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Statewide disabilities champion from Ridgewood honored for advocacy work

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Paul Aronsohn is the state's first ombudsman for individuals with intellectual or developmental disabilities. He estimates that 80% of his time is spent troubleshooting for people with disabilities and their families, helping them navigate a complicated web of resources such as affordable housing and transportation — that make their daily lives possible. The rest of his time is spent in Trenton making sure lawmakers hear their voices and understand their needs.

"Once you get through today's challenge, tomorrow presents another challenge," said Aronsohn, a former Ridgewood mayor. Sometimes he's with people for a few minutes; sometimes problems take months to solve. The New Jersey Council on Developmental Disabilities honored

Aronsohn, 57, with its Distinguished DD Systems Change Award on Sept. 28. The annual accolade honors people who make "out-standing contributions" within complex systems, like the web of programs that affect people with disabilities every day, said Mercedes Witowsky, the group's executive director.

"Paul is available around the clock when people, who are often at the end of their rope, reach out for help. With coffee in hand, he compassionately listens, understands where people are at in their journey and seeks to find the services and supports that they need, which is not necessarily what the state is offering," Witowsky said. In 2022, President Joe Biden appointed Aronsohn to the President's Committee for People with Intellectual Disabilities. He was recently invited to the White House to commemorate the 50th anniversary of the Rehabilitation Act and 33rd anniversary of the Americans with Disabilities Act on Oct. 2. "There are so many people we want to help," said Sen. Kristin Corrado, R-Totowa, who presented the award to Aronsohn. "When somebody is calling for help, nine out of 10 times,

I reach out to Paul. He is a notable asset in these efforts, always a responsive and reliable source of help, even during off-hours and crisis situations."

In the following interview, Aronsohn, who prepares annual reports on the state of disability for Gov. Phil Murphy, who appointed him, talks about the progress he has made over the last five years and considers what needs to be tackled next.

Q: Why do you think they chose you for this award?

A: I think there's a recognition and appreciation for the work of our office. Not only trying to meet the day-to-day needs of the people we serve, but also looking for opportunities to make the system of care better, stronger, more user-friendly, more person-centered.

Q: How would you define the system?

A: Generally, when we talk about New Jersey's system of care for people with intellectual and developmental disabilities, it's the whole system, not just in terms of state government services and supports. It's also the advocacy community and the provider community and the resources available to individuals and families.

Q: That's a huge patchwork of systems.

A: Right. I try to define it that way because I think for the average person, they don't look at it as this particular department or that particular office. I look at the system as a whole and how responsive it is. In each of our five annual reports, we talk about a tale of two systems, one good and one not good enough. We recognize that generally speaking, our system is strong, it's robust, it's well resourced. There are good people, a lot of good programs. But there are also a lot of folks who fall through the cracks dealing with persistent challenges, and that's the part of the system that we try to help fix.



Paul Aronsohn with President Joe Biden, who named him to a panel on disabilities. PROVIDED BY PAUL ARONSOHN

Q: People often fall through those cracks because it's not one system. They're falling through cracks that form when different systems overlap.

A: You're absolutely right. The biggest barrier for individuals and families to get the service and support they need and deserve is the complexity of the system. There are so many offices and so many divisions, so many acronyms, and it's changing all the time. It can be overwhelming for an individual or family. What we try to do is just help individuals and families get the services and supports that they need and, very importantly, that they deserve.

Q: When you began, how challenging was it for you to navigate and understand the complexities of this system?

A: I grew up in a family with disability, so I've been around disability a lot. Professionally, I got involved when I was mayor of Ridgewood and got involved with the county disability services [agency], sat on some boards. But when I took this job, it was a huge learning curve in many respects, not just in terms of trying to understand the very complex system of care for people with disabilities in the state, but also the challenges that people are facing. One of them was severe autism. I was struck at the very beginning by both the prevalence as well as the seeming lack of supports and services for individuals who have these severe challenging behaviors and their families. It was eye-opening.

Q: Is your office focusing on specific issues given the scope of autism in New Jersey?

A: We're a very small operation. So we're tackling everything that comes our way, both on an individual basis as well as the things that we're noticing are trends. But if you look at our annual reports, I've spent a good amount of time focusing on severe autism, simply because the need is so dire, the issues are so large and [it's a] growing population. It's something that doesn't get talked about very much. People don't talk about the challenges that many families face privately and the secret suffering that goes on. That's the thing we try to shine a light on, and try to get more people talking about. We need more re-sources and more interventions, more treatments, more supports, more ser-vices available to these individuals and their families. That's what we're focusing on.

Q: How do you get your reports and findings out there, get people reading them?

A: We send it to as many people as we can, legislators, staff, other government officials, reporters, family members. We post it on our website. We post it on our Facebook page. We want to get it out to as many people as possible. It's written, I hope, in a way that if you know nothing about disability, you'll still learn something. And if you've been around disability a long time, you'll learn something, too.

Q: Have there been instances where your report or discussions influenced policy changes?

A: I've gotten calls from legislative staff or a legislator saying: I read this in your report, can you tell me more about this? And then you see that they introduce a bill that is related to that. I don't know if I'd use the word "influence," but we are certainly informing the discus-sion at a lot of different levels. And I think we're having an impact. I think we're helping to bring to light some of these issues that haven't gotten enough attention and we're helping to shape the conversation.

Q: Which conversation?

A: The state conversation, if you will; people talking about disability. One of the first things I did when I was mayor was set up a disability committee back in 2008 in Ridgewood. When I was leaving eight years later, I got the sense that the town looked at disability differently. It wasn't everybody, and the sun wasn't always shining, but we were heading in a positive direction. People were under-standing more, people were thinking about it more. Businesses were more re-ceptive to hiring people. I think the Mur-phy administration deserves some credit on this. I think we're increasingly a more inclusive, more sensitive, more welcoming, a more disability-friendly community.

Q: How do people find you?

A: We do everything possible with our small operation to get the word out. I accept any invitation to speak anywhere, to go anywhere. We reach out to legislators. We meet people where they live. They can invite their friends, anybody. We go to schools, even though we're overwhelmed. There's only four of us. But the more people that know about us the better.

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