

Helping the Disabled

By The Editors 5/08 7:08pm

Governor Cuomo's proposal to create new safeguards against the abuse of developmentally disabled New Yorkers is, sadly, absolutely necessary. Recent media reports have shown that people with developmental disabilities have been victimized by the very people who were supposed to care for them. Some disabled people have died as a result of shocking abuse.

Mr. Cuomo wants to create a new state agency to advocate for the disabled and to monitor institutions and state employees charged with the care of the disabled. State officials describe this as a civil rights issue, and they are absolutely correct. It is a disgrace, however, that it has come to this.

According to press reports, state employees suspected of abuse were transferred from one institution to another while their superiors somehow managed to avoid notifying law-enforcement officials about the abuse. That is simply outrageous.

The new state agency will have the power to investigate and prosecute workers accused of abuse. The agency also will take over some of the administrative functions of six other agencies that deal with the care of disabled people, including the Office for People with Developmental Disabilities. Centralizing power in a new, more-powerful state agency should prevent lax oversight and establish a clear chain of authority.

The governor's aggressive and much-needed response to the abuse crisis may seem inarguable. But it is not without critics. Some district attorneys may resent the intervention of a special prosecutor for abuse cases. The coldest reception, however, came from public employee labor unions that represent workers in facilities that care for the developmentally disabled. The unions, acting in character, have done everything possible to stall reforms to the system despite the disgraceful conduct of some employees. Union leaders have refused to come to agreement with the state on even the simplest matters, such as the creation of penalties for state employees accused of inappropriate behavior toward disabled people.

The unions will lose this battle, as well they should. If they wish to stand up for employees charged with the maltreatment and abuse of society's most-vulnerable citizens, well, what more do you need to know about the state of public employee unions?

Governor Cuomo understands that the public will not tolerate a return to the days when the disabled were treated with contempt and shame, as they were in Willowbrook State School on Staten Island in the 1960s. The Willowbrook scandal heightened awareness of the rights of the disabled. Mr. Cuomo's proposal builds on that legacy of progress.