



Alliance for the Betterment of
Citizens with Disabilities

Empowering People: Providers Shaping Policies

**NJ GOVERNOR'S COUNCIL ON MENTALHEALTH STIGMA
Dual-Diagnosis: A Vision for Better Mental Health Care for the IDD Population**

ABCD Comments

May 14, 2025

Current Build Up

A Department of Human Services staffer admitted to the new Executive Director of ABCD that the division “screwed up” mental health services for individuals with intellectual and developmental disabilities, by leaving it to the end of the transition from contract to fee for service. As a result, the home and community-based waiver provides no mental health service in the community.

In the last number of years, the state has done a lot to build up our infrastructure.

- Initiatives for new medical residency psychiatry positions focusing on the populations DHS serves.
- Mobile Crisis Prevention and Response.
- NADD Competency-Based IDD/MI Dual Diagnosis DSP Certification Pilot
- Behavioral Health Stabilization Homes
- Emergency Capacity Services Homes
- Increased Community Capacity of Provider Managed Housing for Individuals with Acute Behavioral Needs
- Systemic review of the NJ Comprehensive Assessment Tool (NJCAT). In process

Many of the services are on the acute end. It is important that we not define the need for mental health services as only a crisis requiring emergent and acute care.

Legacy

Consider the historical misconceptions held by well-intentioned professionals like us.
A legacy of being the last and the least served¹

- It is now widely accepted that people with IDD experience the full range of psychiatric disorders as people without IDD. “²

¹ Beasley, Joan B. *An Overview of START with Dr. Joan B. Beasley*, (Institute on Disability/UCED, University of New Hampshire, 2016.) Webinar at www.centerforstartservices.org

- For years the common thought was that you had to have a certain intelligence level to have a mental illness. ³
- Behavioral issues in people with intellectual disabilities were most often viewed as a function of their cognitive impairment rather than a symptom of an underlying mental health problem. ⁴
- A diagnosis of intellectual or developmental disability often overshadows the mental health issues so that the condition goes unrecognized. ⁵
- Barriers to access mental health programs were underestimated. In a nutshell – stigma and ignorance created a fracture system which has been a driver for failed care and negative outcomes. We would be wise to be conscious of our history to ensure that these misconceptions don't find their way into current policies and procedures.

Advocacy Priorities

Medical Side Diagnosticians must learn to see through the bewildering array of physical, cognitive and behavioral information to accurately read and interpret what is truly before them.

MCO's must assign care managers for mental health and be active in the development of the plan of care.

Assessment NJCAT must be complex enough to identify individuals at risk and determine their level of need which, in turn, determines the number of resources they receive (budget). The NJCAT largely disregards mental health issues as a driver for additional care needs.

- 3 questions pertain to mental illness on the sample NJCAT.
- Symptoms are not set up to be discussed
- The difference between mental illness and behavioral issues is not recognized.
- The annual Mental Health Pre-Screen Checklist is completed by the support coordinator who are not diagnosticians,

We have successfully advocated for a revamped NJCAT which will be available later this year. We must ensure that this tool accurately assesses this population.

² Gomez, L., Navas, P., Verdugo, M.A. Tassé. Empirically Supported Psychological Treatments. The Challenges of Comorbid Psychiatric and Behavioral Disorders in People with Intellectual Disability. *World Journal of Psychiatry*. November 19, 2021. www.wjgnet.com/2220-3206/full/v11/i11/1039.htm.

³ Beasley, *Overview of START*.

⁴ Solomon, Andrew. *The Reckoning. The Father of Sandy Hook Killer Searches for Answers*. (The New Yorker Magazine, March 17, 2014) www.newyorker.com/magazine/2014/3/17/the-reckoning.

⁵ Evans, Ike. *Trauma Informed Care and Intellectual and Developmental Disabilities*. (Hogg Foundation for Mental Health, 2017). www.hogg.utexas.edu/trauma-and-idd?

Tools to Redress the Fracture

What impresses me most is how recalcitrant mental illness is, how difficult it is to comprehend, how hard it is to come up with effective treatment and, ultimately, how it is best to be honest about what we don't know so we pursue a more eclectic approach to treating it and not be certain we know the right answer. ⁶

Diversification of service providers and care models would infuse more and different professionals into the service of care in addition to expanding treatment modalities.

Create a Rate for what is Happening and For What Needs to Happen

The structural discrimination against individuals with IDD and co-occurring mental health conditions must be replaced by a mental health acuity rate and related services. Funding a higher rate will encourage and enable residential and day program providers to work for and with these individuals who must live with a chronic condition while specialized support brokerage can assist those living with family or on their own, outside of programs.

Final Thoughts

Sometimes families are victims of stigma. Stigma can lead to a range of negative consequences, in addition to impacting mental and physical health. Though our industry cares for, supports and serves their sons and daughters, it may be wise to care about the wellbeing of their families.

As is true for anyone with a mental illness, true prevention and real recovery efforts require continuity of care from the people who are in it for the long haul with the individual – family, informal caregivers, and formal caregivers.

⁶ Curwen, Thomas. *Q &A: He Studied Mental Illness for 50 Years. Here are all the Things we are Doing Wrong*. LA Times. May 10, 2022. <https://www.latimes.com/california/story/2022-05-10/q-a-andrew-scully-severe-mental-illness>