



ANDREW M. CUOMO  
Governor

## Justice Center for the Protection of People with Special Needs

DENISE M. MIRANDA  
Executive Director

### **Testimony before the Joint Legislative Fiscal Committees 2021-2022 Executive Budget Proposal February 5, 2021 Denise M. Miranda, Executive Director**

Good afternoon Chairs Kruger, Weinstein, Mannion, and Gunther, as well as other distinguished members of the Senate and Assembly.

My name is Denise Miranda, and I am the Executive Director of the New York State Justice Center for the Protection of People with Special Needs. I would like to thank you for the opportunity to testify regarding Governor Cuomo's Executive Budget proposal.

Today, I come before you on behalf of the more than one million New Yorkers in care with special needs. The Justice Center's work is directed by our steadfast commitment to protecting vulnerable people. While it's no surprise that our agency has been impacted by the COVID-19 health crisis, I want to assure you that our commitment has not wavered.

When I appeared before the legislature last year, I spoke about how I see the relatively young age of the Justice Center as an advantage. It allows us to pivot quickly when circumstances necessitate change. This has only been more evident during this global health crisis. We are continually evaluating our processes and exploring ways to operate more efficiently while also collaborating with stakeholders at all levels. The role we play in keeping vulnerable populations safe from abuse and neglect cannot change, even in the face of COVID-19.

Throughout the pandemic, our call center has continued taking reports around the clock. Our team of highly-trained investigators has worked tirelessly to hold the quality of investigations to the highest standard while ensuring the safety of everyone involved.

Our investigators have used telephone and video interviewing techniques when appropriate and followed all health guidelines when visiting provider facilities to do in-person work.

Our advocates have continued victim advocacy and family support work with necessary modifications. Some family members and individuals receiving services no longer felt comfortable appearing in-person for interviews. Our advocates adjusted quickly, using technology to support these individuals remotely.

The Justice Center understands that protecting people from abuse and neglect goes beyond investigations - we work towards the goal of preventing these incidents from happening. It is imperative that the global health crisis not slow this work down.

In 2020, the agency created two new abuse prevention toolkits for use by providers, staff, and individuals receiving services. These toolkits are created through the analysis of trends in Justice Center cases. One recently released focuses on proper wheelchair securement during transport. The other highlights the benefits of global positioning systems in agency vehicles. GPS allows providers to monitor vehicles transporting individuals receiving services and address issues like speeding or unauthorized stops.

We have also modified processes where appropriate to support providers and the dedicated workforce. We all recognize that the COVID-19 pandemic has brought unprecedented challenges such as staffing shortages.

To respond to this challenge and under authority granted by an Executive Order, we created an expedited background check process for workers that are not new to the system of care that is overseen by the Justice Center. This allowed providers to hire staff quickly to fill the gaps without compromising the integrity of the service delivery system or the quality of our background checks.

The Justice Center also evaluated and improved several internal processes during 2020. Staff from several units were combined to create a more efficient approach to our litigation work. This promotes continuity from the launch of an investigation, through appeal, ensuring due process for all parties. Additionally, we continue to expand our three-business-day intake model. The goal is to more accurately classify allegations when they are made which can have the added benefit of reducing cycle time and enhancing the quality of investigations.

While we all recognize the difficulties experienced this past year, we have also found that some of our new processes will be useful when this health crisis is over. For example, we implemented virtual appeal hearings and have found this to be an efficient way to carry on this work when in-person appearances are not feasible. Further, the remote environment allows us to do several different types of interviews without the burden of travel. These efficiencies will be carried forward as mutually beneficial to investigators and interviewees alike.

Finally, we all know the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic extended far beyond the Justice Center's work. New Yorkers needed help from state government in ways never seen before. Justice Center staff recognized the depth of the crisis and stepped up, assisting with things like unemployment claims, COVID test scheduling, and paid family leave calls.

Last year, I closed my remarks by saying the safety and well-being of the individuals under our jurisdiction remains the foundation of everything we do. That has certainly taken on new meaning. The COVID-19 health crisis has challenged the work of government at all levels and the Justice Center is no exception. But I can attest that the agency has risen to meet this challenge.

The Justice Center's ability to adapt quickly and adjust business practices has allowed us to carry on our critical mission. We will take the lessons we have learned and continue to improve our work so we can serve New Yorkers with special needs to the very best of our ability.

Again, thank you for this opportunity to report on our important work and I welcome any questions you may have.