

House Judiciary Committee
Subcommittee on the Constitution, Civil Rights, and Civil Liberties

Hearing on
Americans with Disabilities Act at 20 –
Celebrating Our Progress, Affirming Our Commitment
July 22, 2010

Testimony of
Casandra Cox
Member, Policy Committee,
Coalition of Institutionalized Aged and Disabled, Inc.

Good afternoon ladies and gentleman of the House Judiciary Committee and the Subcommittee on the Constitution, Civil Rights, and Civil Liberties. It is an honor to appear before you today as we celebrate the 20th Anniversary of the Americans With Disabilities Act. My name is Casandra Cox and I am a former resident of Riverdale Manor Home for Adults, an adult home located in the Bronx N.Y.

Prior to moving to Riverdale Manor I worked twenty-nine years for Hadassah, The Women's Zionist Organization of America. Towards the end of this period I became ill and was unable to continue working. My mental health affected my life to the extent that I was unable to function.

At N.Y. Hospital Cornell Medical Center I requested an appointment with a social worker and asked for help. She called Adult Protective Services immediately and they took me before the N.Y. State Supreme Court. The judge appointed a guardian. With the guardian's help I was able to have representation in all aspects of my legal as well as financial matters.

Eventually I had to be hospitalized and voluntarily entered the Payne Whitney Psychiatric Clinic. I was there for a period of three months. While there I was evicted from my apartment. I had no money and when I was discharged from Payne Whitney, I had no place to go. I was advised that I had two alternatives -- either a shelter or an adult home. To me a shelter was a no-brainer and I had never heard of an adult home.

An interview at Riverdale Manor was arranged. I went into shock, as it was less than ideal. My Payne Whitney case manager accompanied me. She had a lot of experience and told me on my return that Riverdale Manor was one of the better homes in that F.E.G. S. was on site and offered very good programs. I reluctantly accepted.

Living in an adult home was one of the most dehumanizing experiences I have gone through in my life. We were not treated as adults; we were treated as sub humans. There was always this undercurrent -- you are a resident and therefore not quite normal. They talk down to you. There is a stigma present. This is also true on the outside. We have to fight the stigma of the mentally ill all the time.

You live in a regimented setting on a daily basis. Rooms are shared and there is no privacy. You have to lock up everything. Fights break out occasionally. It was very stressful to live in this institutional setting and not good for my mental health.

While I was a resident my primary goal was to get back to life as I knew it before. I was not encouraged towards that end. I did become involved with an organization called The Coalition of Institutionalized Aged and Disabled (CIAD). CIAD is an advocacy organization of the mentally ill and elderly who live in adult homes and nursing homes. I attended a CIAD meeting and signed The Peoples Waiting List. It is a list of names of those residents who wish to move to independent housing.

I joined the CIAD Policy Committee at that time because no one was offering to help me move to independence. There were comments from the adult home staff such as – “why would you want to leave? We take care of you; you have everything here”. If I missed an annual function, I would be told, “don't worry, you can go next year.” The mindset was, you are here to stay. It took me almost three years to get out.

As a result of the advocacy of CIAD and the New York State Coalition for Adult Home Reform, an initiative to move 60 New York City adult home residents to their own apartments was created by the New York State Legislature. CIAD held housing forums in Brooklyn, Queens and the Bronx to help residents. I was one of the lucky 60. It was a difficult process but I was willing to do anything to be able to gain my independence.

I celebrated my first year of independent living this April and I continue to work with CIAD. CIAD filmed my move from Riverdale Manor to my new apartment and this video captured the joy of the move. But the true joy comes on a daily basis when I wake up to a new day filled with the promise of the freedom and reality of living life as it should be. I cook, clean, wash clothes, shop, budget, go to the movies and meet friends. I have support from Comunilife, my housing provider. I see a psychiatrist and a therapist, take my medication on a regular basis and of course continue to work with CIAD. I cannot tell you how wonderful it is to have my life

back. Instead of the dead-end existence of the institution, I am now able to plan my own day, prepare my own meals and know that I have a future.

My work with CIAD is very important to me as I feel I need to be able to pay forward the work that was done to help me as well as the many others in the past. As a member of CIAD's Policy Committee, Adult Home Resident Veterans Committee (a committee of former residents) and Food Committee I am able to go to many of the adult homes in New York City and observe first hand the same conditions I have described to you. Residents who want to and can move on to independent living have approached me. I will continue to do all that I can to see that they do.

I've witnessed the ADA at work for many years. I was a union representative when I worked at Hadassah and it was at that time that the ADA was enacted. It was a great help in protecting employee's rights and I watched as it helped the handicapped all over the United States in housing, transportation and employment. I followed with great interest the DAI v. Paterson trial in New York. Two other CIAD leaders and former residents testified. I consider the judge's decision in this case a landmark decision for people who suffer from mental illness. It is the perfect application of the ADA as it was meant to protect those who need it most. It has certainly given me back my life. And for that, I am honored and grateful to help you celebrate the 20th anniversary of this great law. Thank you.