

Testimony of Sherri Landis, Executive Director, The Arc of Pennsylvania
House Health & Human Services Committee
October 21, 2019

Thank you for the opportunity to provide testimony.

My name is Sherri Landis and I have the honor of serving as the Executive Director of The Arc of Pennsylvania. For the past 70 years, The Arc of Pennsylvania, its 33 local chapters and 8,000+ members, have worked to ensure that children and adults with intellectual and developmental disabilities receive the support and services they need, are included in their community, and have control over their own lives.

The Arc of Pennsylvania applauds Governor Wolf, Secretary Miller, and Deputy Secretary Ahrens on the decision to close the state centers at Polk and White Haven and to transition all current residents to their local community over the next three years.

During the past 70 years, The Arc of Pennsylvania has stood firm on this issue --- Pennsylvania should close all state centers and provide quality and comprehensive services in the community for Pennsylvanians with intellectual and developmental disabilities. The Arc of PA is not speaking FOR people with disabilities. We ARE people with disabilities, and their families. That is who The Arc was then and now!

We stood with families who rejected the notion to institutionalize their child, families who created services when no other service existed, and families who decided to move their family member out of a state center. We stand with families now!

To the families, I'd like to say - We know that change can be scary but returning people from state centers to their communities is not new to The Arc or the Department of Human Services. Yet, it is new to the 300 individuals with disabilities and their families living at Polk and White Haven. That is why The Arc supports the thoughtful, deliberate multi-year plan that DHS has outlined to meet with individuals, conduct the proper assessments, and talk through the wonderful community-based options that are available. We know that families are integral to a successful transition and we are committed to supporting individuals and their families in whatever way we can to make this a successful move from an institution to their own home in a typical community. We strongly encourage families to engage in the conversation, to review support options, and consider a neighborhood their loved one can call home.

Having attended the Polk and White Haven Act 3 hearings and subsequent hearings on this issue, it is evident that many of the people in strong opposition to the closing of Polk and White Haven Centers are the people who make their living there. We have heard local leaders share their concern about the local economy and the impact that these closings will have on the livelihood of the employees and the community. But

“jobs” for some is never a reason to institutionalize others. Keeping a state center open in order to maintain the local economy is EXPLOITATION! We have also heard concerns about the community system, which is an important issue but not one that should deny any person the opportunity to get out of an institution and enjoy everything society truly has to offer.

Let me address some of these issues in greater detail:

- 1) **Issue 1: Why was the decision made to close two state centers when there is a long waiting list that exists right now?** There is a misunderstanding about the waiting list. The current waiting list - a list of over 13,000 people - is a list of people waiting for community services, NOT state center services. Just opening up the state center will not address this waiting list. People already have an entitlement to state institutions, but people DON'T want that service. That's why they're waiting for community services. And, similar to the closing of Hamburg Center, no person moving from Polk or White Haven will be added to the waiting list. Funding will follow them into the community where they will receive all the services they need.
- 2) **Issue 2: Why move people to a community system that has high turnover and low paid staff?** The community current system currently serves well over 55,000 people in a variety of locations and with a variety of services (this includes all 3 ID waiver programs as well as the state-only funded “base” program). It is heavily regulated, and monitoring and oversight by various systems are utilized to assure safety. We know that there is not a system that is perfect (including state centers). We know health and safety incidents occur to people living at Polk and White Haven. When one looks just at the numbers of reported incidents, it appears the incidents are higher for people living in the community as compared to the number of incidents to people living in the state centers. But this is a false comparison. The centers serve roughly 700 people while the community serves over 55,000. We also know that people with disabilities are safer when they live among their family, friends, and community members, and others that care about their dignity and safety. Living life is about having friends, seeing people on the street. Waving to your neighbor. Having a barbecue in the backyard. Going to a job. Research shows that people are safer in the community because there are more sets of eyes who see the person. When the community staff see you every day, when your neighbors see you every day, when people at church see you every weekend, when your family and friends see you more often, and when people at work see you, abuse is more apt to be spotted and action taken. When there are more sets of eyes that see a person, they're more apt to see bruises, changes in behavior, and injuries. When you're in an institution, only the state center staff will see the person and things can be ignored or, quite frankly, covered up

more easily. This is not a commentary of the very good people who work at the state centers, but it's human nature. This is why the child welfare system no longer places children in orphanages. Despite the imperfections of foster care, this committee would never argue an orphanage is a better place for a child.

- 3) **Issue 3: The argued disparity between wages earned by state workers in the institutions versus DSPs working in the community are indeed documented, but** I would be remiss if I did not reiterate that the General Assembly has direct impact on the wages earned in the non-public sector. The Arc of Pennsylvania has and continues to ask the legislature to address the Direct Support Professional salary issue to promote quality, yet every year legislative priorities seem to be elsewhere. We will ask for increased dollars for direct service professionals again this year. You have the ability to improve DSP compensation and not use it as an excuse to keep people with disabilities needlessly institutionalized.
- 4) **Issue 4: The Closing of Polk and White Haven will result in people living on the streets and in local prisons.** Unfortunately, politicians and those in the media often confuse state mental hospitals with state centers for people with ID. They are very different systems. Some deinstitutionalization of people with mental illness may have occurred in the 70s without sufficient community-based capacity in place, but it has NEVER been the case that state centers for people with ID were closed without proper planning and community service capacity being in place for people returning to their community. When a closure of state center for people with ID is announced, people receive individual, person centered planning. They meet providers, they visit homes and neighborhoods, and families and others assist in finding a home that meets their loved one's needs. No one from Hamburg ended up in prison or living on the streets. No one leaving Polk or White Haven Center will transfer to a prison or a spot on the local sidewalk. Those are blatant distortion of the facts being spread and the voters have elected you to have the wisdom to see through the misconceptions and past the hyperbole.
- 5) **Issue 5: The local community cannot recover from the economic impact of losing the jobs offered by the state center.** The Arc of Pennsylvania stands strong on this issue - It is not the responsibility of people with disabilities to offer up their right to live in their community so that people without disabilities can maintain their jobs. Current employees who care about the people they support, and we believe there are many that do, can find a job with the community-based provider the person they support chooses and they can follow the person into the community.

Once again, I thank you for this opportunity to present the views of The Arc of Pennsylvania. It's 2019. The debate about institutions and whether the community is

better was over decades ago. It's sad the debate is resurrected when one of the few remaining institutions is slated for closure. Quite frankly, it's embarrassing that Pennsylvania still operates state-run institutions for people with intellectual disabilities. State institutions have been closing over the past several decades under both Republican and Democratic governors. The Arc has applauded Republican governors in the past, and today we are applauding Governor Wolf for continuing the move away from a segregated, state-center model of support to one that invests in the aspirations of people with disabilities - the aspirations we all have - of living in our own home in a typical neighborhood, having control over our own life, taking a walk in the neighborhood, getting a job, going to church or synagogue, and having real friends - other than just those who are paid to care for me. All individuals with disabilities deserve the opportunity to experience life in their community, just like anyone else.