



State of New Jersey

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OR DEVELOPMENTAL DISABILITIES AND THEIR FAMILIES

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**Testimony of Paul Aronsohn,
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New Jersey Assembly Committee on Human Services
Thursday, June 25, 2020**

Good afternoon, Chairwoman Downey and Members of the Committee.

Thank you for holding today's hearing and for including all of us in this important discussion.

Without question, we are living through an extraordinary moment in human history – one that has challenged all of us – individually and collectively – in ways never before imagined. Our physical health. Our mental health. Our emotional health. Our economic health. In unprecedented fashion, all aspects of our lives have been under siege.

- That's true across our country and our world.
- And that's certainly true across New Jersey.

Indeed, there really are no words that can adequately describe this moment. From the loss of family and friends to the loss of jobs and businesses to the loss of so many other things important to us – including an overall piece of mind --- the pandemic has and continues to take a damaging toll on each and every one of us in ways we don't even fully understand yet.

And for many individuals with intellectual or developmental disabilities, the impact has been especially difficult, especially challenging. That's because --

- Many of these individuals are particularly vulnerable due to underlying health conditions and medical complexities.
- Many have severe challenging behaviors, which can be triggered by changes in routines.
- Many aren't able to practice social distancing, because they depend on the physical assistance of others – in group homes and intermediate care facilities as well as in their own homes.
- Many are unable to wear personal protective equipment, namely face masks, due to respiratory conditions or sensitivity to touch and texture or physical limitations, which prevents them from always using a mask.
- Many have communication disabilities, which pose a whole range of additional challenges – from those who need to lip-read, but are prevented from doing so because others are using standard face masks to those who need someone to accompany them and speak for them during hospital stays.

- And many are students for whom remote learning just doesn't work and for whom the absence of in-person teaching and in-person therapy can be particularly damaging.

In the Ombudsman Office, we know of these challenges through our direct and personal connection to many of these folks. Through daily phone calls and emails, we have been in regular contact with individuals and families – responding to questions, listening to concerns and learning, first hand, about their often very difficult experiences.

And we've been sharing those insights with our colleagues throughout the Murphy Administration in an effort to inform their thinking and to shape their decision-making ... doing our best to make sure that the voices of these individuals and their families are heard in a meaningful way.

And we've had the opportunity to work closely with legislators, advocates and providers from all over the State, including many of those participating in today's hearing.

Going forward, I hope and expect that we will all benefit from lessons learned over the past few months – good, bad and otherwise. I hope and expect that we will engage in honest, thoughtful and open conversations about what worked and what didn't ... acknowledging the unprecedented nature of this experience, while fully recognizing and fully owning our responsibility to get it right.

And going forward, we will do everything possible to make sure that individuals with intellectual or developmental disabilities and their families play a central role in these conversations. Because to get it right, we need to make sure that they have a seat at the table and that their insights and experiences inform our State's emergency management planning, preparedness and response.

Now, more than ever, their voices need to be heard.

Thank you.