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Statewide Candidate Forum Held at The Arc of Virginia State Convention

Majority of Candidates for Statewide Office in Attendance for Event Focusing on Priority Issues for Virginians with Developmental Disabilities

RICHMOND, Virginia – The Arc of Virginia, in partnership with The Arc of Northern Virginia, the Autism Society of Northern Virginia, The Autism Society of Central Virginia, The Autism Society of Tidewater, REV UP! Virginia, and the Virginia Board for People with Disabilities Training Alumni Association, hosted a virtual Candidate Forum last night for the candidates running for statewide office this November. This Forum was the culmination of The Arc of Virginia’s 2021 State Convention, which was held virtually from August 9-12.

“We are grateful that so many candidates were able to participate in last night’s Forum, and that our members, advocacy partners, and the general public, had an opportunity to hear about candidates’ platforms on key Developmental Disability (DD) issues,” says Tonya Milling (Executive Director). “Virginia’s next Governor, Lieutenant Governor, and Attorney General will be taking office during an unprecedented time, and facing numerous challenges and crises; ensuring that they are keenly aware, and responsive to the needs of, the DD community is absolutely critical to our future as a Commonwealth.”

Over 200 attendees joined the virtual forum throughout the evening. Candidates in attendance included **Princess Blanding**, former Governor **Terry McAuliffe**, and **Glenn Youngkin**; Delegate **Hala Ayala** and former Delegate **Winsome Sears**; and Delegate **Jason Miyares**. Current Attorney General Mark Herring, running for re-election, was unable to participate in last night’s event; he previously attended a Forum hosted by The Arc of Northern Virginia, before the June Primary nomination.

“I am so encouraged and happy that every candidate listened to and respected our sensory-friendly forum,” says Conner Cummings (Advisory Board Member of *Zoom Autism Magazine*, and advocate from The Arc of Northern Virginia). “They all seem to agree with us that the system is not working, and shared special approaches on how to make it better. Other advocates stated how pleased they were that the candidates have some real-life and knowledgeable experience; this gives me hope, and makes me feel like my style of communication, my stimming, my strengths and my determinations are finally being accepted - not judged. Our voices, no matter how we speak, are being uplifted and heard, and we have added people who are fighting along with us.”

The candidates responded to detailed questions on several core policy areas, including addressing the severely back-logged Medicaid DD Waiver Waiting List, tackling the workforce crisis amongst DD waiver providers, prioritizing inclusive education for Virginia students, and preventing unjust entanglement in the criminal justice system. Audience members also interacted virtually by submitting dozens of questions and comments in writing throughout the evening, stressing the need for immediate and urgent action to support the DD System.

“These are collectively the priority issues that The Arc of Virginia, our chapters, and our coalition partners have been advocating on for years,” states Kim Goodloe (President). “Conservatively, there are over 150,000 citizens in Virginia who are directly impacted by every decision our elected leaders make - or fail to make - related to prioritizing and investing in a robust home and community-based services system. Our families have heard many promises in past election cycles that were later forgotten, or never came to pass. This pattern cannot continue; our system cannot sustain it. Individuals, our families, and our DD waiver providers need action now.”

“We all need independence and access to services,” shares Brittney Lee (Co-Chair, ALLY Self-Advocacy Alliance), “but advocating for and supporting others as co-chair of the statewide advocacy alliance is difficult, because of the struggles of technology and accessing other services that include advocates in the process. I was denied assistive technology by the state, because I can use one finger to type. This hinders me from doing the everyday duties that I am made to do and makes me feel unequal to everyone else. People are waiting too long to receive services in their homes and communities, and too many still aren’t receiving any services at all because there hasn’t been funding for rate increases for our providers. I am willing to be the advocate in supporting those who need me, but we need those who are elected to listen to us and support us.”

“My own family has been in this fight for 28 years,” adds Goodloe, “right alongside the thousands of other Virginia families, urging elected officials to do the right thing. However the elections are decided in November, we will continue to advocate for the state and the new Administration to fulfill its obligation to the DD system.”

About The Arc of Virginia: The Arc of Virginia is the statewide advocacy organization for Virginians with developmental disabilities and their families, and promotes and protects the human rights of people with developmental disabilities and actively supports their full inclusion and participation in the community throughout their lifetimes. For more information, visit www.thearcofva.org.

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Editor’s Note: The Arc is not an acronym, and as such is never capitalized. We, as an organization, have been sensitive to the impact of terminology on our constituency and have adapted accordingly. As the words 'retardation' and 'retarded' became pejorative, derogatory, and demeaning in usage, the organization changed its name to 'The Arc.' The Arc of Virginia is a 501(c)3 organization, and does not endorse any political candidates or parties.