

Statement by Disability Rights Connecticut

RE: Interview Comments by NYC Mayoral Candidate Eric Adams

Disability Rights Connecticut is the non-profit organization designated by the Governor to be the federally mandated protection and advocacy (P & A) System to serve people with disabilities in Connecticut, through investigation of allegations of abuse and neglect and advocacy on behalf of such individuals.

There is a P & A system in every state and U.S. territory. The P & A system, nationwide, was originally founded in response to the revelation of extreme abuse and neglect at a particular institution for people with intellectual and developmental disabilities in Staten Island, New York, known as Willowbrook. After the abuses came to light from video footage of the squalor in that facility, there began a push to close down similar facilities nationwide, with the P & A system a critical voice in that effort.

Given our roots, we were disturbed to view footage of a recent interview which New York City mayoral candidate Eric Adams gave on September 22nd on MSNBC's "Morning Joe" program. He stated, referring to Willowbrook specifically, that "a few employees harmed those who were patients," and that closing the facility was a "big mistake" which was due to "a reaction from the advocates to close down Willowbrook."

This statement is both factually incorrect and devalues the horrific experience of thousands of people who were subjected to abuse while living in that institution. There were over 5,000 people who were harmed at Willowbrook while under the care of New York State.

In Connecticut, the abuses at Willowbrook helped shine a light on institutions in our own state, and, ultimately, to some of them being closed down. Unfortunately, Connecticut still maintains facilities like Southbury Training School and other institutions housing individuals with disabilities.

These institutions continue to provide institutional care at a shockingly high per person cost to state taxpayers, when more integrated

community-based options are now fully developed and can be made available for those residents, with the infusion of relatively modest additional resources. Indeed, more opportunities are needed for individuals in Connecticut to be able to transition to the community in place of the still far too heavy reliance on institutionalization, across various kinds of disabilities.

We understand that these comments were made by Candidate Adams in the context of addressing the need to dramatically reduce homelessness in New York City, including among those with mental illness, and that he did later acknowledge in the interview, correctly, that the closures were not balanced by the infusion of sufficient additional community resources. That failure has also been highlighted in Connecticut by the Keep the Promise Coalition. But the answer is not to reopen institutions or to rewrite history to ignore the extensive abuse that was rampant in such institutions and led to the creation of the P & A system, which unfortunately still continues to uncover far too many cases of abuse.

We expect any candidate for mayor in any city, as well as talk show hosts who interview them, to have a basic familiarity with this sordid history and why it needed to be reversed through a broad program of supports in the community in place of institutional care. We hope all such individuals will join us in supporting a more thoughtful set of solutions which do not repeat the mistakes of the past and fund comprehensive programs to make the promise of living in the community with appropriate supports, including in Connecticut, a reality.

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