



# State of New Jersey

OFFICE OF THE OMBUDSMAN FOR INDIVIDUALS WITH INTELLECTUAL  
OR DEVELOPMENTAL DISABILITIES AND THEIR FAMILIES

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## **Testimony of NJ's Ombudsman for Individuals with Intellectual or Developmental Disabilities and Their Families Before the NJ State Senate Education Committee**

**Monday, March 17, 2025**

Good morning, Mr. Chairman and Members of the Committee, and thank you for giving all of us this opportunity to speak about this important piece of legislation, Senate Bill 3858.

My name is Paul Aronsohn, and I am NJ's Ombudsman for Individuals with Intellectual or Developmental Disabilities and Their Families. As you know, my office is relatively new. It was created by the State Legislature in December 2017; it was signed into law by Governor Chris Christie in January 2018; and I was appointed by Governor Phil Murphy a few months later.

Our purpose and mission are as simple as they are important: To help individuals and families access the supports and services that they need and deserve. We help them navigate our State's system of care for people with disabilities. We help them advocate for changes in policies and regulations. And we work daily to make sure that their voices are heard in a meaningful way – that they have a seat at the decision-making table.

To this end, we take a very personal approach to our work – talking, emailing, and meeting directly with people who turn to us for assistance, visiting with them in-person whenever possible and working alongside them always.

As such, we really get to know the individuals and families who come our way. And over the past 7 years, that has included many families concerned about the transportation available to their children, whose significant disabilities make it necessary for them to attend out-of-district schools – families, including those providing testimony today.

If you think about it, few things must be more stressful than placing your special needs child on a small bus or van for a ride to an out-of-district school – one that may be 30, 60, or even 90 minutes away.

- It must be particularly stressful if your child is the only student on the bus or van and is nonverbal or deaf or blind or has significant physical limitations or significant behavioral challenges or has an intellectual disability.
- It must be particularly stressful if the bus or van is driven by someone who you do not know, who does not know your child or their special needs, and who works for a company that was contracted by your local school district only because it was the lowest bidder.

Yet, this is a stress that thousands of New Jersey parents experience most days throughout the school year. Indeed, an estimated 8,500 students are transported to out-of-district schools, many of them using one of the nearly 1,800 companies contracted to provide this service. That's right, nearly 1,800 student transportation vendors operating in New Jersey alone.

Not surprisingly, over the years, parents have brought various concerns to our attention – concerns about the lack of adequate communication with families, the lack of operational cameras in school vehicles, the lack of training on the part of drivers and aides, and the lack of accountability on the part of local school districts.

In recent years, parents have also brought to our attention concerns and stories born out of tragedy – stories of their children’s young lives needlessly and devastatingly lost to alleged negligence during rides home to and from school.

As a result, we highlighted the issue of student transportation in our 2023 annual report as one of “the most serious, most persistent challenges affecting the lives of New Jerseyans with intellectual or developmental disabilities.” In so doing, we offered a few basic, common-sense, urgently needed reforms ... including -

1. All drivers and aides should be responsible for calling 911 in potentially life-threatening situations.
2. All out-of-district school vehicles should be equipped with operational video camera technology.
3. All out-of-district school vehicle drivers and aides should be trained thoroughly and regularly about how best to support the students in their care.

Recently, the Murphy Administration has begun to look more closely at the training component, and this legislation sponsored in the Senate by Senators Bucco and Diegnan and in the Assembly by Members Barlas, Venezia, and Haider addresses the need for a 911 requirement as well as video camera technology. I should also note that Senators Corrado and Diegnan as well as Assembly Members Barlas, DePhillips, and Stanley are primary sponsors of legislation that would establish a task force to address other key issues, including the need to ensure that transportation is a component of the individualized education program (IEP) process.

Taken together, the work of the Administration and the work of this Legislature represent a significant, much-needed step forward – one that should better protect students with disabilities, one that should ease the stress and challenges experienced by their families. Two most important, most necessary goals.

So, again, thank you for today’s hearing ... thank you for considering this vital legislation...and thank you for your leadership and partnership.