

July 31, 2009

Wayne Zyra, President
Monroe County Legislature
410 County Office Building
39 W. Main Street
Rochester, New York 14614

Dear Legislator Zyra:

I am writing in reference to the audio-tape that has been aired in the local media that records the voice of someone at a recent meeting of the Monroe County Legislature referring to another individual as a "retard". The issue of who in the Legislature used the word is less important than the fact that the Legislature as a body needs to take it seriously.

This is an excellent opportunity for the leadership of the Legislature to address this issue directly and set an example for our community. It is not about "political correctness". It is about the importance of all of our community leaders understanding, respecting and valuing the contributions of all our citizens and discouraging damaging stereotypes. It is a bipartisan issue that affects thousands of Monroe County residents who have disabilities and those who care about them.

Using language such as the word "retard" to describe any citizen of this county serves only to denigrate, demean and create barriers much the same way as ethnic slurs. This term is never used as an endearing comment and only meant to disparage others based on a negative stereotype of people who have intellectual disabilities. It promotes stereotypes that lead to lowered academic achievement for children, bullying, decreased graduation rates, increased unemployment and greater burdens on tax-payers to publically provide more costly support to individuals who otherwise have the capacity to be leading independent, productive and quality lives.

In 2007, the New York State Assembly and Senate passed legislation recognizing the significance of language and the negative impact it can have on individuals with disabilities, and Governor Spitzer signed the "Person-First" legislation into law. Recognizing individuals who have disabilities as people first is also a core value of The Advocacy Center.

The Advocacy Center has served Monroe County for over 50 years to improve the quality of life of individuals with intellectual and other disabilities. We have received financial support from Monroe County and the State of New York for over 10 years to specifically address the need for greater public awareness about disabilities in order to break down myths and attitudes that serve as barriers to a quality of life for people with disabilities. The Advocacy Center's core mission is to build the capacity of individuals with disabilities. Stereotypes and demeaning language diminishes and destroys capacity.

I invite the leadership of the Monroe County Legislature to seize this opportunity to learn more about how all of its citizens, regardless of intellectual capacity, can and do contribute to the quality of life of Monroe County. The Advocacy Center is ready to support you in that effort. We have extensive experience with conducting disability educational awareness training for local businesses, students and human services professionals across Monroe County.

I would be happy to meet with you at your earliest convenience to discuss how we can best support you.

I look forward to hearing from you.

Sincerely,

Paul J. Shew, Executive Director
The Advocacy Center

c. Legislator Dan Quatro
Majority Leader

Legislator Harry Bronson
Minority Leader