



## For Connecticut people with disabilities, systemic change means assuring rights, opportunities are protected

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In Connecticut, there remains considerable work ahead to achieve full equality and justice for people with disabilities. That is the unmistakable reality. Meaningful and enduring progress will require an intensive effort, not only by those within the disability community, but by all of us.

**Deborah Dorfman** Disability Rights Connecticut is an independent statewide non-profit organization which advocates for the human, civil, and legal rights of people with disabilities in Connecticut. Through extensive public input and our work directly with clients and constituents, we have identified inescapable problems that are widespread or pose the greatest threat to the independence and safety of people with disabilities.

As amplified by a recent Town Hall during which members of the public provided direct input, often based on first-hand experience, we have prioritized the following six areas of focus for the next 12 months: Abuse and Neglect, Healthcare, Education, Employment, Individual Rights, and Opportunities to Live in the Community. With an eye toward achieving systemic change, it is these areas that will direct and guide our efforts on behalf of Connecticut residents.

Each of these realms of priority include multiple objectives – specific ways in which we look to highlight current practices that fall short, as a means of achieving system change that in many instances is long overdue.

At the core of DRCT's duties is the obligation to monitor as well investigate and remediate abuse, neglect, and other rights violations of individuals with disabilities residing in facilities such as hospitals, long-term care facilities, jails, prisons, and other facilities as well as those residing in community-based programs or receiving services in their homes from a community provider. In the upcoming year, DRCT will continue to work to protect and advocate on behalf of individuals with disabilities to prevent and remediate abuse and neglect and other rights violations.

In the area of healthcare, for example, DRCT “will advocate for people with disabilities to have timely access to the health and mental health care that they need.” Among the seven objectives identified are ensuring that individuals with disabilities “have timely access to medically necessary medical and mental health care that is free from discriminatory limitations and restrictions on access to care.”

DRCT also will undertake efforts to assure that people with disabilities receive reasonable accommodations or modifications to obtain the COVID-19 vaccine, and we will provide systemic advocacy to ensure that people have timely access to wheelchairs, communication devices and other assistive technology and durable medical equipment that they need to live and participate in the community.

In the area of education, students with disabilities should be afforded inclusive, nondiscriminatory educational services necessary for success in post-secondary or work environments. Among our objectives is supporting systemic reform to ensure that preschool, elementary, and secondary students are not suspended, expelled, arrested, and/or otherwise pushed out of their neighborhood school as a result of behavior relating to their disabilities.

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Recently released federal and state data indicate that individuals with disabilities, particularly students of color with disabilities, have been referred to law enforcement at a significantly higher rate than the overall student population. The data is alarming, and we will work to ensure that the alarm is heard, and the practice is ended.

We are also focusing on children with mental health disabilities, intellectual and developmental disabilities, and traumatic brain injuries who tend to be the ones who are most often pushed out of neighborhood schools. Schools and Districts should use trained professionals – rather than police – and provide school-based behavioral health services to support children with disabilities who are having behavioral issues related to their disability at school.

Another key priority is promoting independent living, competitive integrated employment, access to the state Vocational Rehabilitation programs, and addressing barriers to full participation and independent living by ensuring access to services and programs from government and in public accommodations.

We also place a high priority on employment rights, and promoting independent living, and providing opportunities and the necessary services and supports to live, remain, and fully participate in the life of the community. Towards that end, we intend to engage in systemic advocacy to underscore that individuals with disabilities residing in institutions, or who are at risk of institutionalization, receive information sufficient to make an informed choice whether to move to the community or remain in the institution and for those wishing to transition to the community, meaningful opportunities to do so through the provision of necessary community-based services and supports.

This is a glimpse of the lengthy priority list that has been developed, benefitting from public input. It reflects DRCT's mission to advocate, educate, investigate and pursue legal, administrative, and other appropriate remedies to advance and protect the civil rights of individuals with disabilities to participate equally and fully in all facets of community life in Connecticut. It is an ongoing and unrelenting effort that continually welcomes additional allies and supporters, advocates and friends all across our state.

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