

Question and Answer Session with Mercedes Witowsky, the Executive Director of the New Jersey Council on Developmental Disabilities Regarding the Launching of the New Jersey Legislative Disability Caucus

**Interview Questions by Antoinette S. Johnson and Ann Martinelli
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In New Jersey, a bipartisan legislative disability caucus was launched on December 1, 2020, to support the disabilities community through policy created by the New Jersey Legislature. According to the NJCDD website, "People with disabilities, their families, and organizations that serve, support, and advocate for people with disabilities in New Jersey will be a resource to the NJ Legislative Disability Caucus, providing education and programming as needed."

The following is the Q & A discussion regarding the New Jersey Legislative Disability Caucus.

Q. Congratulations on the kick-off event of the New Jersey Legislative Disability Caucus. How did the NJLD Caucus get started?

A. There have been countless instances when legislation has been enacted that impacts the lives of people with disabilities and their families either directly or indirectly. Typically, when people think about people with disabilities, they think of special programs or residential settings.

It's important to look at people with disabilities in a broader sense. So, whether we are talking about education, employment, housing, or leisure, there will be a direct impact on people with disabilities.

This caucus was born out of the need to advise elected officials on how pending legislation can better support people with disabilities in the broader sense.

Q. What is the mission of the NJLD Caucus?

A. To serve as a bipartisan forum within the New Jersey Legislature for lawmakers and their staff to consider the impact on the disability community when shaping all public policies in the Garden State through increased awareness and a greater understanding of the complexities of the disabilities service system and issues affecting individuals with disabilities and their families.

Q. What is the plan/vision/goal for the NJLD Caucus for the first year?

A. During the first year, we must first raise awareness about the broader needs of people with disabilities. We'll spend a great deal of time educating legislators about key issues impacting people with disabilities.

Q. There are 29 Senators and Assemblypersons and 13 supporting agencies involved with the Caucus. Do you foresee the Caucus growing in membership, and if so, who will it be extended to, or is the Caucus open for those interested in joining?

A. Yes, there is potential for the Caucus to grow. It is open to any interested legislator or supporting agency.

Q. What are NJLD Caucus members doing individually? How will they work together?

A. Legislators who join the caucus agree to be champions for individuals with disabilities in New Jersey by meeting with them in their district offices; participating in quarterly education forums; and above all, promoting policies to improve the lives of people with disabilities and consider the impact on the disability community in shaping all public policies in New Jersey.

Q. In our experience with CLEP, over the years, we have received inquiries from family members regarding not having information on what's next when their son or daughter graduates from high school. Oftentimes they find out at the eleventh hour that services from high school won't continue. There seems to be a communication issue concerning families receiving timely information. Will the Caucus work toward improving understanding and clarity, so families aren't confused at the end of their son or daughter's high school years? Also, can the Caucus be the liaison between the Department of Education and DDD and create legislation to eliminate this confusion?

A. The transition from school to adult services is likely to be a topic of the Caucus in the coming year at one of the four planned educational sessions.

Q. What can families and other advocates expect to see in the coming months from the Caucus?

A. Advocates and family members will be engaged over the coming months. They will be encouraged and given a platform to share their comments, questions, and concerns with the New Jersey Legislative Disability Caucus.

Q. Do you anticipate collaboration with the other eight states' Caucuses, and if so, what is planned for those collaborative efforts? Do you know if the other eight states have achieved success with their Caucus?

A. Early on, we reached out to other states to get a sense of how they structured and operate their caucus. My understanding is that other states have had varying degrees of success. My goal is to make the NJ Legislative Disability Caucus a national model.

Q. Is there any anticipated legislation that you foresee bringing to the Biden Administration? If so, can you share what is anticipated?

A. It is a bit too early to respond to this question; however, areas like employment, housing, access to services, and supports funded at the federal level are likely to all be areas of importance.

Q. There is currently a bill that allows for cameras to be placed in group homes, which was introduced by Assemblywoman Joann Downey. What are your thoughts on this new legislation?

A. This is frankly a topic with many advocates and families who have specific interests based on their level of experience and need. While the intentions of this legislation are good, it could present issues around personal privacy and cost. Ensuring individual safety remains a top priority, and while requiring video cameras may be one element in ensuring safety, there are other areas, including staff training and oversight, that must be included in this discussion.

Q. How should families and other advocates contact the Caucus? Individually? As a group?

A. We have an established web page on the NJCDD website. Families and advocates can contact us to present issues and sign up for periodic updates. The page is located at <https://njcdd.org/legislative-disability-caucus/>.

For more information about the events, please contact Gary Brown at gary.brown@njcdd.org or check the [NJCDD website](https://njcdd.org/) for more details.