The Granite State just got a little less rocky for people with disabilities

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The 20th anniversary of the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) was celebrated this week as we marked the progress we have made in two decades towards equal rights and full inclusion of people with disabilities in community life. In New Hampshire, we not only looked back at our accomplishments, but moved several steps forward, thanks to the work of the Governor and Legislature, and of hundreds of tireless advocates. Even as we celebrated the ADA's anniversary, the Governor signed into law three bills that protect the rights of people with disabilities. The new laws limit the use of restraint of children in schools and treatment centers, and they make hearing aids and treatment for autism more affordable.

Vulnerable children with disabilities got a little safer with the passage of Senate Bill 396, limiting the use of child restraint practices in schools and treatment facilities. The Disabilities Rights Center has handled a number of disturbing cases recently where children suffered broken bones and other injuries in school and other facilities while being restrained. Expert testimony in support of SB 396 demonstrated that face down restraint can put children at risk of death. Indeed around the country children have died as a result of this type of restraint. The new law bans many dangerous restraint techniques and restricts the use of other types to only emergency situations where the physical safety of the child or others is at risk. The bill also limits handcuffing of children being transported or appearing in court. Governor Lynch and the New Hampshire Legislature should be commended for passing the bill.

Families of children with autism rejoiced at the passage of House Bill 569, more commonly known as Connor's Law. The law requires that private health insurance plans in New Hampshire cover prescribed treatments for autism, including speech, occupational, and behavioral therapy. Early and intensive treatment for autism can improve the outcomes enormously for these children, much as insulin can for a child with diabetes and heart surgery can for a child with a heart condition, yet until this law was passed, the child with autism could be denied insurance coverage for treatment. Michelle Jarvis, Connor's mother and President of the Autism Society of New Hampshire, noted, "All along, our message has been that a child with autism deserves the same level of coverage as a child seeking treatment for any other medical condition. To do any less would not only be poor healthcare policy, it would be discriminatory."

Hearing aids became more affordable with the passage of House Bill 561, which requires health insurance to cover hearing evaluations, hearing aids, and the dispensing and fitting of hearing aids. Hearing aids play a critical role in ensuring that individuals with hearing loss are able to fully engage with the world around them: with their families, in the workplace, and in the hundreds of daily encounters that most of us take for granted. The use of hearing aids can significantly improve employability, family relationships, overall mental health, and enhance independence and security. Hearing aids can also improve health outcomes by ensuring better communication with health care providers.

The Governor and Legislature deserve our appreciation for enacting these bills. There is much more work to be done to fulfill the promise of the ADA to eliminate discrimination and to ensure the right to full participation. Although there is much to be concerned about as service budgets are being cut back, these new pieces of legislation show we're continuing to move in the right direction.

Protection and Advocacy System for New Hampshire