



Self-Advocacy Association of New York State, Inc.

March 18, 2011

Honorable Andrew Cuomo
Governor
State Capitol
Albany, NY 12224

Dear Governor Cuomo:

We are writing this letter on behalf of the board and thousands of members of the Self-Advocacy Association of New York State, Inc. (SANYS) in response to the article in the NY Times on March 13 describing abuse in state operated homes. We are shocked, not only about the horrible incidents of abuse described in the article, but also about the inability of OPWDD to permanently remove the people responsible for the abuse. Our members ask, "How can this be?" and "How can this be stopped?".

The mission of SANYS is to help people with developmental disabilities to "speak up for our selves and others". With this letter, we are speaking up for the many individuals living in state operated facilities who cannot speak for themselves.

We know that bad things can happen in any situation but people with developmental disabilities and their families need to trust that direct support professional staff are well screened before hiring, well trained, well supervised, and well supported to be caring, competent professionals. We also need to trust that when things go wrong, when a staff person neglects the needs of people who depend on them, or are abusive in any way, that they will be removed from service.

While speaking of direct support staff, we need to say that we know that most direct support professionals who work in state and voluntary operated homes are good and caring people; we see that in our many interactions through our work. We believe these staff are as appalled as we are about the examples of abuse in the article and we believe they deserve the opportunity to work in homes free of co-workers who are abusive. We worry about the culture that is created when the highest standards of support and care are not always expected and present.

People First is a self-advocacy theme and SANYS' members were excited when OPWDD adopted that slogan. We believe the process that allows a staff person that has abused the people they support or their coworkers to be transferred or to continue working in any way is not consistent with a people first approach. In the article and in the CSEA response on their web site, the role of the union seems to be to defend employees no matter what the circumstances. The way we look at

the arbitration process is that OPWDD acts as the prosecutor, the union representative as the attorney/advocate for the employee and the arbiter as the judge. We have to ask: who represents the person or persons who are abused in an incident? We believe the process for disciplinary action must be modified to quickly remove staff that abuse; we also believe that advocates for the people who are abused must be present in any arbitration process.

Representatives of SANYS participated in a phone conference in response to the NY Times article hosted by new OPWDD Commissioner Courtney Burke, and we learned of plans for improved training, screening of employees and many other ideas to improve the quality of staff and ensure the safety of all people who live in both state and voluntary operated homes. SANYS pledges our support and partnership with OPWDD and other organizations to assist in anyway with planning and implementation of new safeguards and improvements in policies and processes that will help assure that there will be a zero tolerance for abuse in all services provided for people with developmental disabilities.

For many of us, the most important relationships we have in our lives are with our direct support staff. As an organization one of SANYS' roles is to promote individualized supports and a person centered approach in services. We give voice to things people with disabilities want from and value in staff that support them: respect, understanding, caring, knowledge and a commitment to help us live the best lives we can. We want to have relationships with staff that are mutually supportive and respectful. We want people to feel good about the work they do with and for us, and we want to live and work in environments that are safe and that allow for relationships and care for all to be present. That just can't happen in a culture that allows even one person who abuses a person with a disability to work in the most important role in our system, that of a direct support professional staff.

Again we pledge our support to work in partnership with all to do what ever it takes to make sure that there is no need or reason for stories like the one on abuse in last Sunday's NY Times that sickened us all. We want to tell the stories, and there are many, many stories, of people with developmental disabilities who are living good lives, in their communities, in a variety of living situations, with the supports they need, including good and caring staff.

Sincerely,

The Executive Committee of the Self-Advocacy Association of New York State, Inc.

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