

New Jersey Legislative Disability Caucus

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

October 31, 2025

Contact: Karla Pollack

609-558-1237

karla@absnj.com

The NJ Legislative Disability Caucus Hosts Quarterly Meeting

Insightful Discussion on the Role of the Office of the Ombudsman for Individuals with Intellectual or Developmental Disabilities and Their Families

Trenton, NJ – This week, the bipartisan New Jersey Legislative Disability Caucus welcomed Paul Aronsohn, New Jersey's inaugural Ombudsman for Individuals with Intellectual or Developmental Disabilities and Their Families, for a discussion titled "Seven Years Later: Lessons from New Jersey's First Ombudsman for Individuals with Disabilities."

Senate Majority Leader M. Teresa Ruiz, Caucus Co-Chair, opened with a review of the creation of the ombudsman office seven years ago to address the needs of families advocating for their children with disabilities. Senator Ruiz highlighted the office's significant accomplishments, including meeting with 4,626 individuals and families from 2020 to 2024 alone, and emphasized the need for continued policy improvements. She noted the importance of bipartisan commitment and the involvement of the private, nonprofit, and faith-based sectors in shaping effective policies.

Enabling legislative sponsors Congressman Tom Kean and former Assemblywoman Valerie Vainieri Huttel reflected on the origins of the ombudsman office, sharing stories of constituents who needed an advocate to navigate the complex system of services for individuals with disabilities. They highlighted the office's successes, including life-saving interventions and resolutions of long-standing issues, while acknowledging the systemic failures that still exist. Congressman Kean announced his legislative team's work on national legislation to establish a similar ombudsman program, inspired by New Jersey's model.

As he prepares to conclude his historic tenure at the end of Governor Murphy's administration, Paul Aronsohn shared candid reflections on his seven-year journey advocating for New Jersey's disability community.

"When I started this role seven years ago, I honestly didn't know what an ombudsman was supposed to do," Aronsohn said. "But what I learned is that this work is about showing up—traveling across the state, sitting with families, listening to their struggles, and fighting alongside them to get the services and support they deserve. Our team has been privileged to serve thousands of families, but the truth is, there's still so much more work to be done. We need to strengthen this office, expand its resources, and most importantly, ensure that individuals with lived disability experience are at the table for every policy decision that affects their lives."

Aronsohn emphasized the importance of the office's hands-on approach, which involves direct engagement with individuals and families throughout the state. He discussed the need for the office to be strengthened and expanded, referencing recent legislation introduced to increase resources and improve the office's effectiveness.

Family advocates Pat Miller, Fran Bickel, and Kate DeLuca shared their experiences, underscoring the importance of the ombudsman's role in addressing issues like supporting individuals with severe challenging behaviors, complex medical needs, and abuse and neglect.

Mercedes Witowsky, Executive Director of the New Jersey Council on Developmental Disabilities (NJCDD), the Caucus's lead supporting agency, invited legislators to follow Senate Bill 4769 sponsored by Caucus member Senator Kristin Corrado, which aims to rename the office of the ombudsman and expand its duties. "I am grateful to all participants and attendees for their contributions to the session and their ongoing efforts to improve the lives of individuals with disabilities and their families," said Witowsky.

To access the full recording from the October 28 roundtable, visit:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=RHZ-zrSWr7A>.

###

About the New Jersey Legislative Disability Caucus

Formed in December 2020, the Caucus is 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, participating in quarterly education forums, and promoting 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/>.