



Office for People With Developmental Disabilities

**Senate Finance Committee
Confirmation Hearing Testimony by
Acting Commissioner Kerri Neifeld
March 1, 2022**

Good morning Senators Krueger and O'Mara and other distinguished members of the Senate Finance Committee.

My name is Kerri Neifeld and I have been nominated for the position of Commissioner of the Office for People With Developmental Disabilities.

I am grateful for the opportunity to meet with you to discuss my qualifications and to share my vision for the future of supports and services.

Let me begin by sharing some information with you about my background. I have a Bachelor's degree from Elmira College and Master's from the University at Albany School of Social Welfare.

I have spent my entire career advocating for others and helping people access needed services. My first job out of college was providing direct support in a community residence for people with serious mental illness and substance use disorder. From there, I spent many years working in various capacities in the human services sector, as a Foster Care Caseworker, a Child Protective Services investigator, with at-risk youth, with families surviving domestic violence, and in a mental health clinic. I was also a Fellow on Women & Public Policy at Rockefeller College.

My career in state service began as an Excelsior Fellow working as a Special Assistant to the Deputy Commissioner at OTDA. Later, I was promoted to Assistant Deputy Commissioner, helping to manage the Division of Shelter Oversight and Compliance. And, most recently, I served in the Executive Chamber as the Assistant Secretary for Human Services and Mental Hygiene.

It was while working in the Executive Chamber that I came to appreciate the mission and operations of OPWDD. I have seen first-hand the great wealth of talent, the complexity of delivering on its simply stated mission and the dedication of stakeholders to meeting the complex needs of people with developmental disabilities. I am excited to be before you today to talk about the opportunities and the challenges we have ahead of us as we work to help people with developmental disabilities live richer lives in their communities.

I have spent the time since my appointment in early November meeting with as many people as possible. I believe that being an effective leader requires an informed understanding of what's happening in the service system, as well as knowing and understanding the perspectives of the various parties who make up that system. I have visited day programs, residences, clinics, met with self-advocates, family members, providers, staff, and legislators.

I am committed to building OPWDD's relationships with the people we support, their families, our providers, advocates and our state and legislative leaders. As Commissioner, it is my responsibility to advocate for what the agency needs to fulfill its mission, for what the service system needs to function effectively and efficiently, and most importantly, for what the people we support and their families need to lead healthy, fulfilling and successful lives.

I think we can all agree that we must address the current crisis we face within the direct support workforce. For many years, the wages of our direct support professionals have remained stagnant while wages for other, less demanding and less meaningful jobs, have grown. What was once a job that paid significantly more than minimum wage and offered a person the ability to have a meaningful career and to support themselves and their family, now barely keeps pace with the wages of big box stores and fast-food restaurants. Over the last several years we have seen staff vacancies in our system grow. When the pandemic hit, it exacerbated what was already a challenging situation, causing even more of the caring, dedicated professionals we need to leave the field.

As you know, Governor Hochul has not only announced a \$1.5 billion investment in this essential workforce through the American Rescue Plan Act, with the first of these dollars expected to be delivered to service providers by the end of this month, but she also released the strongest Executive Budget proposal in recent history when it comes to supporting people with developmental disabilities. The Executive Budget proposes a 12 percent growth in funding for OPWDD supports and services. That commitment includes a 5.4 percent cost of living

adjustment to service providers to enhance wages and provides funds for additional staff bonuses.

Those are tremendous investments in our system, but in addition to funding we must do more to promote and professionalize direct support as a rewarding and meaningful career choice, to grow the ranks of caring professionals doing this important work, and to ensure stability in the service delivery system.

OPWDD is already implementing many other important initiatives to enhance and expand our capacity to deliver person-centered services. These initiatives respond directly to the tremendous public input we received last summer from our many stakeholders as the agency prepared to draft a new comprehensive, strategic plan. While issuance of our plan has been delayed with the changes in executive leadership, it is not derailed. The public input we received has helped inform the Budget process and the Governor has committed funding in her proposal for crucial services such as housing, employment and crisis supports – all areas identified by our stakeholders during the strategic planning process.

As we work to finalize the agency's 5-year strategic plan which is on target for a mid-April release date, OPWDD has begun launching significant efforts to study and transform services as outlined in our ARPA spending plan. The ARPA funds are providing an important and timely boost for the service system and will help us initiate transformation in many of the ways our stakeholders advised.

As you can see, it is a truly exciting time for OPWDD. I am honored to be here to experience the energy and witness the innovation that is coming. With your confirmation, it would be my distinct privilege to lead these efforts to strengthen and expand what is surely the greatest system of supports and services for people with developmental disabilities in our nation.

I look forward to answering any questions you may have. Thank you.