

Rocky Hill, Elections

A Who's Who of Candidates Gather to Take Questions and Talk About Disability Issues

— Emilia Otte, 10.13.2022



Lt. Gov. Susan Bysiewicz and journalist Diane Smith

ROCKY HILL – CT Cross Disability Lifespan Alliance hosted a non-partisan forum on Wednesday, drawing a who's who of state and federal candidates, to discuss “issues of interest to the disability community,” including housing, independent living, health care and employment.

Among those attending were Bob Stefanowski, the Republican candidate for governor, Lt. Gov. Susan Bysiewicz, Rep. Jahana Hayes, George Logan, Rep. Rosa DeLauro, and Rob Hotaling, the Independent Party candidate for governor. .

Housing was a topic that was front and center in the conversation.

Rep. Rosa DeLauro, current chair of the House Appropriations Committee, said that Congress had passed a “significant increase” in the 2022 budget for housing, including an additional 2100 units for people with disabilities, and an increase in Section 8 funding and funding for the Community Block Development Grant. According to DeLauro, one in three adults under the age of 62 who receive Section 8 vouchers have a disability.

Logan, the Republican candidate for the House of Representatives 5th district, said there needed to be more of an effort to communicate with landlords about the value of renting to someone with a disability.

DeLauro also mentioned the challenge of asset limits for people receiving disability assistance from the federal government. According to current law, non-working disabled individuals in Connecticut must have less than \$1,600 in assets to qualify for medicaid. The federal asset limit is \$2,000 for an individual and \$3,000 for a couple.

“Those numbers have to be reviewed and we’ve got to up the asset limitations in order to allow people to be able to get the benefits that they need in order to be able to succeed and to thrive,” she said. “I think the numbers bear out that so many of persons with disabilities live in poverty in our country, and there is no need for that.”

Bob Stefanowski and journalist Diane Smith

Carol Scully, director of the Arc of Connecticut, a nonprofit that provides services for the disability community, told CT Examiner that the asset limits were a huge issue for the disabled community.

“They make you be poor before you can get any help and it holds people back, so it prevents them from getting successful employment,” she said.

Jennifer Jenkins, one of the event organizers and a senior advocate at Disability Rights Connecticut, said that having housing located near public transit was key. She said that people who wanted to use public or paratransit systems in Connecticut had to schedule their days around when they could get access to transit.

Bysiewicz, who was representing the Ned Lamont campaign at the event, spoke to another concern for the disability community — the right to remain

and receive services in their homes, rather than living in congregate settings.

“We should be working with our Department of Social Services to make sure that there are more providers available and more people to assist people who want to stay at home, because everybody wants to be in their home,” she said. “It is in the state’s best interest ... and it is much more cost effective and much more in line with people’s wants and needs to keep them in their homes.”

Republican Laura Devlin, who is running for Lieutenant Governor alongside gubernatorial candidate Bob Stefanowski, agreed that there needed to be more options for people who wanted to remain at home, and that it would save money in the long run. She said she wanted to see more “creative” solutions for affordable housing.

“The whole idea of being part of a community and having the opportunity to integrate within a community — that’s your home, where you’re gonna go to your job, where you’re going to maybe go to the library — and that housing does need to be available. I know we do have a shortage.” she said.

But Devlin said that when it came to affordable housing, the current requirements placed upon towns to have 10 percent of their housing stock be counted as “affordable” was not the way to address the problem.

“What we’ve talked about is less stick and more carrot,” Devlin said. “Some towns have developed affordable housing trusts and that has helped a lot. Should there be more grant programs available from the state? Those are things that we talk about and that we absolutely want to explore because there’s a need at all levels for affordable housing.”

Medical care and respite

Bysiewicz also said that she felt the state should create a program to provide income for people who care for individuals with disabilities, similar to programs that already exist for people who care for their elderly relatives.

Amy Chai, a physician who is running against DeLauro on the Independent Party ticket, also emphasized the needs of caregivers, and said she wanted

to fund one-day-a-week respite care for people who are taking care of someone with a disability. She said that she saw the toll that remaining in the home to care for their relatives took on her patients.

“I’m actually terrified for the health of caregivers, to be completely honest ... a lot of them will turn to — if we’re lucky — they’ll just turn to carbohydrates. A lot of them will turn to alcohol. I’ve had people turn to opiates,” she said. “I’m worried that caregivers are actually going to die.”

Chai added that she also wanted to address the shortage of physicians, and said there should be incentives for doctors to go into primary care rather than specializations. She also said that she wanted to work with the federal government to open more slots for recent medical school graduates that needed to do a residency.

Amy Chai and journalist Diane Smith

“The [federal Centers for Medicare and Medicaid Services] strictly limit the spots because they don’t want to pay for more spots. Right now, we have 10,000 MDs in the US who cannot work because there is no spot for them. That’s 200 doctors for each state,” Chai said. “I would love [00:15:00] to open up spots and have our wonderful CMS actually pay for these spots. We need things like more addiction medicine. We need things like mental health care and pediatric mental health care. Those things aren’t happening.”

Scully said another health-related issue she was concerned about was an initiative that the Office of Health Strategy was working on called the Crisis Standards of Care, which outlines who should be prioritized for care in the event that hospitals were short on resources — for example, having a limited number of ventilators during the COVID pandemic.

“The Crisis Standard of Care is really ... a document that tells you resources are allocated equitably,” she said. “We don’t have an official plan in the state ... the Department of Health is sort of letting the hospitals write the plan. So that is problematic because then they get to decide who gets care.”

Scully also said the agency was working on legislation that would require more training for police officers. According to her, a large number of police shootings involve individuals with disabilities.

“We really need training for police, fire, all your first responders,” she said.

Education

Several advocates and candidates expressed concern for the ability for people with disabilities to receive a quality education and then be able to find jobs that would allow them to earn a living.

Sierra Scott, who attended the forum with the group Proud Parents, said she wanted to see more support for parents with disabilities, particularly a change in policy that would better protect parents with disabilities from having their children removed by the state Department of Children and Families.

“Parents with disabilities are capable of parenting,” she said.

Maria Ramos, a parent leader with Make the Road CT, an organization that helps immigrants, told CT Examiner that none of the candidates talked about what could be done for migrants who came into the U.S. with children who had disabilities. She also said that the state needed more bilingual and special education teachers, as well as case managers, and proposed student loan forgiveness or other incentive for teachers who were willing to work in the schools.

Hayes, a Democrat currently representing the 5th district of Connecticut, said that a big priority for her was fully funding IDEA, the federal grant that provides money to states for special education. The grant is **regularly underfunded**.

“These are mandated programs that literally are the largest chunk of education budgets. We have to do something. It holds so many young people behind,” she said.

Hayes also said she was cosponsor a bill that would allow students with disabilities to receive Pell Grants — a federal grant that helps low-income students pay for college — without having to take on the normal requirement of a full course load.

Hotaling said he wanted to provide more state funding for special education and give regional education councils more power to standardize curriculum and provide services, and that he thought there should be an option for virtual instruction for students who were sick or had a disability. He also said there needed to be more of an effort to recruit and retain teachers.

“We may have a great school system ... but right now we do have an incredibly poor achievement gap,” he said.

Ramos also said that when children of migrants come to the U.S., under the law they have to receive services. But once they become legal adults, those services are no longer provided.

“At 18 years old, what happens?” she said. “Do they become the state’s responsibility ... Their parents perhaps can’t work because they have to

take care of them? There aren't any opportunities. This is one of the issues that I didn't hear about here, and it seems to me a bit strange.”

Fair pay and dignified work

Bycewicz touted the Governor's Workforce Council as providing opportunities for people with disabilities to find work, saying that it would provide transportation and childcare for people who wanted to get training in jobs like manufacturing, healthcare and Information Technology.

Cindy Ocasio, who works as an administrative assistant at the University of Connecticut, said she wanted to see more people with disabilities in offices, doing things like answering phones, as their abilities allowed, rather than just packing bags in a supermarket or pushing carts.

“I want there to be more opportunities for individuals with disabilities. I want there to be less judgmental opinions about them, and just for them to be treated fairly — get the same wages that we would get, go to the same schools, attend the same classes,” she said.

She also said she wanted to see the Southbury Training School shut down, an issue that the disability community has been fighting for. The community argues that the training school keeps disabled individuals isolated rather than integrating them into the community.

“I wish they would just close that place,” she said.

Another issue, Jenkins said, was the need to abolish what she called the “sub-minimum wage.” According to Jenkins, Connecticut has 18 active 14(c) certificates, which allow people with disabilities to be paid less than the state's current \$14 hourly minimum wage. DeLauro said that Connecticut was one of 14 states that received grant money from the federal government to be part of a pilot program that would move the state away from paying workers wages that were below \$14 per hour.

Logan, the Republican candidate for Connecticut's 5th Congressional District, said he felt that the sub-minimum wage issue was partly the result of a poor economy and state regulations that, he said, disincentivized businesses from hiring additional workers.

“We know, and I’ve seen it, that people with Intellectual and Developmental Disabilities are workers. Period. Productive workers,” he said. “I don’t believe in an incentive for companies being ‘offering them to pay anyone lower than the minimum wage.’ I don’t think that’s the answer. We can incentivize companies in other ways. It should not be on the backs of people with Intellectual and Developmental Disabilities.”

Hayes also said that the sub-minimum wage needed to be eliminated, and suggested offering grants or incentives for employers to stop the practice.

“I’ve been on too many job sites as a job coach. I know what my ladies were able to do at work, how impactful they were to the overall production of the environments that they were in, and they should be paid,” she said.

Logan said that many of the businesses that were dedicated to helping people with disabilities — organizations, he said, that could do the job better than the state could — ended up at loggerheads when they tried to work with the state of Connecticut.

“They keep hitting a wall when it comes to funding ,when it comes to working with the state,” he said.

Bureaucracy and access to politicians

Other candidates proposed ideas for revamping the way that the government interacts with the disability community. Stefanowski said he wanted to create a new position in government that would be exclusively focused on the needs of individuals with disabilities.

“I want someone coming in every day with the only thing that’s on that person’s mind is this community and how we help it,” he said.

Justin Pagliano, who is running against DeLauro on the Green Party ticket, said there needed to be better coordination within state agencies, including one person who would be responsible for navigating the state bureaucracy for families who needed disability services.

“I think it’s important that the state provide someone who’s a point person so that people don’t get confused trying to navigate all the different

agencies,” he said. “I understand from talking to some people in the community that siloing of services is a big headache for a lot of people trying to jump back and forth and figure out which agency they qualify for help from.”

He also said that the state needed to tighten the gap when people with disabilities transition from Medicaid to Medicare.

But Ramos said that a truly critical piece of the discussion, particularly for marginalized individuals, needed to be education about who their politicians were, and providing access to those politicians. She told CT Examiner that she was impressed by Democratic Secretary of the State candidate Stephanie Thomas because she was talking about civic education. She said voters needed to know the local and state level officials that make so many of the critical decisions that affect them.

“Many of our marginalized citizens — Bridgeport, low-income families — don’t know who represents them,” she said. “They aren’t interested in politics.”

Ramos said many of the people she worked with didn’t have access to their politicians, and wouldn’t feel comfortable sitting down with them for a cup of coffee because of the language barrier. She said that in her years of working in the Bridgeport community, she had seen the distrust and disinterest with which many people viewed candidates.

She also said that cultural competency was critical. Bridgeport had not only a Spanish-speaking population — it also had Portuguese, Creole and French-speaking individuals.

“What are we doing for these communities?” she asked. “We can’t talk to our politicians. [There’s] inaccessibility to our politicians ... We elect them.”

She said she tries to teach people that they don’t have to speak perfect English to sit down and have coffee with a politician. She said she also tries to facilitate candidate forums where politicians can come and talk.

But without classes and civic education, she said — it’s simply not possible.

But Jenkins said that even access to voting was a significant concern for people with disabilities. According to Jenkins, many polling places in the state are not ADA compliant, and while early voting would be a help to people with disabilities, what they really wanted was no-excuse absentee ballots.

“Even though we have expanded the reasons on absentee ballots, it doesn’t account for people who might be immunocompromised, people who might have mental health disabilities that don’t allow them to get out of the house on a certain day,” she said.

—

Editor’s Note: this story has been corrected to reflect that the event was hosted by CT Cross Disability Lifespan Alliance

Emilia Otte

Emilia Otte covers health and education for the Connecticut Examiner. In 2022 Otte was awarded "Rookie of the Year," by the New England Newspaper & Press Association.

 e.otte@ctexaminer.com