

Thank you chairs Rivera, Gottfried, May, Bronson, Skoufis, McDonald and members of the committees. My name is Keith Gurgui. I am the System's Advocate at the Resource Center for Accessible Living, or RCAL, In Kingston New York. We have been the Independent living Center serving Ulster County since our founding in 1983. I am also testifying today as a member of the New York Carrying Majority, a resident of New York, an individual with a disability, a son of two Registered Nurse, and a recipient of long-term care... specifically, split shift, 24-hour personal care.

In fact, it has been eleven years to this very day that I became introduced to living life with a disability after suffering a spinal cord injury while on summer vacation in 2009. My disability, as well as my experience working at RCAL, has given me a unique familiarity with the complexities of both receiving and providing home and community-based services. I am acutely aware that if it were not for being able to live and work at home, my health and quality of life would be in severe jeopardy. That's true regardless of the current state of affairs, but now after the outbreak of COVID-19, the idea of ever having to be admitted into a nursing home is truly terrifying.

We know nursing homes are not the safest place for seniors, individuals who are immunocompromised, or those with disabilities, to be. For years, nursing home executives have put profit over people, so it's no surprise that these institutions were not equipped to protect the residents they're responsible for when the pandemic hit. In contrast, home care is safer, and costs less on average than institutionalized care; and New York's aging population is growing rapidly while our nursing homes are overwhelmed.

Now, I obviously have a clear bias in preferring to live at home, but I also acknowledge that there are those New Yorkers, that for one reason or another, have no alternative but to live in a nursing home. That being said, it's unfortunate that there aren't stronger home and community-based supports in our state. I do recognize that many of you are in the middle of working hard to help home care workers earn a dignified wage... and I thank Senator May for supporting the initiatives you've spearheaded, which you outlined at the July 29th release of the caring majority's report on home care; including sponsoring legislation for a home care jobs and innovation fund that would create pilot programs across the state to help boost home care jobs. And I also want to thank Assemblyman Ron Kim and his colleagues for their work on ending the legal immunity for nursing homes that existed from this year's budget.

However, we can, and we must do more. Let's not forget that even before the pandemic, advocates were fighting against the Medicaid Redesign Team's proposed cuts to Medicaid spending and the reimbursement rate reductions to Fiscal Intermediaries running the Consumer Directed Personal Assistance Program. Now, with an even more dire economic future looming we should be protecting and strengthening our personal care systems and discussing raising reimbursement rates, not slashing them and how to raise the necessary revenue to do so. If there is one message I would like to send today, it is that New York is one the key financial hubs of the entire world. There are solutions to properly funding our essential workers, but nothing worth doing is ever easy, nor is it always popular with the public. This state, and this nation is at a crossroads. We can either devolve into further depression and crisis or we can muster our collective courage and forge an equitable future for all. I pray you choose the latter. Thank you

Keith Gurgui
Systems Advocate
Resource Center for Accessible Living
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10 August 2020