

NEWS

Rep. Tom Kean pushes for national disability ombudsman, modeled after NJ watchdog



Gene Myers

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U.S. Rep. [Tom Kean Jr.](#) is developing federal legislation to create the nation's first ombudsman for people with disabilities, much like the [watchdog office](#) he helped establish in New Jersey in 2018.

Speaking at the October meeting of the New Jersey Legislative Disability Caucus, the Republican congressman said his staff "is currently working on legislation that would establish a national intellectual and developmental disabilities ombudsman," modeled after the state's version and the existing federal long-term care ombudsman.

"My goal is to ensure that this country can have access to the help and protection that New Jersey families now have," Kean said of the state position, created with bipartisan support when he was a member of the state Legislature.

Noelle Berriet, Kean's communications director, confirmed the effort in an email.

“Our legislative team is still in the early stages of drafting the bill. We are working closely with the Congressional Research Service, disability advocates and other entities to determine the bill text, scope, introduction timeline, etc.,” Berriet wrote. “The goal is to build on the success of the New Jersey ombudsman office that the congressman helped establish seven years ago.”

An estimated one in four U.S. adults — about [70 million people](#) — reported having a disability in 2022, according to the U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention.

Similar to the Garden State office, a federal ombudsman would serve as an independent advocate for families — helping them navigate programs, resolve issues with agencies and make their voices heard in government.

New Jersey’s first disability ombudsman, former Ridgewood Mayor [Paul Aronsohn](#), still holds the position. He serves within the state Treasury Department and prepares annual reports for Gov. Phil Murphy — often with candid details about the shortcomings of state programs and private health care providers.

Aronsohn, working with a small staff, has documented recurring issues such as [workforce shortages](#) and inconsistent oversight and [abuse in group homes](#).

His reports highlight potential solutions and catalogue services available to New Jerseyans with developmental disabilities.

One of the strongest arguments for a national office is the sheer complexity of disability services. Families “don’t know what they don’t

know,” Aronsohn said in an interview, and they often need a single office that can explain options, resolve disputes and connect them to the right programs.

The New Jersey office’s success has come from its “direct, personal approach,” spending one-on-one time with families in their homes, in coffee shops and over video calls to understand both immediate needs and the broader failures of the system, he added.

He sees his role as being in the corner of people with disabilities during disputes with providers or during investigations of abuse — and then relating those real-life experiences to policymakers in government.

Looking ahead to a national version of the role, Aronsohn said, his advice for whoever takes the job would be simple: “Have open eyes, open ears, and an open heart.”

Hurdles to Health Care: [NJ has a huge health care gap for people with disabilities. Dig into our series](#)

Meeting people where they live, work and go to school, he said, is the only way to understand both the challenges and opportunities in the system.

Ultimately, Aronsohn is “excited” about the national effort. “So many people will benefit,” he said, adding that the office should eventually “expand to support all disabilities — intellectual, developmental, mental health and physical.”

The legislation is expected to be introduced “in the coming weeks,” Berriet said.

Kean represents the 7th Congressional District in central and western New Jersey.