



The Autism National Committee

Position Statement on the Use of Restraints

The Autism National Committee condemns the widespread and excessive use of restraints in restricting the civil and human rights of people with disabilities, and affirms that the use of restraints should be considered a failure of treatment.

People who have survived forceful restraint have reported they feared they would die in restraint, and some have died. A number of tragic cases of restraint-related deaths of children and adults have recently made the national news. Estimates of deaths occurring during or shortly after restraint currently range from 50 to 150 annually. The actual magnitude of such deaths is poorly tracked and subject to under reporting. A federal Department of Health and Human Services spokesperson has agreed that these deaths are under reported.

Many have reported that they now live with fear and flashbacks that involve a sudden, involuntary re-living of this emotional and physically traumatic experience. Post-traumatic stress disorder is increasingly being diagnosed among persons who have been subjected to the systematic use of restraints. In our experiences as professionals, parents, and individuals with autism, we have witnessed too many times the horror and injury done to our citizens with autism. We are weary of seeing our people become victims.

It is clear that: individuals' sometimes desperate efforts to communicate are ignored when staff force compliance for oftentimes trivial reasons; the cumulative effects of repeated restraint can lead to diminished self-image and negative attitudes; when restraint is used, struggle is provoked and this natural response increases the danger of physical injury.

Although any one of us, disabled or not, may at some point in our lives need to be restrained on an emergency basis, that should only occur when there is a substantial threat of injury to self and others. Behavioral restraints are neither treatment nor education. They are merely procedures or methods that restrict freedom of choice and adversely affect the human development of people with disabilities, and as such we totally condemn their use.

We call on national and state agencies to investigate the widespread mistreatment of people with disabilities through the use of restraints. We call on Congress and state legislatures to pass legislation to protect people with disabilities by: limiting the use of restraints on children and adults with disabilities to one-time emergency situations involving serious threat of injury to the person with disabilities or to others; requiring immediate reporting of these incidents; requiring thorough investigations of the circumstances that lead to the incident; and requiring the development of supports and accommodations to prevent future incidents.

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