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September 1, 2022

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California Department of Developmental Services (DDS) Names Panel of National Experts to Review DDS Conservatorship Process

DDS is the Court-Appointed Conservator for 413 Individuals

Sacramento, CA – The California Department of Developmental Services today announced the formation of a panel of national experts to conduct a comprehensive review of DDS' conservatorship program. The panel is a joint effort by DDS and the National Association of State Directors of Developmental Disabilities Services (NASDDDS.)

The creation of this panel is one of the actions announced by DDS earlier this month to better support the 413 individuals currently under conservatorships managed by DDS. In addition to the panel of national experts, DDS committed to:

- Forming a multidepartment working group to conduct enhanced reviews for each of DDS' 413 individual conservatees with staff from the Department of Social Services, Department of Aging, and the Department of Public Health.
- Amendments to regional center contracts to enhance oversight and review requirements for DDS' 413 conservatees.

"I am very grateful to these accomplished, committed experts for joining DDS' effort to make our services better centered on the individuals who rely on us. The panel's evaluation will provide an opportunity for an objective review of DDS' conservatorship process and to explore alternatives to conservatorship and improve oversight of DDS services, said DDS Director, Nancy Bargmann.

"I am honored to be part of the tremendous level of national expertise gathered for this effort," shared Mary Sowers, Executive Director, NASDDDS. "We have representation from professionals in the fields of healthcare, advocacy for individuals with disabilities, law, equity and inclusion, and other subject areas that will be important to our collaborative work."

In early 2023, DDS will publicly issue an update on the panel's progress to-date and the recommendations resulting from these efforts. The panel's process will include engagement with California-based advocates and experts in DDS's conservatorship process. Additionally, DDS will share updates with the Developmental Services Task Force and recommendations from the panel may inform future legislative changes.

Please see below for background information on each of the 9 panelists and meeting facilitator:

Mary P. Sowers, Executive Director, NASDDDS

Before joining NASDDDS in 2014, Mary provided consultation and technical assistance to state governments on a wide array of Medicaid-related issues, with a focus on integrated care, home and community-based services, and managed long-term services and supports. Mary has held senior positions with the federal Centers for Medicare & Medicaid Services (CMS), Disabled and Elderly Health Programs Group within the Center for Medicaid, and CHIP Services. During her tenure at CMS, Mary specialized in Medicaid home and community-based services, managed long-term services and supports (including strategies for reducing institutional reliance), self-direction, and strategies to design person-centered systems of care.

Caroline Brown, Brown & Peisch PLLC

Caroline has been practicing law in the area of government-sponsored health care and other public benefit programs for more than 25 years. Caroline has counseled dozens of state agencies on compliance with the federal public assistance statutes and implementing regulations involving a range of complex issues, including Medicaid managed care, payment for home and community-based services, dual eligibles, and Section 1115 demonstration projects. Caroline has supported clients through transformational change and brings unparalleled expertise with regulatory and statutory frameworks and system interactions.

Kecia Weller, Self-Advocacy & Community Liaison at the UCLA Tarjan Center

A disability rights advocate for the past 30 years at the local, state and national levels, Kecia is a self-advocate advisor to the National Center on Criminal Justice and Disabilities. Her recommendations for system change were published in the March 2019 online Ms. Magazine. Kecia is also a founding member of the California Silence = Violence Statewide Coalition and currently hosts the plain language podcast, *In Other Words*, which provides information from the Tarjan Center's Distinguished Lecture series in language that everyone can understand. Most recently, Kecia has been an advisor to, and featured in, the new national *Talk About Sexual Violence* training videos and guides for health care professionals and she's one of the national founding Co-Chairs of the Peer Support Network for sexual assault survivors with intellectual/developmental disabilities.

Mark A. Thomas, Director Guidehouse Consulting Services

Mark's professional areas of focus are Long Term Supports and Services for Individuals with Developmental Disabilities and Aging populations, Medicaid, Public Health, and Behavioral Health. Mark is a former Deputy Secretary/Chief Operating Officer for the Louisiana Department of Health and was Assistant Secretary for the Office for Citizens with Developmental Disabilities prior to filling the role of Deputy Secretary. Mark is the immediate past president of the National Association of State Directors of Developmental Disabilities Services. He is also a sibling of a person with developmental disabilities. He brings more than 29 years of experience in public and private sector disability supports and healthcare including work in successful statewide transformational activities.

Mary Faithfull, former Executive Director, Disability Rights Texas (DRTx)

As a person living with a disability, Mary knows firsthand the importance of the services provided by federally mandated Protection and Advocacy (P&A) agencies. Recently retired from 37-years at DRTx, Mary was Executive Director for the last 21-years. Before DRTx, Mary worked for The Institute of Rehabilitation and Research and was faculty at Baylor College of Medicine in Houston. During her tenure with DRTx, she provided direct services, advocated at the Texas legislature, coordinated special projects to transition students from special education to community living, and managed the Houston office before being named Executive Director. Mary believes that the right supports and services, combined with advocacy and enforcement of disability rights laws, levels the playing field so people with disabilities can be fully engaged, integrated and contributing members of their communities.

Mary Anne Harvey former Executive Director, Disability Law Colorado

Mary Anne served as the Executive Director of Disability Law Colorado, the state's Protection and Advocacy agency, from 1980-2021. Beginning in 1988, Disability Law Colorado became the host agency for the Colorado State Long-Term Care Ombudsman Program and the Colorado Legal Assistance Developer for older adults. Mary Anne was active in the National Disability Rights Network (NDRN) as a former board member, past president and trainer. In addition, she participated in the development of national standards and outcome measurements for Protection and Advocacy Systems and she was a co-founder of the Executive Leadership Institute which supports the development of a group of peers from non-competing organizations and serves as a forum for creative problem-solving.

Sam Crane, Legal Director, Quality Trust

Quality Trust is an independent, non-profit advocacy organization focused on improving the lives of people with developmental disabilities in DC and beyond. Quality Trust partners with people and their families so they can succeed, thrive, and experience full membership in the communities they choose. Sam oversees the organization's legal advocacy activities, including the Jenny Hatch Justice Project and National Resource Center for Supported Decision-Making. Prior to joining Quality Trust, Sam was the Legal Director at the Autistic Self Advocacy Network. She has advocated on a range of issues including increased access to supported decision-making, community-based services, and healthcare, as well as freedom from seclusion and restraint.

Shannon Cogan, Director of the Office of Clients' Rights Advocacy at Disability Rights California

Shannon leads the team of advocates who protect and advocate for the rights of people served by regional centers. She also has the unique experience of representing a Public Guardian in conservatorship cases and litigating financial elder abuse cases. These experiences provided Shannon with insight into the overwhelming need for alternatives to conservatorship and stronger court oversight to protect the individual rights of people with disabilities. Shannon became a disability rights lawyer due to her experiences advocating for her own child in disability-related systems. In 2021, Shannon served as a delegate to the Fourth National Guardianship Summit, a convening of conservatorship experts who approved 22 recommendations for reforming conservatorship systems nationwide.

Regina Rodriguez Sisneros, Director of Equity Initiatives & System Innovations, NASDDDS

Regina is the Director of Equity Initiatives and System Innovations at NASDDDS. Prior to joining NASDDDS, Regina spent 14 years with the Colorado Department of Human Services as the Contract Manager and Equity, Diversity, & Inclusion Manager for MINDSOURCE Brain Injury Network. Her experience related to disability started personally because of individuals with disabilities in her family, and professionally when she became a Certified Brain Injury Specialist in 2008. She is a graduate of Georgetown University's Leadership Institute for Cultural Diversity & Cultural and Linguistic Competence and an alum of the Colorado JFK LEND Program and was selected as the 2021 Emerging Leader for the Association of University Centers on Disabilities.

Catherine Blakemore, Facilitator

Catherine brings more than 40 years of expertise in advocating for Californians with disabilities to the table--the depth and breadth of which is unique and will contribute to facilitating the work of this panel. She is the former Executive Director of Disability Rights California (DRC), the federally mandated protection and advocacy agency in California and the nation's largest disability rights organization. Catherine previously represented individuals with disabilities and low-income Californians as an attorney with the Disability Rights Legal Center, the Legal Aid Foundation of Los Angeles and DRC. She currently is a consultant for DDS and consults for other protection and advocacy agencies, in addition to being the Chair of California's Alzheimer's Advisory Committee and Vice-Chair of the California Commission on Access to Justice, which works to identify innovations to increase access to courts and legal resources for individuals of modest or low means.

About DDS:

Under the Lanterman Developmental Disabilities Services Act, DDS is responsible for overseeing the coordination & delivery of services and supports to approximately 400,000 Californians with, or at risk for, developmental disabilities including cerebral palsy, intellectual disability, autism, epilepsy and related conditions. The state's service system is designed to meet the needs and choices of individuals at each stage of their lives, and, to the extent possible, support them in their home communities, providing choices that are reflective of lifestyle, cultural and linguistic preferences.

About NASDDDS:

NASDDDS represents the nation's agencies in 50 states, Puerto Rico, and the District of Columbia providing services to children and adults with intellectual and developmental disabilities and their families. NASDDDS promotes visionary leadership, systems innovation, and the development of national policies that support home and community-based services for individuals with disabilities and their families.

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