

New Jersey Legislative Disability Caucus

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Members of the NJ Legislative Disability Caucus & Advocates from the Disability Community Discuss Access to Dental Care for Individuals with Disabilities at Quarterly Meeting

Trenton, NJ – On July 23, the bipartisan New Jersey Legislative Disability Caucus met virtually to discuss the many challenges individuals with disabilities face in accessing oral health care and treatment and the steps that the state could take to help improve access to these critical services. With oral health a fundamental component of overall health and well-being, Caucus Co-Chair Senator Bucco was pleased to lead the important and informative conversation and urged the Caucus to apply the insights gained from the meeting into actionable steps.

The Caucus welcomed three speakers who all shared their unique experience and expertise on the topic. The meeting opened with Dr. Chelsea Fosse, Director of the Research & Policy Center at the American Academy of Pediatric Dentistry who delved into a report –[Addressing Barriers to Oral Health and Healthcare for Adults with Intellectual & Developmental Disabilities \(IDD\) in New Jersey, Five-Year Plan](#)—that she was involved in putting together in 2019 with other policy experts and health practitioners. Based on research, focus groups, and input from a variety of stakeholders, the report charts out a five-year advocacy roadmap aimed at improving oral health and health care for people with disabilities. As with nearly everything though, progress on the policy recommendations was sidelined due to the COVID-19 pandemic. Now, five years later, Dr. Fosse's presentation is a call to action for lawmakers and disability advocates to use the report as a resource and work together to enact much-needed policy changes.

“While written in 2019, this [report](#) still stands relevant and true, as COVID-19 only further highlighted the disparities in access to oral healthcare,” said Mercedes Witowsky, Executive Director of NJCDD. “Hearing today that individuals with disabilities wait on average six months for preventative care and three years for dental treatment in New Jersey should be a wake-up call for all of us. And considering the pandemic made it even more difficult, if not impossible, to access care, oral problems for individuals with disabilities have only exacerbated, making the need to address this access issue even more pressing” she concluded.

Dr. Evan Spivack, Professor and Program Director at Rutgers Special Care Treatment Center at UMDNJ offered his perspective as an educator and practitioner in the field of dentistry for over 30 years. He detailed how patients with disabilities wait for months, if not years, for care and that most need to travel for hours to receive it because there are so few dentists that serve individuals with complex disabilities in the state. The main reason for this he said is the abysmally low Medicaid reimbursement rate. With

dental practices operating on a relatively thin margin, most dentists simply cannot afford to treat individuals with disabilities because it takes longer to care for them and many need acute care, like sedation. In addition to raising Medicaid rates, Dr. Spivack recommends an increase in the number of dental residency positions, which would allow for improved training of newly graduated dentists in caring for those with special needs. Simultaneously, he suggests mandating that dental practitioners have residency training to obtain a dental license which would also increase experience treating those with special needs, significantly advancing the goal of access.

Heena Patel, a dental hygienist with 25 years of experience and the mother of a teenage son with profound autism, shared her unique and moving lived experience. In 2022, her son had a dental emergency that required immediate attention. Despite her extensive connections in the dental field, it took her several months to secure care for him. Sadly, after the treatment, her son experienced several health issues related to the sedation, continuing his cycle of pain and highlighting the need for change.

“Access to dental care is a critical component of overall health but individuals with Intellectual and Developmental Disabilities (IDD) in New Jersey continue to face significant barriers in receiving the care they need,” said Senator Bucco. “This caucus meeting has been incredibly informative and I’m grateful to the speakers for sharing their valuable perspectives. Addressing this issue, along with many others, and finding solutions to these problems is vital to improving the health outcomes and quality of life for people with disabilities across the Garden State—I look forward to working with my colleagues in the Caucus and the supporting agencies and advocates to make it happen.”

Additional Resources:

To view a recording of the July 23 Caucus Meeting go here <https://youtu.be/n4S85ni1rxl>.

National Council on Disability:

- [Incentivizing Oral Healthcare Providers to Treat Patients with Intellectual and Developmental Disabilities](#)
- [Medicaid Oral Health Coverage for Adults with Intellectual & Developmental Disabilities – A Fiscal Analysis](#)

CMS/Medicaid:

- [Dental Rehabilitation in Operating Rooms | G0330 Facility Fee Code -- State Implementation Updates](#)

About the New Jersey Legislative Disability Caucus: *The Caucus was formed December 1, 2020, and serves 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. The Caucus is co-chaired by Senate Majority Leader Teresa Ruiz (D-29), Assembly Majority Leader Lou Greenwald (D-6), Senator Anthony Bucco (R-25) and Assemblywoman Aura Dunn (R-25). Participation in the Caucus is open to all legislators who agree to be champions for individuals with disabilities in New Jersey by meeting with them in their district offices; participate in the quarterly education forums; and promote policies to improve the lives of people with disabilities and their families. People with disabilities, their families and organizations that serve, support and advocate for people with disabilities in the Garden State serve as a resource for the NJ Legislative Disability Caucus. For more information about the Caucus and to get involved, visit <https://njcdd.org/legislative-disability-caucus/>.*

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