

**Opening Remarks Presented to the
Senate Budget Committee
by
Jennifer Velez, Commissioner
New Jersey Department of Human Services
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Good afternoon Chairwoman Buono and distinguished members of this Committee.

With me now are the other members of my senior team – and, in the interest of time and because we are such a large agency, I will suspend individual introductions, but will ask that they introduce themselves to you in response to questions as they arise.

I want to begin by acknowledging that this management team is a group of very committed individuals – who are active with their national organizations – who ensure that New Jersey's voice and presence is known across the country – and that we, in turn, benefit from that national presence. Just this past Wednesday, for example, at a statewide mental health conference, a senior director at SAMHSA (the federal mental health agency), touted New Jersey as being at the forefront of the national recovery movement.

That speaks well on behalf of our state – and similar recognition is bestowed upon our division directors and our work in issues concerning traumatic brain injury, developmental disabilities, consumer-directed services, and other disciplines within our Department.

This team serves New Jersey well.

Four priority areas are worthy of a brief mention before we address your questions.

As a department, we have worked very diligently to prioritize housing, employment, health insurance and contract reform.

Housing is especially critical when we consider our waiting list for those with developmental disabilities, our obligations under Olmstead, clients living with addiction, and those for whom safe, affordable, and accessible housing is a constant concern.

Employment is another area in which we are focusing attention and resources – and in collaboration with the Departments of Education, Labor and Workforce Development – and dozens of stakeholders – we have developed a comprehensive strategic plan, which was funded by a federal grant – to begin to reduce the often cited statistic that the unemployment rate for persons with disabilities is upwards of 70%.

Both housing and employment in particular, are issues that people value and need. Whatever the state of our economy – good or bad – however poor an individual or a family might be – these issues are cross cutting, and they underlie everything we do at the Department. People need and want a safe and decent place to live, and most people want to experience the dignity and the value of work.

Maximizing health insurance is an area that we and the Governor have prioritized, and we have worked hard to ensure that our State program – NJ FamilyCare – is protected and that enrollment is maximized.

Finally, the Department has been embarking upon a significant contracting reform effort. Given our size and the diversity of services within this Department, this undertaking is not without complexities.

We are responsible for \$1.7 billion in approximately 1200 third party contracts – and have very competent and committed staff dedicated to ensuring that our fiscal responsibilities are prudently managed.

In each of our divisions, we have initiatives underway to improve the delivery, performance, quality of care and cost rate structures throughout our contracting community.

The reform effort is centered on our actively moving to implement an integrated and streamlined system that will allow divisions to manage and share contract monitoring, fiscal and quality performance information across the department – rather than just within a single division.

This effort will improve the overall administration of all contracts – as well as the delivery of vital social services on behalf of the clients we serve. Some advances are already well underway – but over the past year, we have been addressing contract reform in a comprehensive manner – and we're including our contracting community in the process.

With that brief overview of the work underway at the Department, I'd be happy to answer your questions.