

New Jersey Legislative Disability Caucus

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Legislators and Disability Advocates Discussed the Need for ALL Children in New Jersey to Be Fully Included & Treated Equally at the Quarterly Meeting of the New Jersey Legislative Disability Caucus

Trenton, NJ – In recognition of Dwarfism Awareness Month, the October 22nd quarterly virtual meeting of the New Jersey Legislative Disability Caucus began with a brief discussion around understanding dwarfism and related rare diseases such as Turner Syndrome. The conversation focused on the challenges people with dwarfism face and the importance of early intervention in best supporting the physical health and emotional and social well-being of those living with these conditions. The remainder of the meeting delved into the disparities that still exist in school discipline based on race, ethnicity, and disability status, particularly in the use of seclusion, restraint, suspension, and expulsion. The discussion examined how these outdated practices are barriers to educational inclusion and the discussion explored systemic and preventative alternatives to exclusionary discipline. Caucus Co-Chair, Senate Majority Leader Teresa Ruiz, led the engaging discussion, stating, "There is no greater responsibility than ensuring every child in New Jersey is fully included and treated equally. The insights gained from these meetings help shape policies that make this a reality."

The first speaker, Angela Verardo, MD, Pediatric Endocrinologist at Montefiore Medical Center, provided an overview of dwarfism, including the conditions associated with it, impact on daily life and the critical importance of early intervention and specialized care. Kym Hall, a patient advocate from the Turner Syndrome Foundation followed, sharing her lived experience with this rare condition and how barriers to care have impacted her quality of life. Both speakers brought valuable awareness to dwarfism, which is essential in dispelling misconceptions and ensuring that individuals with rare conditions receive the understanding, support, and equal opportunities they deserve in every aspect of life.

The focus of the meeting then shifted to school discipline and how disparities in the use of seclusion, restraint, suspension and expulsion exist based on race, ethnicity and disability status. Peg Kinsell, Policy Director at SPAN Advocacy Network and NJCDD Council Member, who has done a great deal of advocacy work in this space opened her comments commending Caucus Co-Chair, Senate Majority Leader Ruiz, for championing [legislation](#) that requires school districts to report on the use of seclusion, restraint, suspension and expulsion because information and data helps lead to policy change. In a call for action, parent advocate Kimberley Milligan shared the concerning treatment that her son with autism received in his elementary school. She said her son endured inappropriate restraint and seclusion because of a lack of understanding of his condition and failure to address his needs, which schools and policymakers need to address.

Fred Buglione, President and CEO of the New Jersey Coalition for Inclusive Education was the final speaker providing insight into the work that is happening in New Jersey to prevent what happened to Kimberley Milligan's son and create systemic and preventative alternatives to exclusionary discipline in our state's schools. He called the work "absolutely critical" with the state already being amongst the bottom in the nation for inclusion rates of special education students in general education classrooms. He highlighted the need for training, techniques and systems being implemented to address school discipline issues as well as a recent grant funded by NJCDD to Build Capacity in Supporting Black and Hispanic Communities to reduce seclusion, restraint, suspension and expulsion in schools by working directly with three school districts in NJ to introduce best practice strategies.

"I am grateful to all the speakers who participated in this important discussion today, sharing their lived experience and expertise to educate us as policymakers. The information and dialogue shared in these Caucus meetings spark collaboration that is key to advancing policies that promote inclusion and equity for New Jerseyans of all ages and abilities," Caucus Co-Chair Senate Majority Leader Ruiz concluded.

Visit <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Ilj2FITE5zw> to view a recording of the October 22nd Caucus Discussion.

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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