

Question #1: Please introduce yourself and tell us your message to Virginians with Developmental Disabilities and their families.

My name is Rachel Levy. I am an educator who has spent most of her career as a public school teacher, I am a mother of three, I am a leader in my community and I have a doctorate in Educational Leadership & Policy. I am called to public service and believe that every citizen deserves hard-working, responsive, and competent representation no matter who they are or how they vote or whether they are eligible to vote. All citizens deserve to be treated with dignity and respect, and people with developmental disabilities and their families are no different. I know that Virginia has a lot of work to do to ensure that people with intellectual and/or developmental disabilities (I/DD) are positioned to lead full, independent lives and have their needs met.

Question #2: What do you think needs to be done to not only reach compliance but to ensure a thriving community-based system is developed and maintained in Virginia?

First, Virginia needs to build the capacity for the provision of long term supports and services (LTSS) and nurture a pipeline of people who will work in this field as professionals. Second, Virginia needs to make sure that such professionals receive adequate compensation and benefits to improve recruitment and retention rates. Medicaid services need to be fully funded, more waivers should be funded, and the existence of Medicaid should not be up for perennial debate. However, Medicaid and Medicaid-benefits-funded institutions should not be the only means for people with developmental disabilities to access the LTSS services they need. Finally, family caregivers should be compensated for the care they provide, without being overly burdened with documentation, should they choose to be a caregiver, but that should not be expected or relied upon. Closure of institutions for people with developmental disabilities in favor of a community based system should not mean that people with I/DD and their families are left to fend for themselves.

Question #3: How would you include people with developmental disabilities and their families in the decision-making process and support their voices when working on policy?

This is an on-going problem—that the people most impacted by a set of policies, especially if they are vulnerable, are not consulted about said policies. When working on policy, I pledge to consult with people with expertise, stakeholder organizations such as the Arc of Virginia, and with people with developmental disabilities themselves. Not only will I consult with them and take input but I will participate in structured and organized opportunities to do so. I also pledge to hold office/constituent service hours and townhalls in publicly accessible places across the district, so that I can “come to the constituents” when they can’t come to me.

Question #4: What is needed to help protect people with developmental disabilities from unjust involvement in the criminal justice system?

First of all, I would want to see a JLARC study about this phenomenon. If there isn’t a recent one, I would sponsor a resolution to get such a study completed. First responders and law enforcements agencies, as well as the general public, may need to be more educated on how to interact with people with I/DD developmental disabilities and how to best serve them. Second,

often intellectual disabilities cannot be seen, or are invisible, especially when there are no physical disabilities present. Just as law enforcement professionals have become more attuned to interacting with people with autism, and there have been more efforts for autistic people to be outwardly identified as such to local law enforcement, the same could be done with people with I/DD, so that negative interactions with first responders and law enforcement are less likely to happen in the first place. Third, I would like to see special divisions in public defenders services and offices (and better funding for public defenders' services more generally) for legal services provided to people with developmental and/or intellectual disabilities. Finally, services for incarcerated people are woefully lacking. People with I/DD who are incarcerated should have the same rights and access to services that people with I/DD who aren't incarcerated do.

Question #5: What policies and funding would you support to help people to achieve full inclusion – or talk about your values related to inclusion for people with disabilities.

I believe that full inclusion of people with disabilities benefits not only them but their fellow citizens, too. People with disabilities should live, learn, and work alongside people without disabilities. This takes acceptance and education and also investment—in physical modifications to facilities, accommodations to remote/virtual settings, and in processes that foster inclusion. I admit we have a A LOT of work to do in Virginia to reach full inclusion.

Question #6: How do you think Virginia can better support students to have a robust quality education where they are included in their neighborhood schools alongside their siblings, friends, and neighbors?

I think it's preferable students with disabilities are fully included and accommodated in our public schools such that they can learn alongside their siblings, friends, and neighbors in neighborhood schools. This will take a level of investment that Virginia has yet to make—investments in staffing, compensation, programs, and accommodations in physical facilities. I also understand that sometimes services are more robust when they are centralized at certain facilities, and that some families prefer private educational settings. In some cases, such centers can help, but should not replace full inclusion or undermine the robust investment needed to support full inclusion.

Question #7: How would you work with the community of advocates, people with disabilities, and other grassroots stakeholders to innovate and finally stimulate provider businesses to grow and offer these new integrated services?

Working with community of advocates, people with disabilities, and other grassroots stakeholders, I would first assess what the needs are, especially in the 59th District and then I would see what and where services are already being provided. Next, I would study where such provider businesses have been successful and effective, and see where locally these services and provider businesses would be similarly ripe for incubation or growth, and how local institutions could facilitate and contribute to their growth and incubation. Finally, I would look at incentives—local, state, and federal—available to stimulate current and potential provider businesses.