



News and Information from New Jersey's Protection and Advocacy System

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Reintroducing New Jersey's Protection and Advocacy System

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To Contact DRNJ

DRNJ's staff is available from 9:00 a.m. to 5:00 p.m. Monday through Friday. Individuals may visit DRNJ's barrier-free, fully accessible office or call, write, fax or email. DRNJ has telephone language interpreting services to facilitate communication in 150 languages and dialects. Voice-mail messages may be left 24 hours a day. Requests for assistance and services are provided free of charge.

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A New Name

On October 1, 2008, the former New Jersey Protection and Advocacy, Inc. became DISABILITY RIGHTS NEW JERSEY. While the name is new, our mission remains the same: to advocate and advance the human, civil and legal rights of persons with disabilities.

"Our new name reflects our identity as part of the disability rights movement," explains Executive Director Joseph B. Young. "It's part of a national trend among the protection and advocacy agencies, represented in all 50 states and the U.S. territories, to make our mission readily recognizable by people with disabilities and the general public."

"Protection and advocacy agencies (known as P&As) have a unique status, established by Congress as components of major legislation declaring the rights of people with disabilities," according to Young; laws that include the Rehabilitation Act, the Developmental Disabilities Assistance and Bill of Rights Act, the Protection and Advocacy of Individuals with Mental Illness, the Assistive Technology Act, the Ticket to Work and Work Incentives Improvement Act, the Children's Health Act, and the Help America Vote Act. "These laws give the P&A agencies unique authority and responsibility".

Evolution of Disability Rights New Jersey

Created as a result of the public outcry arising from Geraldo Rivera's expose of the appalling conditions of abuse and neglect at Willowbrook Developmental Center, a public institution in New York for persons with developmental disabilities, Congress, led by Senator Jacob Javits of New York, established the protection and advocacy system as part of the renewal of the federal developmental disabilities legislation enacted in 1975. Its origins were to protect people with cognitive impairment in facilities from abuse and neglect.

Both the national protection and advocacy system and New Jersey's designated protection and advocacy agency have changed and expanded greatly over the last thirty years.

New Jersey's protection and advocacy programs were initially located in two divisions of the original Department of the Public Advocate, the Division of Advocacy for the Developmentally Disabled and the Division for Mental Health Advocacy.

When the Department of the Public Advocate was abolished in 1994 a small number of P&A employees incorporated New Jersey Protection and Advocacy, Inc., (NJP&A) as a private, non-profit agency with a board of directors comprised of a majority of persons with disabilities or family members of persons with disabilities.

From NJP&A’s original seven staff members, DRNJ is currently staffed by 39 individuals, the vast majority of whom are seasoned, having worked for the agency an average of seven years. Support and administrative staff, lawyers and advocates come from diverse backgrounds in disability, race and ethnicity, as well as diverse educational and work experiences. DRNJ has long employed staff with a range of disabilities, including mental illness, developmental disabilities, blindness, deafness, traumatic brain injury, paraplegia, and other physical disabilities. Their stories, combined with those who are siblings and parents of people with disabilities, add to the agency’s expertise. “While our mission is primarily to provide legal and advocacy services, the personal experiences of staff provide empathy and insight into the struggle of those who face and challenge barriers every day,” according to Ellen Catanese, Director of Advocacy and Administration. “When asked the single most important reason for staff’s commitment to the work, it is the rewards that arise from helping individuals overcome these challenges.” The diversity of the DRNJ staff supports a team approach for advocacy, with communal responsibility and the shared expertise of a group working toward the same end further enhances services.

DRNJ has also served as a training site for law, social work, and other student interns over the years, and a number of former interns have been hired as staff. DRNJ contracts with the Rutgers University work-study program and serves as a training site for the Rutgers School of Social Work and Rutgers Law School.



National Disability Rights Network

The growth of DRNJ, as well as the 56 other P&A programs, is due in large part to the national organization of protection and advocacy systems, now known as the National Disability Rights Network (NDRN). New Jersey took a leading role in organizing the original National Association of Protection and Advocacy Systems. Local advocates were among the first to recognize the need to coordinate the many P&As and to represent their interests, and those of people with disabilities, before Congress and federal agencies and to enhance the work of the P&As through training and technical assistance. NDRN's guiding principles also reflect the work of DRNJ and include:

- **equality, equity and fairness**, that people with disabilities are full and equal citizens under the law;
- **meaningful choice and empowerment**, that people with disabilities, no matter their type or level of disability, can make choices;
- **supports and participation**, shaped by unique needs and preferences, and ensuring integration;
- **independence**, based on individual, professional and systems advocacy;
- **cultural competency**, including people with disabilities in all aspects of P&A and NDRN activities, reflecting the cultural, ethnic, racial and disability diversity of each state and;
- **resource generation**, providing leadership in public policy.

DRNJ works closely with the national organization, participating at annual training conferences, and CEO and fiscal administrators meetings, and on the legislative and legal directors committees.

From the beginning of the protection and advocacy program, which was limited to protecting individuals with disabilities housed in institutions, the individual P&As, NDRN, and Congress have sought to respond to the needs of people with disabilities, and their fundamental rights to freedom from abuse and neglect and discrimination, as well as access to services in order to achieve meaningful community integration. P&A services now encompass areas of abuse and neglect of people with disabilities, both in institutions and in the community, assistance to those seeking or receiving services from the public vocational rehabilitation agencies, matters of discrimination, physical accessibility, special education, the right of all qualified persons to cast a confidential vote, responsive healthcare, and access to assistive technology services and devices. In addition to individual and systems legal and non-legal advocacy, DRNJ engages in policy and legislative activities, outreach, education and training.

The needs and demand for P&A services are great. In order to ensure that DRNJ is serving the needs of people with disabilities, staff reaches out to the community in many ways, including surveys and focus groups, to inform DRNJ's advisories and board of directors of the issues of immediate concern to the disability community as they establish program priorities for the agency. "We want to know the most important concerns of our community" according to Young.

Donations

Disability Rights New Jersey is a 501(c)(3) corporation. Donations are tax-deductible and gratefully accepted.



Yes! People with disabilities in New Jersey can count on my help in support of their human, civil and legal rights at this critical time!

Enclosed is my tax-deductible contribution of:

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