

Our view: Get tougher on those who abuse disabled people

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## **Observer-Dispatch**

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Gov. Andrew Cuomo's proposal to better protect the near-million New Yorkers with disabilities and special needs under state-funded care should move ahead, and legislators need to make it a priority before the Albany session ends next month.

Cuomo, noting 10,000 abuse reports last year alone, recently proposed creating a new agency — the Justice Center for Protection of People with Special Needs — that would include an inspector general, prosecutor with subpoena powers, and a 24-hour hot line where the public could report allegations of abuse or neglect.

The ramped-up effort comes on the heels of a New York Times investigation last year that revealed numerous problems in the care provided people with developmental disabilities. Some died as a result of the abuse. The investigation also found that the employees responsible for the abuse were shifted from one site to another instead of being fired.

The new office proposed by Cuomo would oversee those agencies that provide care and services for the disabled, including the Office for People with Developmental Disabilities, one of the state's largest agencies with 22,000 employees, including 18,000 who provide direct care to about 126,000 clients. It would also oversee Mental Health, Children and Family Services, Alcoholism and Substance Abuse Services, as well as the Health and Education departments.

The Times investigation uncovered a system rife with problems. In addition to transferring abusive employees from group home to group home, it found that abuse cases were rarely referred to the police, and employees were hired with criminal records. Furthermore, unions often blocked any efforts to fire abusive workers, and nonprofit groups caring for disabled people were using Medicaid to finance seven-figure compensation packages for executives.

Clearly reform is needed. And a first order of business should be to fire the nearly 200 employees with "substantiated allegations of abuse," as requested last week by OPWDD Commissioner Courtney Burke. Unfortunately, that can be a long, difficult process because existing rules make disciplining and/or firing a bad employee a challenge.

That's all the more reason for revising the rules. It's likely to mean going head-to-head with unions, but if that be the case, so be it.

The abuse of society's most vulnerable and fragile people is intolerable. The people dependent on this care include those with intellectual disabilities, autism, Down syndrome and other disabilities. The very thought of the cruelty perpetrated by abuse is abhorrent, and every step must be taken to prevent it — and to severely punish those guilty of such inhumanity.