

# Celebrating a milestone for disability rights

## Your Turn

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Guest columnists

Next month, Americans everywhere will take a moment to celebrate our nation's 242nd birthday. Parades. Fireworks. Neighborhood gatherings. In so many important ways, we will come together – as a national family – to celebrate our country and the enduring values it embodies.

This week, however, on June 22, many of us will come together for another special birthday – one that also speaks to the importance of Independence and to the “inalienable rights” of all Americans to “life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness.” And while there won't be a parade at this indoor event; nor (hopefully) will there be any fireworks; there will be many people on hand – including New Jersey Lt. Gov. Sheila Oliver and County Executive James Tedesco – to celebrate the 40th anniversary of the Bergen County Division on Disability Services. For several thousand Bergen residents and their families, this is a significant milestone.

It was in 1978 – long before the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) of 1990 and long before many of the recent achievements in the disability rights movement – when Freeholder Director Jeremiah O'Connor and a handful of



**A disabled child in a wheelchair relaxing outside with a care assistant.**

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other progressive visionaries decided to restructure County government in a way that better served the residents of our North Jersey community. Among the important changes was the creation of an Office on the Handicapped – the first of its kinds anywhere in the state – with a mandate to help people with disabilities lead more fulfilling, more independent lives.

Over the years, the office has evolved – in name and function – to meet the changing needs of the residents it

serves. More focus on lifespan conditions, like autism. More focus on long-term supports for families. More direct outreach to people and families living throughout Bergen County's 70 towns.

In fact, this last piece – working at the municipal level – has become a trademark of the Division. Beginning about a decade ago, there has been a concerted effort to create “Access for All” committees in each of the towns to make all of our Bergen communities more welcoming, more inclusive and

more accessible to those with disabilities. Each committee is different in shape, size and emphasis. But each committee provides opportunities for local leaders and families to come together – in ways that make sense for their particular town – to improve the lives of residents with disabilities.

Beyond Bergen, the division has also sought to take this approach statewide, by sharing the “Access for All” model with disability leaders throughout New Jersey. The reason for this is simple: By partnering with municipal governments, county disability offices can have a more direct, more positive impact on the lives of their residents. They can better connect people to the services and supports they need.

Similarly, going forward, we believe that county disability offices should also partner more with Trenton – administration officials as well as legislators. Sharing resources. Leveraging expertise. And again, helping to make sure that individuals with disabilities and their families have a seat at the policy-making table.

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