

DIRECT SUPPORT PROFESSIONAL ALLIANCE OF NEW YORK STATE

Promoting valued lives for the people we serve by advancing the profession of direct support.



Public Forum Remarks

Concerning the Development of

The Office of Mental Retardation and Developmental Disabilities'

Statewide Comprehensive Plan for Services for the Period 2009 Through 2013

June 10, 2009

Commissioner Ritter and staff of the Office of Mental Retardation and Developmental Disabilities (OMRDD), my name is Lysa Hitchens. I am a member of the Direct Support Professional Alliance of New York State (DSPANYS) and have worked as a direct support professional for Aspire of Western New York for 25 years.

On behalf of DSPANYS and all direct support professionals in New York, I thank you for this opportunity to provide input for OMRDD's five year plan of services.

I know that I am preaching to the choir when I say that New York State has one of the most diversified and vibrant systems of services for people with developmental disabilities in the nation. It is a system that both protects them and enables them to achieve their individual dreams. I see it in my everyday work.

It has been the leadership of OMRDD and others that has brought us to that point. But the thousands of New Yorkers who depend on OMRDD's services would not thrive, if not for the more than 65,000 frontline workers who support them.

Direct Support Professionals are more than the backbone of the system; we are the eyes that watch over individuals while they, their parents, and state officials sleep at night; the ears that listen for the most

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subtle of complaints; the hands that help tie shoes or offer pats on the back for jobs well done; and just plain old friends, in the truest sense of the word, who'll see them through the thick and thin of life's journeys.

Just recently, one of the individuals I support, and who is non-verbal, started walking strangely. I sensed something was wrong. He seemed to be in pain, but could not express it verbally. I advocated that he be seen by a doctor. He was and he required emergency surgery for a life threatening abdominal problem. Today he is on the road to recovery and the bond between us could not be tighter.

The future of New York's system of services depends on the direct support workforce. I believe, OMRDD, in its five year planning process, should devote considerable attention as to how it can support and enhance that workforce, and at the same time tap into the richness of our everyday experience and wisdom.

This is not the economic environment in which salary discussions would be fruitful, although we all know that Direct Support Professionals are underpaid, and OMRDD needs to do everything it can to help us earn a living wage. I have two other suggestions.

1. Public Perception:

Although we support people every day, the only time the public reads or hears about Direct Support Professionals is through media reports on a negative event. After many years of hard work, we now blend in and are integrated in the community when we are out doing our jobs, helping people live their lives. But once the bad press hits, it stigmatizes not just Direct Support Professionals across the board, but also the people that we support. OMRDD should mount an aggressive campaign championing the millions of good things that Direct Support Professionals do every day. This is a noble profession and we need a public service campaign

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that encourages others to consider it as a career. With the aging of America, there will be intense competition for people like me in the next 20-30 years, so our system needs to attract and keep dedicated, professional and caring people to do this work. We need to start doing it now.

2. A Seat at the Policy Making Table

OMRDD has a variety of advisory committees that include providers, provider organizations, families, self advocates and associations that support families and self advocates. It is time for Direct Support Professionals to have a seat at the table. Today it is more critical than ever as economic realities force a re-examination of how services are delivered. Direct Support Professionals, together with the individuals we support and their families, are in the unique position of saying what works... what is quality service...we are, as they say, “where the rubber meets the road. “

Conclusion

In closing, I again thank Commissioner Ritter and OMRDD staff for this opportunity to give input. I believe Direct Support Professionals can be of great assistance to you in your plan of services to help people with developmental disabilities live richer lives. It is what we do every day, 24 hours a day. If I or DSPNYS can be of assistance on these matters, please let me know. Our contact information is in our written remarks.

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