



NEW YORK STATE SENATOR

James Skoufis

## Skoufis, Lawmakers, Advocates Call on OPWDD To Provide Residents With WiFi

JESSICA GULOTTA January 25, 2021

| ISSUE: **OPWDD, DEVELOPMENTAL DISABILITIES INTELLECTUAL DISABILITIES DISABILITY RIGHTS COVID-19 RESPONSE**



Senator James Skoufis (D-Hudson Valley) held a press conference outside the state's Office for People With Developmental Disabilities headquarters in Albany to shine a light on an issue affecting people living in state-operated group homes. Even throughout the pandemic, New York State-operated group homes/living facilities do not provide free WiFi for individuals living in the home. Senator Skoufis, lawmakers, and disability advocates called

on the state to rectify this injustice immediately and announced a bill that they will introduce requiring all of the state's group homes offer free WiFi to their developmentally disabled residents.

Senator Skoufis was joined by fellow lawmakers, including John Mannion who Chairs the Senate's Committee on Disabilities, and Samra Brouk who Chairs the Senate's Committee on Mental Health, Aileen Gunther who Chairs the Assembly's Committee on Mental Health, and Thomas Abinanti who Chairs the Assembly's Committee on Disabilities. They were also joined by Doug Hovey, President/CEO of Independent Living Inc and Alex Thompson of the New York Association on Independent Living.

Senator Skoufis' constituents from Highland Mills, Phil and Maryann Smith, reached out to his office in late 2020 because their daughter, Michelle, was not provided WiFi in her state-operated group home. Due to this issue, the Smiths were forced to take her out of the home; during COVID, with the minimal contact everyone already has, it was distressing to leave Michelle without basic access to contact loved ones, online programs, and telehealth appointment abilities.

Like everyone else in the world, Michelle and other group home residents depend on WiFi as a way of life. While staying at home during the pandemic, Michelle has been on Zoom at least twice a day, five days a week with peers from her day program. Once Michelle returns to the state-run group home, however, access to that program will end since there isn't any WiFi.

After being alerted to this issue, Senator Skoufis learned this was not an isolated incident and, in fact, free WiFi is not provided in any of the state's group homes. He proceeded to organize multiple phone calls with OPWDD in an attempt to convince them to reconsider their draconian statewide policy. Despite the pandemic, however, they continued to insist that individuals must pay for WiFi services themselves, and refused to commit to making

WiFi services available in the future. OPWDD is treating WiFi like a luxury item and balked at the statewide cost of \$900,000. For context, the state budget exceeds \$190 billion.

“Every day that goes by and individuals in homes are denied basic access to WiFi, the state is single-handedly impeding people’s ability to navigate essential services and communicate with their families,” **said Senator Skoufis**. “Adding insult to injury, most of these group homes already provide WiFi to state employees. As the Governor proposes extending accessible and affordable Internet service throughout the state, it's imperative that this state-caused injustice is addressed as well. I look forward to working with my colleagues to pass this important bill and provide a fundamental, basic service to some of our state's most vulnerable individuals.”

**Doug Hovey, President and CEO of Independent Living Inc. said**, “Thank you to Senator Skoufis for bringing this important issue to the forefront. Access to WiFi is a right not a privilege. I can’t think of anything more important than being able to communicate with our families and loved ones especially during the pandemic. Governor Cuomo intends to make Wi-Fi universally accessible for all people including low income families who may not have the financial ability to pay for Wi-Fi access which is commendable. The governor must also immediately provide Wi-Fi for people with developmental disabilities living in state operated group homes and community residences.”

“The pandemic has shown that Internet access is as vital to modern life as electricity, yet Wifi is considered a luxury by New York State if you have a disability and live in a group facility – this has to change,” **said Senator John Mannion, Chairman of the Senate Disabilities Committee**. “I strongly support Sen. Skoufis’ efforts to ensure every OPWDD facility provides free WiFi for all residents. It is not only a lifeline to friends and family for needed emotional support – particularly during the forced isolation of the pandemic - but with the expansion of telemedicine it is also a means to proper medical treatment.”

**Senator Samra Brouk, Chair of Committee on Mental Health said,** “I strongly support this bill that would guarantee free wifi to residents of state-operated group homes. Having reliable internet access can positively impact a person’s mental health in many different ways -- making it possible for someone to do a telemedicine appointment with their doctor, to use social media to keep up with family and friends, and to reach education and workforce goals by doing classes and certifications online. This pandemic has shined a light on the vast inequalities that arise when everyone does not have equal access to the internet. Residents of state-run group homes are some of the most vulnerable and isolated members of our community, and they deserve our help.

**Assemblywoman Aileen Gunther, Chair of Committee on Mental Health said,** “It’s absurd OPWDD isn’t providing free WiFi for their residents. Some families haven’t seen their loved ones in nearly a year and internet may be their only way of connecting. We need to ensure that the state is doing everything it can for people with developmental disabilities and their families. Free WiFi would help with feelings of isolation without being a financial burden on residents.”

**Assemblyman Thomas Abinanti, Chair of Committee on Disabilities, said,** “In a COVID world, Internet access is the lifeline for people with disabilities to be part of the rest of the community. The Internet gives not just access to information but contact with loved ones and vital remote services that cannot now be provided in person safely. OPWDD’s failure to provide Internet to people who are otherwise isolated prevents people with disabilities from receiving required services.”

Please see the attached video testimony from Phil and Maryann Smith, as well as a link to the full press conference and photos.

[Click here for the Smiths' testimony.](#)

[Link to full press conference.](#)

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