

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 15, 2009

Commissioner Ritter and staff of the Office of Mental Retardation and Developmental Disabilities (OMRDD), my name is Barbara Del Ventura. I am a member of the Direct Support Professional Alliance of New York State (DSPANYS) and have worked as a direct support professional for New Horizons Resources in residential services for seven 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.

Thanks to the leadership of OMRDD and others, New York State has one of the most impressive systems of services for people with developmental disabilities in the nation, both in terms of numbers of individuals served and the range of supports that are offered. I see it in my everyday work. Could it be made better? Sure, what system couldn't?

DSPANYS is concerned that our system is at risk of collapse, if we don't take bold steps to advance the profession of direct support professionals. As Commissioner Ritter often correctly states, we are the "backbone of the system". Yet there are a number of factors that jeopardize the availability and sustainability of a direct support workforce in the near future. An excellent analysis paper was developed by the National

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Direct Service Workforce Resource Center¹ that addresses many of these factors and is cited in my written testimony.

Chief among them is the issue of supply and demand of workers. As baby boomers age, there will be an incredible demand for individuals to provide supports for the elderly. At the same time, the pool of people who typically provide these supports, women like me between the ages of 18 and 35, will shrink. The net result will be fierce competition for people willing and able to do the work. OMRDD should brace itself, and, in its five-year plan, develop strategies to address this looming crisis so quality supports for people with developmental disabilities do not take a back seat to any other service sector.

In this vein, I have two suggestions: 1) OMRDD needs to elevate the status of Direct Support Professionals in the developmental disabilities field; and, 2) OMRDD needs to embrace Direct Support Professionals, along with self-advocates and families, as partners in policy making decisions as they relate to services to people with developmental disabilities. We have watching from the sidelines for far too long, and that's not a good place for the "backbone" of an industry to be.

Elevate the Status of Direct Support Professionals

We all know that salaries are a key factor in career choices and the fact that our wages are low certainly keeps good people away from a great career. But there are other, less tangible factors, including job satisfaction and public perception. OMRDD should devote attention to these other factors, particularly today when economic realities make salary increases difficult.

¹ A synthesis of direct service workforce demographics and challenges across intellectual/ developmental disabilities, aging, physical disabilities, and behavioral health. Direct Service Workforce Resource Center, November, 2008

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All Direct Support Professionals, regardless of where they work face similar daily challenges. Despite this, our training, recognition and value differs from agency to agency, and program to program. Here are three things that DSPANYS believes that OMRDD should do to elevate our status; 1) establish expectations for Direct Support Professionals to adhere to a Code of Ethics; 2) provide access to quality, relevant and uniform training and; 3) embrace a voluntary and portable credential in direct support - like what is now offered by the National Alliance for Direct Support Professionals. These three steps will ensure uniform competency benchmarks in which Direct Support Professionals could find satisfaction by being part of a true profession. Finally, I cannot emphasize this enough – we must find a way to provide salary increases as someone achieves the three steps toward the credential.

A Seat at the Public Policy Making Table

In its five-year plan, OMRDD should make provisions to include Direct Support Professionals at the table where policy decisions are being made. We Direct Support Professionals, along with the individuals that we support and their families, are “where the rubber meets the road,” we know quality services, what works, and what doesn’t. Planning for the future would be short sighted without the input of those who make the future happen for people with disabilities every day.

Our national organization, the National Alliance for Direct Support Professionals are now partnering with other leading national disability organizations that are working on the Alliance for Full Participation event that will be held in Washington, DC in 2011. The policy makers and other advocates at the state, local and agency levels should follow that lead and include Direct Support Professionals too. We have much to offer you.

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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 DSPANYS can be of assistance on these matters, please let me know. Our contact information is in our written remarks.

- Barbara Del Ventura, bdelventura@nhrny.org
- Joseph M. Macbeth, joem@nysacra.org (518) 449-7551