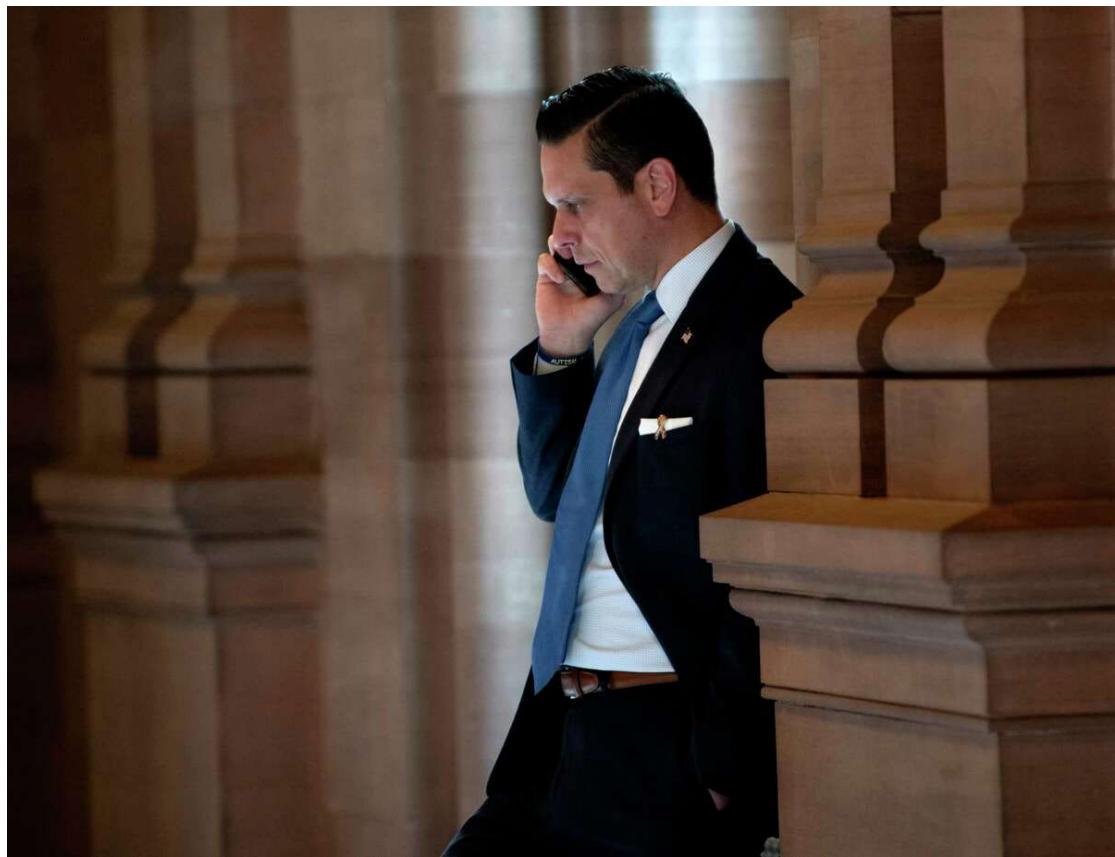


Santabarbara Says Plan to Study Group Home Issues Moving Ahead

Assemblyman noted New York's COVID-19 case rate for group home residents was more than triple that of the general population

Brendan J. Lyons

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Assemblyman Angelo Santabarbara is pushing for Gov. Kathy Hochul to sign legislation that would create a working group to study what he said were breakdowns in the state's group homes' systems for intellectually and emotionally disabled individuals during the COVID-19 pandemic.

ALBANY — Assemblyman Angelo Santabarbara on Monday said legislation he sponsored to establish a working group to help improve living conditions in group homes for disabled individuals is moving forward and is expected to be sent to Gov. Kathy Hochul for final approval.

The working group would also examine communication between group home residents and their families, he said.

"Residents of group homes, who often have disabilities, deserve the right to weigh in on how they are being treated," said Santabarbara, who has a son with autism. "However, the COVID-19 pandemic highlighted a stark failure in communication between residents and the institutions tasked with supporting them."

In a news release, Santabarbara noted New York's COVID-19 case rate for group home residents was more than triple that of the general population.

"Reports from early 2021 indicate that well over 10,000 group home staff members had been infected with COVID-19, with a number of them becoming fatally ill," the release states. "Many of these cases were due to communication failures between residents, staff and the state Office for People with Developmental Disabilities (OPWDD)."

Santabarbara said a focus of the working group would be to ensure that the communication failures that he said contributed to problems in group homes during the pandemic are corrected going forward.

"During the pandemic things were much more chaotic but we have to be able to address needs during all times, whether (or not) they're challenging times," he said. "It's important to these families, and some of them may even be serving with this work group, it's important that that communication take place. ... You're going to see a number of measures like this put in place to make sure that we're prepared should something like that happen again."

Those communication breakdowns occurred as New York group homes have seen an unprecedented staffing crisis that began well before the pandemic struck but grew worse as a result of it.

Last year, at the urging of his Republican colleagues, state Sen. James Skoufis — who chairs the investigations committee — said he was interested in examining former Gov. Andrew M. Cuomo's COVID-19 policies at group home facilities for people with developmental disabilities, which have mirrored those of nursing homes.

Four senators had signed a letter noting the former administration's policies did not prioritize getting personal protective equipment to group homes for those with emotional and intellectual disabilities. That push was also prompted by a directive from OPWDD — similar to one sent to nursing home operators early in the pandemic — that facilities should accept residents who had tested positive for COVID-19.

The policy issued in April 2020 had instructed that if patients were "medically stable" and "asymptomatic" then, "no individual shall be denied re-admission or admission."

"Given the similarity of the directive to the very controversial nursing home executive order, and the very simple fact that these group homes are congregate settings, this is something I want to do some information gathering on," Skoufis, D-Orange County, said last year.

But according to state Sen. James Tedisco, R-Glenville, who was one of four Republican senators who signed the letter sent to Skoufis, the Senate did not initiate a formal investigation.

"They don't do any investigation and when they do one and start one they never finish it," he said, adding that the administration of Gov. Kathy Hochul also has slowwalked an after-action investigation of the state's handling of the pandemic.

"We haven't seen any hearings or any investigation and the family members there deserve that, as well as the family members ... of the people put in nursing homes," Tedisco said.

Skoufis could not immediately be reached for comment late Monday. Last year he had said he wanted to explore the issue and potentially partner with Sen. John Mannion, who chairs the Committee on Disabilities, because, "this is something that deserves examination."