



Commemorating the Willowbrook Mile

Dear Friends and Colleagues,

Thirty-five years ago, on this day, the Willowbrook State School was shuttered, signaling a new day for people with developmental disabilities. It was the courageous reporting of Geraldo Rivera, aided by a brave young named Bernard Carabello, that led to its closure by exposing the failure of a system that relied heavily on mass institutionalization of people with disabilities. Mr. Rivera's expose 50 years ago launched a multi-year effort to change the service delivery system, leading ultimately to the closure of 20 institutions across New York State over 30 years in favor of community living.

The history and the mission of the Office for People With Developmental Disabilities is irrevocably intertwined with the history of the Willowbrook State School. This agency was born out of the strong and heroic advocacy of family members and people with developmental disabilities to ensure better treatment and better services for people within their communities and ultimately led to the end of institutionalization.

The opening of the [Willowbrook Mile](#) today preserves this history for future generations so that we may never forget what happened, nor take for granted the actions that led to the school's eventual closure and, ultimately, the integrated and community-based living opportunities that exist for people with developmental disabilities today.

As we continue to remember Willowbrook, we are reminded of how very important our ongoing advocacy is. We need continued advocacy from people with disabilities, their families, our provider partners and those of us working in state government service to keep our system safe, accountable and responsive to the needs of people with developmental disabilities.

So, as we reflect on this Anniversary and the opening of the Willowbrook Mile, I ask that you join me in remembering our history and continuing to use your voices to help pave the path forward. While we have come a long way, there's so much further we can go. Let's work together to secure the support and the funding we need to ensure that all the people we support can live rich lives and realize their full potential. Bernard, the many brave families who fought to close Willowbrook and similar institutions and so many others who have followed in their footsteps have shown us what is possible. It is up to us all to continue pressing forward to achieve what is possible for people with developmental disabilities both now and in the future.

Sincerely,

Kerri E. Neifeld
Commissioner