

Legislative update from Assemblyman Angelo Santabarbara

Chair of the NYS Assembly Committee on People with Disabilities



Dear Friend,

As we kick off another legislative year, I want to take a moment to reflect on the important work accomplished by the Assembly Committee on People with Disabilities and the meaningful progress we have made together. The 2025 legislative session was guided by a clear priority: ensuring that New Yorkers with disabilities are treated with dignity, afforded equal opportunity, and supported by systems that truly meet their needs. Through close collaboration with self-advocates, families, providers, and colleagues across the state Legislature, the Committee advanced legislation that strengthens fundamental rights, expands access to essential services, and improves transparency and accountability within our disability service systems. The bills highlighted in this newsletter reflect our ongoing commitment to listening to lived experience and translating those voices into action through the legislation we have successfully passed in 2025. While there is always more work to be done, these efforts represent important steps toward a more inclusive and equitable New York.

Sincerely,

Angelo Santabarbara
Member of the Assembly
District 111
Chair, Committee on
People with Disabilities



Committee Jurisdiction

The Assembly Committee on People with Disabilities works on laws and issues that affect New Yorkers with disabilities and their families. The Committee focuses on improving access to services and support, protecting individual rights, and promoting inclusion in areas like education, employment, housing, health care, and community life. Its goal is to ensure that people with disabilities can live safely, independently, and with dignity in their communities.

Protecting the Right to Communicate

The Committee on People with Disabilities advanced A.7363-C of 2025, which establishes a Communication Bill of Rights for New Yorkers with disabilities. Communication is foundational to independence, self-advocacy, and human dignity. Yet, too many individuals—particularly those who are nonspeaking or who rely on assistive or alternative communication methods—continue to face barriers to being heard. This legislation affirms that every person with a disability has the right to communicate in the manner that best meets their needs and to access the support necessary to do so. By codifying these rights in law, the bill helps ensure individuals can fully participate in their education, health care decisions, employment, and community life. This legislation reflects the Committee's commitment to recognizing communication not as a privilege, but as a fundamental right that must be protected and respected across all systems.

Expanding Eligibility for FASD Services

In 2025, the Committee worked toward addressing a critical gap in New York's disability services system by advancing legislation that would add fetal alcohol spectrum disorders (FASD) to the statutory definition of developmental disability (A.999-A). Individuals with FASD often experience lifelong cognitive, behavioral, and developmental challenges that significantly impact daily living, yet many have been excluded from vital services simply because their diagnosis was not explicitly recognized in law. The Committee prioritized this bill because families across the state have long struggled to access appropriate support, often navigating multiple systems without adequate assistance. By expanding eligibility, this legislation would ensure individuals with FASD can access OPWDD services, including care coordination, employment support, housing assistance, and family resources. This change promotes earlier intervention, greater stability, and improved long-term outcomes, helping individuals with FASD live more independent and fulfilling lives.

Elevating Family and Resident Voices in Group Homes

The Committee also passed legislation that creates a Statewide Group Home Families Working Group to advise the Office for People with Developmental Disabilities on issues affecting residents, families, and guardians (A.1130-A of 2025). The Committee recognized that individuals living in group homes and their loved ones have invaluable firsthand insight into what works well and what needs improvement in the residential services system. This bill establishes a formal, structured process for gathering input, holding public meetings, and making recommendations on care quality, operations, and financial practices. By elevating these voices, this legislation strengthens transparency and accountability while fostering collaboration between families, advocates, and state leadership. This legislation affirms the Committee's belief that meaningful policy decisions must be informed by those most directly impacted, ultimately leading to stronger, more responsive residential services statewide.

Recognizing Spina Bifida as a Developmental Disability

The Committee is working hard to ensure that individuals with spina bifida are explicitly included in New York's definition of developmental disability, a change that carries significant implications for access to services and supports (A.3572 of 2025). Many individuals with spina bifida face complex, lifelong challenges that affect mobility, learning, and independence, yet have historically encountered barriers when seeking developmental disability services. The Committee acted to correct this inequity, recognizing that outdated statutory definitions should not prevent individuals from receiving the assistance they need. By formally including spina bifida, this bill opens the door to OPWDD services and other critical supports, helping individuals and families better navigate care, plan for the future, and live with greater independence. This legislation reflects a broader commitment to ensuring that New York's disability policies evolve alongside medical understanding and lived experience.

Planning for the Future of Disability Services with the Blue-Ribbon Commission

The Committee on People with Disabilities took a forward-looking approach by advancing a Blue-Ribbon Commission to study and make recommendations on the future of New York's service delivery system for individuals with intellectual and developmental disabilities (A.6021-B of 2025). The Committee recognized that growing demand, workforce shortages, and changing community needs require thoughtful, comprehensive planning to ensure long-term sustainability. This Blue-Ribbon Commission would bring together individuals with disabilities, family members, advocates, service providers, and experts to evaluate existing systems and propose reforms related to housing, employment, service access, and workforce support. By requiring this in-depth review, the Committee is working to ensure New York remains a national leader in disability services while adapting to emerging challenges. The Commission's findings will help guide policy decisions that improve quality, equity, and outcomes for people with disabilities statewide.

Strengthening Transparency and Accountability

The Committee worked to strengthen transparency by requiring the Developmental Disabilities Advisory Council to publish an annual public report detailing its activities, priorities, and recommendations (Ch. 663 of 2025). The Committee supported this measure to ensure that the important work of the council is clearly communicated to policymakers, advocates, and the broader public. By making this information accessible, the bill promotes informed advocacy, strengthens accountability, and ensures that the council's insights meaningfully contribute to legislative and administrative decision-making. This reporting requirement also helps track progress toward statewide goals and highlights areas where additional attention is needed. This legislation reflects the Committee's commitment to openness and collaboration as essential components of effective disability policy.

Closing Message from the Chair

The progress we made in 2025 is a reminder that thoughtful, inclusive policymaking can create real and lasting change for individuals with disabilities and their families. As Committee Chair, I remain deeply committed to continuing this work in the year ahead building on what we have accomplished, addressing remaining gaps, and responding to emerging challenges with care and urgency. I am grateful to the advocates, families, and individuals who consistently share their stories and expertise, and to my legislative colleagues who have partnered with us to advance these critical initiatives. As we look toward the new year, the Committee will continue to center the voices of people with disabilities and work for a New York where everyone can live with independence, security, and respect. I look forward to continuing this important work together.

Important Resources for Individuals and their Families

NYS Office for People With Disabilities (OPWDD)

Helps individuals with developmental disabilities and their families access services and support.

Website: <https://opwdd.ny.gov>
Phone: 866-946-9733

NY State Independent Living Council (NYSILC)

Supports independent living and disability rights across the state.

Website: <https://nysilc.org>
Phone: 518-400-4210

NY State Commission for the Blind (NYSCB)

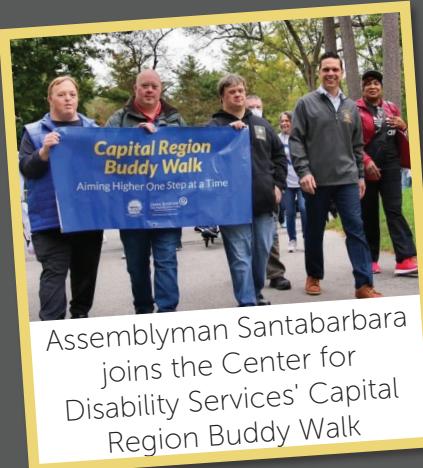
Provides services for people who are blind or visually impaired.

Website: <https://ocfs.ny.gov/programs/nyscb>
Phone: 866-871-3000 **TDD:** 866-871-6000

NY State Commission for the Deaf, Deafblind & Hard of Hearing (CDDH)

Offers resources, advocacy, and support for individuals who are deaf, deafblind, or hard of hearing.

Website: <https://www.ny.gov/new-york-state-deaf-deafblind-and-hard-hearing-office/interagency-coordinating-council-iac>
Phone: 518-491-5068



Assemblyman Santabarbara joins the Center for Disability Services' Capital Region Buddy Walk



"Coach" Santabarbara volunteering with a Special Olympics Basketball team at the Schenectady YMCA

New York State Assembly, Albany, New York 12248

PRSR STD.
U.S. POSTAGE
PAID
ALBANY, NEW YORK
PERMIT NO. 75

Legislative update from
Assemblyman
Angelo Santabarbara
Chair of the NYS Assembly
Committee on People
with Disabilities



Carl E. Heastie, Speaker • Angelo Santabarbara, Chair