



KATHY HOCHUL
Governor

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Executive Director

**Testimony before the Joint Legislative Fiscal Committees
2024-2025 Executive Budget Proposal
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Denise M. Miranda, Executive Director**

Good afternoon Chairs Mannion, Brouk, Krueger, Seawright, Gunther, Weinstein, as well as your distinguished colleagues 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 Hochul's Fiscal Year 2025 Executive Budget proposal.

This year, the Justice Center marked an important milestone: the agency's ten-year anniversary. For more than a decade now, New York has been home to the strongest protections in the country for individuals with special needs.

In that time, it may have been easy to forget what brought us to the creation of the Justice Center. Before the agency's existence, scathing reports exposed a system that was ripe for abuse. Known offenders were rarely held accountable for their actions. Instead, they were shuffled from program to program, finding new potential victims with each move. The legislature knew an overhaul was overdue.

The Justice Center has substantiated tens of thousands of cases in the last decade of service, holding subjects responsible for egregious conduct. We've prevented violent criminals from entering the workforce and barred nearly 1,000 of the worst offenders from working with vulnerable populations. We've also tracked trends and produced materials that can help prevent incidents from happening.

It might be easy to believe that abuse and neglect has been eradicated because of all this work. Unfortunately, we continue to investigate shocking incidents. In the past year alone, we've substantiated cases involving brutal physical assault, rape, and severe neglect. They are a grim reminder of just how important the Justice Center's work remains.

Further, we know that former staff members substantiated for the worst cases of abuse and neglect have attempted to regain employment nearly 300 times. Only the Justice Center stood between them and individuals with special needs.

I think it's important to point out that stopping bad actors from working in or re-entering the workforce does not just help individuals receiving services, it also makes the system safer for the tens of thousands of dedicated direct care professionals. The vast majority of staff members across the State are incredibly resilient and dedicated to New Yorkers with special needs. They deliver exceptional care under very difficult circumstances.

Recognizing the unprecedented stress on the workforce, the Justice Center is examining each case through a workforce crisis lens. This will allow us to determine if an incident occurred because of an isolated issue or a systemic concern that needs to be addressed. Additionally, the Justice Center's proposed budget allocates funding that will allow the agency to take further steps to reduce case cycle time which lessens the burden on the workforce. This year's Executive Budget includes one-point-three million dollars in additional state operations funding. This money will provide 18 FTEs, allowing the agency to continue our efforts to reduce cycle times. We are mindful of the critical role we can play in ensuring accountability and high-quality care, which requires quick resolution to cases.

As we look ahead to the next decade of service, we know the core mission of our work will carry on. But beyond that, we want to leverage our wealth of data to stop incidents from happening. Intense trend analysis and an evaluation of what providers and staff need to train and support the next generation of the workforce will be a focus of the agency. In addition, we understand the key role stakeholders play in the success of the agency which is why we will be working to strengthen these partnerships and build new ones. We started this initiative last year with a series of roundtables where we peeled back the good and the bad, so we can move forward together. We regularly interact with statewide advocacy organizations, self-advocates, families, labor unions, and members of our advisory council to better inform our work and to find more innovative ways to support staff in the field. We also present to providers all throughout the state about Justice Center processes and provide opportunities for candid conversations with the direct care workforce. We are eager to continue our collective work to enrich the lives of the people receiving services.

The Justice Center appreciates your partnership in our mission to protect all vulnerable New Yorkers.

I now welcome your questions.