

GOVERNMENT OF THE DISTRICT OF COLUMBIA
Department on Disability Services



PUBLIC ROUNDTABLE ON PR 21-869,
THE “DIRECTOR OF THE DEPARTMENT ON DISABILITY SERVICES
ANDREW P. REESE
CONFIRMATION RESOLUTION OF 2016”

Testimony of
Andrew P. Reese
Acting Director

Before the
Committee on Health and Human Services
The Honorable Yvette M. Alexander, Chair
Council of the District of Columbia

October 20, 2016
11:00 a.m.

Council Hearing Room 123
The John A. Wilson Building
1350 Pennsylvania Avenue, N.W.
Washington, D.C. 20004



INTRODUCTION

Good morning, Chairperson Alexander, members and staff of the Committee. I am Andrew Reese, Acting Director of the Department on Disability Services (DDS). I am pleased to formally introduce myself and share my vision and plans for DDS. I want to thank Mayor Bowser for the nomination as Acting Director of the agency whose mission is to provide high quality services that enable people with disabilities to lead meaningful and productive lives as members of their families, schools, workplaces and communities in every neighborhood in the District of Columbia.

EDUCATION AND PROFESSIONAL EXPERIENCE

I am a life-long resident of the D.C. Metropolitan area with a career that spans more than 25 years of service as a social worker and a lawyer. I received a bachelor's in family studies from the University of Maryland, College Park and earned a master of social work from Howard University. I received my law degree from the University of Maryland School Of Law in Baltimore.

I began my career as a social worker. I worked in both non-profit and public agencies over the subsequent 10 years, with roles in foster care, child protective services and family services. I then taught graduate social work students in the HIV, juvenile and special education, criminal defense, guardianship and disability law clinics in the University of Maryland's Clinical Law Office. During this time I also pursued my law degree and eventually came to work at the D.C. Office of the Attorney General (OAG) as an Assistant Attorney General in the Child Protection Section. I left this position to return to the University of Maryland as a clinical instructor in the law school for three years, at which time I also established a private law practice, working with children and families in the neglect system in the District of Columbia.

In April 2008, I rejoined OAG as Deputy Attorney General of its Family Services Division, where I served for more than three years until I came to DDS to serve as its Deputy General Counsel in October 2011. At DDS, I represented and advised the Rehabilitation Services Administration (RSA) on all internal legal matters. In 2012, I was appointed as the DDS Deputy Director for RSA. In that role, I was responsible for leading, planning, and administering a comprehensive program to ensure that District residents with physical, mental and intellectual disabilities have access to services and supports that lead to employment, self-sufficiency and

independence. I served in this capacity for nearly four years until April 2016, when I was appointed Interim Director.

I appear before you today to share my vision for DDS as you consider my nomination on September 6, 2016, to serve as its third director.

VISION

My vision for DDS is to increase the agency's collaboration, transparency and accountability in order to ensure that people with disabilities are fully included in our communities. Over the last few years, due in large part to various mandates related to the *Evans* class action or in response to federal oversight, the agency has focused on compliance. As we prepare to exit the *Evans* class action, I will continue the incredible progress made in supporting people with disabilities through a system that utilizes a person-centered approach and philosophy to foster inclusion and integration for people with disabilities. I want to ensure the participation of staff and providers in decision-making and agency direction to make us a true person-centered organization that incorporates experiences of staff and providers in creating opportunities for employment and integrated, community-based supports for people with disabilities.

As Deputy Director for RSA, I began instituting these practices of including community, staff and provider input in making decisions regarding agency services. This was particularly true in developing the Vocational Rehabilitation portion of the Unified State Workforce Development Plan. I created a process of engaging with staff and the State Rehabilitation Council to develop goals and strategies for improving employment outcomes for people with disabilities. Through this process, we were able to develop a more comprehensive state plan. In order to ensure input and engagement with the people we support, their families and advocate, since becoming DDS Interim Director, I have visited with the DDA provider agencies, Supporting Families Community of Practice, and attended all monthly meetings of the self-advocacy group, Project Action!, while continuing to work with the State Rehabilitation Council and the State Independent Living Council and the Workforce Investment Council.

The health and strength of our communities, of our City, relies on the full participation of all of its citizens. We all benefit when people with disabilities are welcomed into our neighborhoods,

employment settings, parks and recreation centers, places of worship, and schools. There are still too many adults with intellectual disabilities who are spending their days in facility-based programs. Using person-centered thinking as the foundation, the agency is beginning to work with all large day programs to increase opportunities for meaningful days, community integration, and employment for the District residents who attend these programs. Under my leadership, DDS will continue to strive for full community inclusion and integration of people with disabilities.

The expansion of person-centered thinking was integral to the District's progress in achieving substantial compliance in the *Evans* class action. In two separate reports and recommendations issued this summer, the Special Master found the District to be in substantial compliance with the remaining outcome criteria necessary to fully resolve the case. DDS is poised to exit the case by the end of the calendar year and is awaiting a final court ruling on the Special Master's recommendations.

As Mayor Bowser has charged, I intend to continue to focus on increasing employment opportunities and creating pathways to the middle class for people with disabilities. To have a job means more than just economic self-sufficiency. Work leads to independence, involvement with community and civic activities, and gives people the confidence to pursue a self-directed life. Under my leadership, DDS will continue to work with the workforce system partners to implement the Workforce Innovation and Opportunities Act (WIOA), with particular focus on the priorities related to people with disabilities.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Today, DDS is well equipped to meet the needs of District residents with disabilities. DDS's greatest strength is its human resources. DDS has more than 400 dedicated professionals that serve tirelessly to fulfill the agency's mission to the nearly 7,000 people the agency supports. I want to take the opportunity to thank members of the leadership team and DDS staff and the provider community for all that they do.

Also, I would like to thank my spouse, Greg Friel, who is here today.

CONCLUSION

On a personal level, I deeply understand the challenges that we confront as we move toward full inclusion of people with disabilities. When we adopted our son, Jeremy, from CFSA he was eleven years old and had already been placed in segregated, non-public school for students with disabilities. While I wanted him to attend our local school, which I felt would better prepare him for adulthood and to live independently in the community, I was also very concerned about whether he would receive adequate support and safety there. When Jeremy was in tenth grade he decided that he was prepared to transition, and we advocated with him to transfer to our local high school. This was ultimately both challenging and very rewarding. Jeremy graduated in 2015 and is unable to be here today because he is at Montgomery College, where he is taking college courses, for credit. He still points to his transition from the non-public school to Wilson High School, and his subsequent graduation, as his proudest achievement. In large part, his success was because he transitioned when he was ready; and that he was able to advocate on his own behalf for the education services he felt were best for him.

That is what I want for all District residents with disabilities—a sense of empowerment and the confidence to pursue and realize self-sufficient, self-directed lives. Only when we have achieved disability-inclusive approaches to education, employment, and community-based services can we ensure that the District is a place where all residents are truly afforded equal rights.

Madam Chair, members of the committee, I have shared with you my background and my vision for the Department on Disability Services to demonstrate that I have the experience and skills to lead this agency forward. I am confident that, with the continued support of Mayor Bowser, Deputy Mayor Brenda Donald, members of this Committee, my DDS colleagues and other agencies, plus the positive engagement of stakeholders, DDS can continue to make significant strides in improving the lives of the people we have the privilege to serve. I respectfully ask you to confirm me as DDS's director.

This concludes my testimony. I welcome any questions you may have.