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NEWSLETTER | FEBRUARY 2026



Commissioner Cha Confirmed by State Senate

The New Jersey Senate voted unanimously on Feb. 24 to confirm Dr. Stephen Cha as New Jersey Human Services Commissioner.

The vote came after the Senate Judiciary Committee unanimously advanced his nomination on Feb. 19. During the hearing, Commissioner Cha noted the importance of Human Services to the people of New Jersey.

"As a physician, I wanted to lead this department because I know - through all of these programs - our work here in Human Services saves lives,"

Commissioner Cha said.

He noted the challenges facing New Jersey due to the [Medicaid](#) and [SNAP](#) changes approved by Congress and signed into law by President Trump.

"As you all know, the rapid change in federal policies and funding is creating incredible challenges for the people we serve," **Commissioner Cha said.** "Due to HR1, we could face hundreds of thousands of New Jerseyans losing health coverage, as well as the billions of dollars in funding that comes with that coverage. Billions more in lost revenue for our providers. Hundreds of millions of dollars in cost shifts from the federal government to the state and to our counties for SNAP administrative fees. HR1 was not our choice here in New Jersey. But how we respond to these challenges is our choice. And we cannot simply continue as is. We have to evolve together to meet these challenges."

Read Commissioner Cha's testimony [HERE](#).



Jade Bechelli Named Chief of Staff

Commissioner Stephen Cha named Jade Bechelli as Chief of Staff, bringing

nearly two decades of experience in state government and public policy to the department's leadership team.

“Jade Bechelli is a deeply experienced and trusted public servant whose career has been defined by a commitment to improving the lives of children, families, and communities across New Jersey,” **Commissioner Cha said**. “Her institutional knowledge, policy expertise, and values-driven approach will be invaluable as we continue to strengthen and modernize the services that millions of residents rely on every day.”

“It is a privilege to serve as Chief of Staff at the Department of Human Services,” **Bechelli said**. “This work is deeply personal to me, informed by my family's lived experience and a longstanding commitment to building systems that truly support people where they are. I am grateful to Commissioner Cha for his leadership and trust, and I look forward to continuing this work on behalf of New Jersey's families and communities.”

Read more [HERE](#).



Governor Sherrill Takes Action to Protect New Jerseyans' Safety & Defend Constitutional Rights

Governor Mikie Sherrill took action to protect New Jerseyans' safety and Constitutional rights as the Trump administration's federal agents act outside the scope of the law.

Governor Sherrill alongside Attorney General Jennifer Davenport and Commissioner Stephen Cha –announced [Executive Order No. 12](#) to protect against ICE raids on state property, a resident reporting [portal](#), and information

for New Jerseyans to [know their rights](#).

“I take seriously my responsibility to keep New Jersey residents safe and, as a Navy veteran and former federal prosecutor, my commitment to upholding the Constitution will never waver. This executive order will prohibit ICE from using state property to launch operations. To strengthen public safety, we will also give New Jersey residents the tools to report ICE activity to the Attorney General’s office and ensure residents know their Constitutional rights. Today, we are making clear that the Trump administration’s lawless actions will not go unchecked in New Jersey. Given ICE’s willingness to flout the Constitution and violently endanger communities – detaining children, arresting citizens, and even killing several innocent civilians – I will stand up for New Jerseyans right to be safe,” **Governor Sherrill said.**

“At a time when the Trump administration continues to undermine Constitutional protections and spread fear in immigrant communities, the Sherrill Administration is committed to standing on the side of facts, fairness, and human dignity. The Office of New Americans’ [Know Your Rights](#) and [legal services](#) information help ensure that residents have accurate, helpful guidance and legal representation for their day in court, no matter where they were born and what language they speak. The Know Your Rights information is available in 22 languages and are downloadable to print out or post online. In New Jersey, we will not allow misinformation or intimidation to deny people the rights and resources they are entitled to under the law,” **Commissioner Cha said.**

Read more [HERE](#).



Commissioner Stephen Cha and Deputy Commissioner for Disability and Aging Services Kaylee McGuire had the following op-ed [published](#) on NJ.com:

The R-word isn't edgy — it's cowardly. N.J. won't play along

Language is never neutral.

The words we choose reflect our values, shape public attitudes and signal who belongs — and who does not.

That reality compels us to join disability advocates across the country in expressing concern about the renewed use of a long-recognized slur aimed at people with intellectual and developmental disabilities — a term that should have been, and many believed was, left behind.

More than a decade ago, New Jersey chose to move forward. In 2010, our state acted decisively to remove outdated and demeaning terminology from New Jersey statutes and regulations and replace it with respectful,

person-first language.

Leaders from both parties drove that change, grounding it in a truth: Words shape how people experience the world.

The state did not make this change for appearances. Lawmakers made a clear statement that people with disabilities deserve dignity, respect and full inclusion. That decision placed New Jersey within a broader movement to modernize language in public policy and affirm the humanity of people with intellectual and developmental disabilities.

It also echoed what families, self-advocates and service providers had said for years: Language had become a tool of ridicule, exclusion and harm.

Today that progress faces a test. Prominent voices have openly embraced this regression. On a widely listened episode of “The Joe Rogan Experience,” [the host used the slur](#) within seconds of the program’s start, celebrating its return as a cultural win.

After Elon Musk [shared the term on X](#), researchers at Montclair State University found that use of the slur on the platform [increased by 207.5%](#), underscoring how quickly harmful language can spread when amplified.

The pattern has repeated elsewhere: Musician Kid Rock publicly [used the slur on television](#), and Kanye West used the word during an interview, among many other recent examples.

These examples are not isolated incidents; they show how easily progress can erode when people with large platforms treat demeaning language as

entertainment or provocation. The renewed use of this slur — whether online, in entertainment or in casual conversation — does not signal edginess.

It signals disrespect.

Each use reinforces a regression to harmful stereotypes and promotes the idea that disability invites mockery or dismissal. Those messages shape how people treat individuals with disabilities in schools, workplaces, health care settings and communities.

At the New Jersey Department of Human Services, we serve people with disabilities every day. We witness their talents, resilience and contributions. We also witness how stigma blocks opportunity, belonging and well-being.

Language can dismantle those barriers or strengthen them. When New Jersey removed this term from state law, the state acknowledged that systems must embed respect rather than leave it to chance. When people revive language our state deliberately rejected, they weaken that commitment and send a damaging message to people with disabilities and their families.

Progress does not sustain itself. People sustain it through vigilance, leadership and everyday choices, including the words they use. We call on public figures, media voices and community leaders to recognize the power of their language.

We condemn the use of this — and any other — slur.

We ask every New Jerseyan to remember that dignity is not optional. Respect is not a trend.

NEW JERSEY HUMAN SERVICES



Scholarship Program for Academic Year 2026-2027

Application deadline April 30, 2026



Commission for the Blind and Visually Impaired Opens College Scholarship Program for Blind, Deaf-Blind and Visually Impaired Students

Human Services Commissioner Stephen Cha announced blind, deaf-blind, and visually impaired students can now [apply](#) for scholarships offered through the [Commission for the Blind and Visually Impaired](#).

The program is open to high school seniors and college students of any age who will be registered to attend the Fall semester of the 2026-2027 academic year at any qualified U.S. Institution. Students must be active or eligible CBVI clients. For full eligibility requirements, please visit [here](#).

"These scholarships offer financial assistance to ensure that individuals with visual impairments can achieve their academic and professional aspirations,"

Commissioner Cha said. "Higher education is a gateway to endless possibilities, and it's crucial that everyone, regardless of visual ability, has the chance to explore all that it has to offer. We urge those interested to learn more about this program and [apply](#) for the 2026-2027 school year."

"Education should be accessible to everyone. These scholarships make higher education more attainable by alleviating financial pressures," **Deputy Commissioner for Aging and Disability Services Kaylee McGuire said.**

"Beyond financial aid, these scholarships recognize and celebrate the remarkable talents and achievements of students with visual impairments. They embody our dedication to fostering an inclusive environment that values diversity, equity, and a sense of belonging for all."

"For well over two decades, the [CBVI](#)'s Board of Trustees has awarded scholarships to outstanding students with visual impairments pursuing higher education. We are excited to continue this support to the next generation of scholars. These scholarships work to foster equal opportunity and help reduce financial burden," **CBVI Executive Director Dr. Bernice Davis said.** "I urge CBVI consumers to check their eligibility and [apply](#)."

Read more [HERE](#).



New Jersey Human Services staff, along with the [Department of Health](#), met with Governor Mikie Sherrill to discuss health care and medical costs.

“We are laser-focused on lowering costs and fighting for affordability in New Jersey,” **Governor Sherrill** [noted](#).



Commissioner Stephen Cha, Chief of Staff Jade Bechelli, Deputy Commissioner for Social Services Michael J. Wilson, Human Services Police Director Timothy Gallagher, and Human Services Emergency Management Director Joseph Geleta toured the Regional Operations Intelligence Center. [Human Services OEM](#) helps ensure the safety of the residents during times of crisis or disaster.



Commissioner Stephen Cha, Deputy Commissioner for Health Services Valerie Mielke and Chief of Staff Jade Bechelli were met with a warm welcome during a meeting with some of the Medicaid leadership team.

Welcome!

Stephen Cha, MD, MHSR
Acting Commissioner
NJ Department of Human Services

[Learn more about Dr. Cha](#)

New Jersey Human Services | Division of Developmental Disabilities 4

Commissioner Stephen Cha joined the [Division of Developmental Disabilities'](#) monthly [webinar](#) update for individuals, families and providers and emphasized that "the safety and well-being of the individuals we serve is our highest priority."

"I've spent time in group homes before," **Commissioner Cha said.** "I've seen when it feels like a family. We need to learn from these type of best practices. There are so many talented and caring professionals to learn from. There are families and self-advocates who know best what they need from our Department in order to thrive, and I understand "Nothing About Us Without Us" is our North Star. I am committed to listening and learning. I will spend time across the state, meeting with the people we serve, families, providers, advocates, counties, and partner agencies. I will reinforce a clear commitment to supporting our workforce, and open, transparent engagement."



Commissioner Stephen Cha celebrated the [Division of Family Development's](#) Office of Child Support during the annual Child Support Council Training Conference in Atlantic City.

"The [Office of Child Support](#) embodies the spirit of continual improvement,"
Commissioner Cha said.



Commissioner Stephen Cha and Deputy Commissioner for Aging and Disability Services Kaylee McGuire participated in the [Commission for the Blind and Visually Impaired's \(CBVI\)](#) State Rehabilitation Meeting, with partners and advocates present.

During the meeting, Commissioner Cha reiterated Human Services' dedication to empowering and supporting individuals with disabilities in the

employment sector and beyond. Learn more about CBVI's services and program [HERE](#).



Commissioner Cha swore-in new recruit Eric Weigel to the [Human Services Police \(HSP\)](#).



Congratulations to [NJ Human Services Police](#) Lieutenant Paul Campistrous, Detective Sergeant Zivojin Savkov, and Detective Sergeant Alex Rivera (not pictured) for successfully completing the [New Jersey State Association of Chiefs of Police](#) Command and Leadership Academy.

Human Services Utensil Drive and Rolling Event



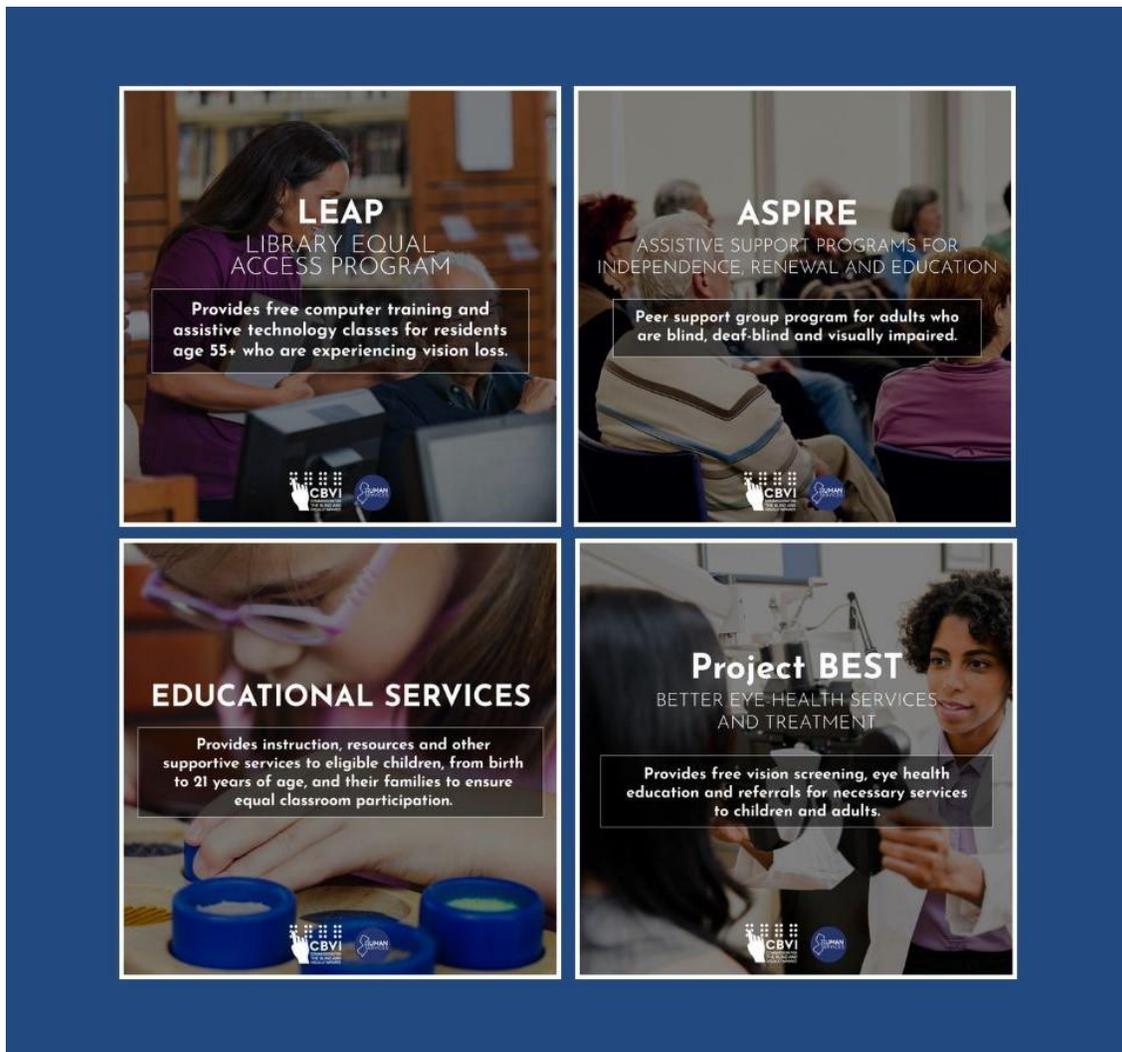
Human Services staff used their lunch break to participate in a Valentine's Day utensil drive and rolling community service project for [TASK Soup Kitchen in Trenton](#). Thanks to this project, TASK will receive nearly 1,000 prewrapped utensils ready to use for meals.

February 21st was **National
Caregivers Day.**

Human Services thanks all caregivers for providing dedicated support to people with disabilities, older adults and those who are chronically ill, often at great cost to themselves.

For resources and supports visit [HERE](#).





February was **Low Vision Month**.

Low vision is the term used to describe significant visual impairment that cannot be corrected fully with glasses, contact lenses, medication or eye surgery. [The Commission for the Blind and Visually Impaired](#) (CBVI) will help people with low vision acquire visual aides appropriate for their degree of vision loss in social situations, at work, school, and when involved in leisure time or recreational activities.

For more info on CBVI's programs and services,
visit our website [HERE](#).

[NJ SNAP](#) | [NJ FAMILYCARE](#) | [NJSAVE](#) | [NJ HELPS](#)

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