

Good afternoon, Chairwoman Downey, Vice Chairman Chiaravalloti, and committee members. My name is Dr. Suzanne Buchanan. I am a licensed psychologist, Board Certified Behavior Analyst, and the Executive Director of Autism New Jersey, a nonprofit organization that represents thousands of individuals with autism and their families.

I will describe the problems facing individuals with autism and severe challenging behavior and then make practical recommendations.

Problems - We're here today because children and adults with autism are suffering as they frequently **engage in challenging behaviors** such as self-injury, aggression, and property destruction. Research suggests that as many as **70%** of individuals with autism will engage in self-injury at some point in their lives. More troubling is that left untreated, 84% of these individuals will continue to engage in self-injury 20 years later.

Today, virtually all families are failed by **unequipped systems**, such as mobile teams, psychiatric hospitals, mental health agencies, and emergency rooms that are designed for other populations and have little to *literally nothing* to offer the families we're talking about today. Countless individuals have been turned away from and even mistreated by these entities because they don't know how to help. The results of these well-intentioned but unequipped systems: aggression and self-injury remain untreated and families remain unsafe.

Making this problem even worse, funding sources typically address these challenges only when a situation has reached a **full-blown crisis**, and in many cases, this could be ten years after the child began engaging in challenging behavior.

Solutions - With a problem so complex, we need meaningful change across the board. That's why we're encouraged to see the Governor's proposal for \$9.5 million in combined state and federal funds to address immediate needs and plan for the future.

We have a **simple request** that will set us on a new path and a **preliminary framework** that seeks to systematically and comprehensively address these challenges.

The request? **Include Board Certified Behavior Analysts** in discussions and decisions regarding treatment for this population. Over the past four decades, the field of Applied Behavior Analysis has developed highly specialized assessment and treatment procedures and delivers **the most well-researched and effective treatment** for challenging behavior.

More broadly, Autism New Jersey's preliminary framework includes critical areas:

- **Access to ABA treatment** – both as early as possible in a child's life and in times of crisis
- **Provider qualifications** – establishing minimum standards and licensure for behavior analysts, a measure that this house resoundingly approved in January and awaits further action in the Senate
- **Examination of reimbursement rates** - building an adequate workforce to deliver this intensive and specialized treatment
- **Building state and private capacity** - strengthen existing programs and establish new ones

We just have to invest in the right programs; that is, programs based on Applied Behavior Analysis in collaboration with multidisciplinary teams because these programs have the greatest scientific support and offer the **greatest hope for changing lives**.