

Blueprint for Safe, High-Quality Residences

Ending Abuse & Neglect in State-Licensed Group Homes and Apartments

A Memo to Governor-Elect Mikie Sherrill

In response to the USA Today Network's investigative news series, "[Hidden at Home](#)," we initiated a conversation about steps to be taken to ensure that State-licensed residences for New Jerseyans with intellectual or developmental disabilities are safe and of the highest quality. We engaged people across the State, across disability types, and across the disability service system. We surveyed them. We held interactive virtual forums with them. And we even solicited their feedback on a draft of this statement.

Taken together, we framed our community-wide conversation around the people responsible for ensuring this safety and quality – State government officials, provider agency management, direct care staff, residents and their families. Specifically, we focused on their respective roles and responsibilities as well as on needed reforms.

We also considered technology that could enhance the health, safety and well-being of the residents.

State Government

There was full agreement that State government must do more. Specifically, the NJ Department of Children and Families and the NJ Department of Human Services need to exercise more active oversight of State-licensed provider agencies; they need to be more transparent; and the State (more generally) needs to reform the way allegations of abuse and neglect are investigated.

- ❑ State government must hold provider agencies more accountable for ensuring the safety and well-being of their residents. This means the adoption of meaningful incentives and disincentives, including the imposition of civil financial penalties for poor performing agencies and criminal penalties for staff culpable of abuse or neglect.
- ❑ State government must revisit policies and practices related to the safety and well-being of residents. This includes policies and practices related to medication administration, family visitation, human rights, doctor visits, and the enforcement of [The Stephen Komninos Law](#). This also includes the need for more transparency and more individual/family involvement in the development of State government policies and practices.
- ❑ State government must overhaul the process by which allegations of abuse and neglect are investigated. To that end, there are three possible approaches that have been most widely discussed: (1) significant, systemic changes in both departments, (2) transfer of investigative responsibility from both departments to the Attorney General's office, or (3) transfer of investigative responsibility to a new, independent organization similar to [the New York Justice Center for the Protection of People with Special Needs](#).

Provider Agencies

There was full agreement that provider agencies must do more. Specifically, provider agencies need to ensure a solid, well-trained direct care workforce and person-centered environment, and they need to be more transparent and more collaborative with the residents and families they serve.

- ❑ Provider agencies must ensure that their residences are fully and properly staffed. This means providing direct care staff with a living wage commensurate with their important responsibilities as well as ongoing training so that they can and will maintain the highest standards of care.
- ❑ Provider agencies must align staffing schedules with the needs of the residents.
- ❑ Provider agencies must ensure a person-centered approach to every resident under their care. This means ensuring that individual budgets are spent on the individuals and that Individualized Service Plans are followed.

- ☐ Provider agencies must ensure transparency with respect to the way monies are spent. This includes residents' State allocated budgets as well as their personal monies.
- ☐ Provider agencies must ensure that residents and/or their families have meaningful access to medical records.
- ☐ Provider agencies must collaborate more with residents and families. This includes better communication, more transparency, and more meaningful engagement of individuals and families in the development of policies and in day-to-day operations.

Direct Care Staff

There was full agreement that direct care staff play a central and critical role in the lives of their residents. As such, they must be well-compensated, well-trained, and held to the highest standards.

- ☐ Direct Support Professionals (DSP) must be paid a [living wage](#), not a minimum wage – one that recognizes the challenging nature of their work.
- ☐ Direct Support Professionals must be properly and continuously trained to ensure appropriate competencies, ensuring that they can effectively support the residents in their care and communicate with their families.
- ☐ Direct Support Professionals must be held to the highest standards – something made possible by appropriate compensation and training.

Residents and Their Families

There was full agreement that residents and their families are central to the safety and well-being of people living in State licensed settings.

- ☐ State government officials and provider agency management must value residents and families as true partners.
- ☐ State government officials and provider agency management must involve residents and families in decision-making.
- ☐ State government officials and provider agency management must communicate with residents and families in a timely, transparent, and authentic way.
- ☐ State government officials must engage residents and families in meaningful options counseling, ensuring that they are provided information about alternative residential opportunities, including through self-direction, as well as the tools and resources to make those opportunities viable.

Technology


There was full agreement that technology must be embraced. Technology, such as video cameras and smart technology, that can enhance safety must be more readily used. Technology, such as augmentative and alternative communication (AAC) devices, that can allow people to communicate and to reach their full potential must be more readily available. And provider agencies must ensure direct care staff are fully and properly trained to use such technology.



Mercedes Witowsky
Executive Director,
NJ Council on Developmental Disabilities



Dorothy Blakeslee & Cathy Tamburello
Chairpersons,
NJ Regional Family Support Council



Paul Aronsohn
NJ Ombudsman for Individuals with
Intellectual or Developmental Disabilities
and Their Families