# Gubernatorial Candidates Town Hall on Disability & Chronic Conditions

September 20, 2022

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**Scott Spradling:** Good afternoon, everyone. Welcome. And thank you for joining us for the 2022 Gubernatorial Candidates Town Hall on Disability and Chronic Conditions. I'm your moderator, Scott Spradling. And it is an honor to be here with all of you for the next little bit to discuss issues facing all of you and how our next governor of New Hampshire intends to address those priorities in the future.

This event is being held both here in person and virtually to maximize access and volume to this discussion. And we're thrilled to be here. There are nine advocacy groups and nonprofits co-sponsoring this town hall conversation. Lead sponsor, Granite State Independent Living is working in collaboration with ABLE New Hampshire, Disability Rights Center of New Hampshire, the New Hampshire Council on Developmental Disabilities, Community Support Network, Inc., the Council for Youth with Chronic Conditions, the Brain Injury Association of New Hampshire, the Institute on Disability at UNH and the Parent Information Center. Representing this coalition. I have a special shout out to Deb Ritcey who is the president and CEO of GSIL working hard behind the scenes today.

And I'd like to take one quick moment to introduce Jill Bille, the Chief Financial Officer for GSIL to say just a few words, Jill,

**Jill Bille:** Thank you, Scott. And welcome everyone. It's an honor to represent a coalition of such important advocacy groups. Many, thanks to all of the work done to make this moment a reality.

The topics we will discuss here today are critical, but not just those impacted directly by the answers. The very fact that we are having this dialogue and focusing on ability of this population of Granite Staters sends a message to all that we matter, that we contribute, and that we deserve to be heard.

We thank Senator Sherman and Governor Sununu for adding their voices and their volume to these issues. And many thanks to Elaine Hamel of girls at work. Our event sponsor today, our event host Elaine and her team do amazing things that operate with parallel mission to the many groups that are co-sponsoring today's events.

We're honored to be here. And thank you for all that you do, Scott.

**Scott Spradling:** Thank you, Jill Appreciate it. Now onto the program just very quickly, each candidate will have a few moments to say hello. Then I will ask each gentleman three questions that were formulated by our nine partners and shared with each campaign in advance for maximum opportunity to answer with depth, then we'll shift to the live Q&A incorporating questions from our live audience of guests and from the Q&A function on our zoom call.

Those interested can type in a question and we've already received several in advance. GSIL policy director, Jeff Dickinson, will read those live on behalf of the zoom audience. We will offer candidates a closing thought. And then we're through. I'd like to now introduce Dr. Tom Sherman candidate for governor and current state, Senator.

Dr. Sherman, thank you for joining us. According to his bio sheet, he's dedicated his life to service from working as an EMT in high school to designing a clinic and a homeless shelter while in medical school. And then more than 30 years of working as a doctor. The Senator has been a leader for public health in Concord, with a long history of reaching across the aisle to get things done.

Working with members of both parties, he's helped expand health coverage to more than 50,000 Granite Staters. He's lowered prescription drug costs, instituted the toughest clean water standards in the country to protect our drinking water, and increased beds available for people in mental health crisis.

Tom is married with three sons, and if I have this right, he can basically play every instrument in the band except for drums. So Senator thank you so much for being here and welcome the floor is yours.

**Senator Tom Sherman:** Thank you, Scott. It's great to be here. Just want to put a little disclaimer on being able to play all those instruments.

Not very well is what I'd like to add to what he just said, but very passionately. So I know so many of you, from two terms in the house, two terms in the Senate, I was chair of, Senate health and human services. And as many of you know, I really, was raised with awareness of people with disability.

My great aunt, Mary Sue, had severe cerebral palsy and she was born in 1922. So if you can imagine what that time was like for her, because most children were institutionalized in that time. My grandparents wouldn't do that. And so she was, I guess, the equivalent of being mainstreamed nowadays, she was just another of the kids.

And my dad grew up with. her And she was part of the household. She was part of my life. And the wonderful part, of, of what I saw come out of that is she would swim a mile every day. She was smarter than anyone around her, and she was a vibrant part of the family. She got married. And so she really lived such a full life because in part, my grandparents didn't make her other, they just made her part of the family and, and that made her part of the community.

And then fast forward to my first year after med school, I ended up doing a project where I was really interested in how parents cope when their children have a severe disability. And so I spent a summer in Kansas city working at what was called the multiply handicapped preschool. And it was, I had no training.

But I was a teacher And so I was more being educated than teaching and I was being educated by the students who were wonderful children with absolutely devastating disabilities. The amazing part is that I just ran into my boss, not too recently, who now lives in Concord. And she told me that my favorite, I guess you're not allowed to have favorites as a teacher, but I'll, I'll confess, he was my favorite. Timmy actually has gone on to be a Paralympic champion. And at the time, the only way we could communicate was by rudimentary, rudimentary sign, those ingrained in me, the importance of making sure that we develop a culture of inclusiveness. And I don't know the best way to express it.

I think those of you who have seen the work I've done in the legislature, understand it, understand what I'm trying to do, but it's a culture shift. It's where there is, there is not one group or another group. It's all of us together. And we are doing everything we possibly can to incorporate into our lives, people with disability and make sure that their lives are as rich as can be.

So that's my background. My commitment is absolute. Those of you who I've worked with in the legislature, understand that. And I really look forward to the opportunity as governor to help with that culture, because I don't think we have it in New Hampshire, but I think we can. So thank you for having me.

**Scott Spradling:** Senator thanks again for being here. I'd like to move now to those three questions that we sent to both candidates in advance. So they'd have some time to think on them. And yes, I need glasses to see people with disabilities want to fully live inclusive lives in their communities in order to avoid placement in a nursing home or an institutional setting in or out of state, people with disabilities need access to home and community based support services.

What's your plan to increase the workforce, serving the home and community based system for people with disabilities.

**Senator Tom Sherman:** It's a great question because of course, workforce is a crisis that is developed over the last several years. We knew it was coming. We didn't do much to prepare for it, but now it's here.

We know that in the mental health community and the substance use community and in the disability community finding, not only for our area agencies, but also for the vendors, finding people who will work in those areas is virtually impossible. but we also know that the dedication of the people working in those areas is absolute.

It's more of a calling than it is a profession, and that's not quite fair. It's more of a calling than it is a job. And so for the people who are doing this work, and I know many of them, they are broken hearted, that they can't earn a living wage while doing the work. They have to work two jobs, three jobs.

That's how passionate they are about the work. So step one is make sure that there is reasonable living reimbursement for choosing that career. And some of that has to do with our Medicaid reimbursement. A few years ago, we increased Medicaid reimbursement by 6% about, but that still leaves us pretty much at the bottom of all the states in the country.

We really have to do more to bring that up, but not just Medicaid because some of the home health, a, some of the, aides the personal care aids or personal care attendants aren't being reimbursed by Medicaid. In fact, they're being reimbursed by the family. So we have to provide those supports. That's part of recruiting people.

It's part of retaining people, but the other part is making sure that on that salary, they can actually live in the community where they work. That's true, not just for people who work with the disabled, but it's true. Law enforcement firefighters, people in hospitality industry. But when we think of essential workers, you know, we're, we're used to the term essential workers now because of COVID.

But when we think of essential workers, we have to make sure that we in all of our future development have housing available. Not just for the disabled, but for the people who care for them and support them. Now I'll add one more thing. When I did that study in Kansas city, and I talked to all those parents, their biggest concern, wasn't, who's gonna take care of them right now.

It's who's gonna take care of them. Who's going to sustain that independence that we try to get for people with disability when they aren't there anymore. And that to me is sort of that's the final mark of when we've been successful, when we can make sure that the parents are reassured that their children their disabled children are going to be okay.

Even if they aren't around to help that to me is when we can do that. We've hit the mark

**Scott Spradling:** Senator. Thank you. The next question through Education Freedom Accounts, millions of dollars are moving from local public schools into private schools, which are not legally bound to follow IDEA. The Individuals with Disabilities Education Act, and some are also permitted to deny enrollment to students with disabilities, this type of financial loss places, pressure on local school districts who must deliver special education services.

How will you ensure that special education students will receive an equitable and inclusive education in the age of EFA's diminishing public school budgets?

**Senator Tom Sherman:** That's a great question. And I've answered this, on, on, WMUR before I fundamentally have always disagreed with taxpayer dollars going to private and religious schools.

Fundamentally. There are situations where it's appropriate, but only when the public school is not able to provide that special service. Some of you may know Landmark down in Massachusetts, and we have some kids from the sea coast who go down to Landmark. I get that because they need those really highly specialized services.

And that's something that we provide, we say, yes it's okay. But fundamentally until every child in New Hampshire has access to a great public school education, we should not be diverting those dollars to private and religious schools. And then when you think about the EFA program, the voucher program, one of the most expensive, and now over budget programs in the entire United States, you have to realize that there's almost no accountability for those funds.

Thousands of taxpayer dollars going out with almost no accountability. Put on top of that, the fact that some people whose parents or themselves are paying taxes, can't get in. That's unacceptable to me. My first choice would be to stop the program, make sure that none of the kids currently in it are penalized.

So we would have to make sure that those children can continue, but meeting, they have to meet the eligibility requirements every year. But number two, if we are going to continue this program, because this is the decision of the legislature, not me as governor. If we are going to continue, I would really make every effort I could to make sure that those schools that accept taxpayer dollars cannot discriminate on the basis of disability.

And they must have a program for providing the same level of services that those children would find in the public school system. That's the plan B. But the current system to me is really outrageous. It's outrageous that in the state of New Hampshire right now, taxpayer dollars are going to schools who deny entry to people with disability and other things, by the way.

But we're focused on disability today. And I find that unacceptable.

**Scott Spradling:** Thank you, Senator. Third question in light of the shortage of affordable housing in the state of New Hampshire, especially accessible housing, what in your role as governor will you do to ensure that people with disabilities have access to affordable, community based, accessible housing so that people with disabilities are able to live meaningful lives in their communities, and what's the role of government?

**Senator Tom Sherman:** Great question. And actually it's a great opportunity, you know, we need right now, we need about 20,000 housing units in the state of New Hampshire. We have a lot of experience with, how can we incentivize developers to put more workforce housing, or older housing into that?

We need, and actually, if you go to my website, you'll see a plan, for housing, that's a strategic plan. It will take years to get rid of that 20,000, unit deficit. But it, it actually will walk you through how we're going to do it. But I would add to that plan, we can use some of those same incentives at the state level, and also at the municipal level to help developers see that part of that development, whether it's mixed use housing, whether it's, single family homes, whether it's apartment buildings, that a component of it, a percentage of it needs to be geared towards people with disabilities.

And you know, the beauty of the plan that we have is that it's really working at the municipal level. And the way that meets the needs of the disabled in my book is that it varies based on the community. So let's make sure that when we put in an incentive that will help developers, whether they're commercial or nonprofit, build more accessible housing, let's make sure that it's designed for the people who actually live in that community.

Can you imagine if you have somebody who just for example, is wheelchair bound, you give an incentive to a developer and they don't really accommodate that. Now some of that would be, you know, would be covered by the ADA, but we're going beyond the ADA. We're going to, and this is where the beauty of looking at the local level is so important because there we can tailor it to the needs of that community and that community can help decide, what level of incentives they're going to provide. I think it's a really huge opportunity.

**Scott Spradling:** Senator, thank you. So those are the three questions that were given to the campaigns in advance. Now I'd like to essentially turn it over to you and to the folks who are watching from the zoom platform. Is Jessica Dollar here?

We have a first live question for Jessica, right from the front row and Audrey has a microphone, so you don't even have to move. We can that way, let you offer your question to Senator Sherman.

**Jessica:** With the high unemployment rate with people experiencing a disability, what will you do to support the community to be part of the, the Granite State workforce?

**Scott Spradling:** Thank you, Jessica.

**Senator Tom Sherman:** So the very first part you said,

**Scott Spradling:** The high unemployment rate,

**Senator Tom Sherman:** The high unemployment rate or the high employment rate?

**Jessica:** High unemployment rate.

**Senator Tom Sherman:** Okay. Well right now, you know, there's sort of two scenarios. One is right now where we have thousands of job openings, we have workforce need, and I think we should be embracing the community, the disabled community and saying, how can we work with you to help fill some of the fill some of this workforce? And that means we need more supports. We need, we need to be really thinking about how we can help incorporate people who can work, who want to work into the workforce on the flip side, when you have large unemployment, and I've seen this on sea coast, not, you know, during the recession, there were a lot of people, the first to go were some of the people who were disabled. Where they had started special programs. I remember one of my neighbors, right. Literally four houses down, the state pulled all of the support that allowed him to work. And that's just completely unacceptable. He should have the same job security as every other person in that workforce.

And I think one of the ways we can do this is make sure that no one is, I'm trying to think of the right, the best way to put it, make sure that no one is terminated solely on the basis of how much, you know, how much they can do because of a disability. We have to make sure that's part of, that they are treated like everyone else in that workforce.

And there are protections right now already, but we need to make sure they're absolute. So that my neighbor down the street, just because it costs more to have him in that workforce, that workforce was his lifeline. Not because of the money he made. But because of the work he did and what it did for him.

And I understand that and we have to make sure that he is just as valuable to that workplace and has just as many rights as the person working next to him without a disability.

**Scott Spradling:** Thank you, Senator. Jessica, thank you for the question I'm looking now for Justin Bonnie. Believe Justin is here for a question.

**Justin:** So my question is, you know, we look at the Granite State, we have so many wonderful outdoor attractions, we have Mount Washington, not to far away, we have many different hiking trails. And my question is under your leadership, how would you make the outdoors more accessible, to people in wheelchairs?

**Scott Spradling:** Oh, good question.

**Senator Tom Sherman:** Right. Great question. There is some move to doing this. Actually, we were, we were looking at a, the possibility of a pier or on top of the jetty out at Hampton beach, which is in my district, that would be wheelchair accessible, to allow people to get out over the water. I mean, it's hard enough to get down to the beach.

This would allow people to get out over the water. That's the kind of spirit we need, maybe not the pier, but I think it's really important to allow people to get out to the end of the pier, get out where the breakers are not get wet. Although I, I helped out with a program. One of the camps was down there and I helped them this year.

It was most amazing. All of the participants were in wheelchairs. They, they had severe disabilities. They absolutely loved it. I was freezing, they were enjoying it. But it was great to see how much fun they were having. We have to make sure that in all of our natural resources, like you've said, whether it's hiking, climbing, or getting to the top of a mountain, that everybody can do it.

There's a wonderful program at UNH that actually will rent out that, that, equipment and for, and it's something that I'd love to see us expand on it's enormously successful. Unfortunately, I think they're going to have to move out of their facility, but it's enormously successful program. And I would love to see us put more resources into that.

So there's sort of two levels, right? There's people who can't afford the equipment because it takes highly specialized equipment that is really quite expensive, as you all know better than I do, but on, so we need to make sure that equipment is available when people want to take advantage of it. But we also need to make sure those trails, that pier over the ocean, all these are accessible and, and I think it would be, really wonderful, not just Mount Washington, of course, but so many other trails, that, make them accessible.

I agree with you.

**Scott Spradling:** Thank you for that question. I'd like to direct your attention Senator, over to Jeff Dickinson, who's been sitting very patiently and getting questions that have been coming from our zoom audience in some cases in real time. And in other cases, we got questions before we even sat down today. As, as many of you know, Jeff works at Granite State, Independent Living as the advocacy director, he's been there for 23 years, even though he only looks 23 years old.

And during that time has held many different positions and, and by the way, he's got a bachelor's in business administration and a master's degree in teaching, both from UNH. So he is a, a local product. And, and I know Jeff, you you've been, monitoring some of the questions. Do you have one that you could ask to the Senator?

**Jeff Dickinson:** Yes, Scott I do. Thank you Senator for joining us today. A little bit of preface to the question for me. Having worked as an advocate, and the legislature for a number of years now, the ability to participate in that remotely has always been something that we've kind of dreamed of being able to do more of.

One of the positive things, if there were any, to come out of COVID 19 pandemic was that the legislature, and other public meetings, examined and found ways to offer those meetings remotely and let folks, all folks, participate in those meetings via remote platforms. For those with disabilities, it was really a wonderful experience and proof of what a lot of us have been saying, which is that it is possible to do it this way.

So to get to the actual question, people with disabilities want to play an active role in the legislative process, but often struggle with transportation, or assistance getting to legislative meetings. What is your position regarding remote access, legislative hearings, and other government proceedings?

**Senator Tom Sherman:** Great question. Thank you, Jeff. And by the way, when Jeff speaks, I always pay attention. He's taught me that, over years of, of working with him. This, I, I wanna take this one step further after I answer it. I think one of the huge lessons of COVID, and I'm a doctor and is number one, not only did we see much more robust participation, but it was safer.

It was safer. What, and, and so taking it. So first of all, I'm, I would fully embrace the technology. I think there is something to be gained by us being as much as possible, and as much as is safe, together. But I think it's more important that everybody can participate. And so as a Senator, I found it incredibly, eye-opening to be able to see so many people who told me previously, they wanted to testify, they wanted to participate, but they couldn't until COVID. Imagine that.

And then on the flip side, and this is the one step further, there were legislators, and there still are, who can't participate. And I know you'd mentioned that this is not just about disability, but also about chronic illness. There are a number of chronic illnesses as I think most everyone participating knows, like autoimmune disorders, or ones that require you to be on immunosuppressants or, or drugs that suppress your immune system where, cramming them into a 400 seat auditorium where you are like this, which I was for four years, for two terms, is probably not healthy. But because they can't do it for health reasons does not mean their participation is not valuable.

It's critical. Can you imagine if you can't be there because of chronic illness or disability, that whole group is not able to be represented and to me that's wrong. So I would take it one step further. I would say we need to make sure the public can participate remotely if they need to. And the legislators should be able to participate remotely, if they need to.

We lose some very, very important voices, when we deny access to the legislative process. We need to make sure those voices are heard.

**Scott Spradling:** Thank you, Senator. Jeff, I'm gonna come back to you. I know you have several people asking questions and you've already printed out some questions. Why don't you throw another one at him?

**Jeff Dickinson:** Okay. As you know, Senator, after many, many years of strong advocacy, by all sorts of individuals and groups, this past session there was coverage for dental services passed under Medicaid. I'm wondering, well, I know the answer to this, but are you committed to retaining that coverage? But I guess more importantly, how do we ensure that that coverage is maintained?

**Senator Tom Sherman:** Right. First of all, if I could, I want to acknowledge the work that you've done, and the disabled population is done, and the, NAMI New Hampshire and all the other groups that lobbied for this, but also my hero, Cindy Rosenwald, the state Senator, who just would not give up on this. I would say over and over again about the medical benefits, the social benefits, the, the, the workforce benefits of having this. But it was, Senator Rosenwald who just would not give up.

And, and I, my hat's off to her. There's two components to making sure this, actually three, three major components. One, we have to make sure that this benefit never goes away. It needs to be one of the essential benefits of our state plan. Right now it is, it needs to stay that way as long, you know, permanently.

Second, we need to make sure that the reimbursement is adequate for all the people participating. We were talking about Medicaid reimbursement with the first question tonight. Remember we are among the lowest in the nation. We need to bring that up. Whether it's for the mental health community to, to improve recruitment and retention, or whether it's to incentivize dentists and dental hygienists to participate fully.

And that brings us to the third issue, which is participation. You know, it's great to have a benefit, but if nobody takes that benefit, it's pretty useless. We have to make sure that we get as robust participation as possible and work very closely, which by the way I have, with the dental association, they're fully behind this.

We have to work with the dentist, with the dental hygienist and make sure that this is as robust a benefit for the beneficiaries, for the people who are using it, as possible. It, it, I don't think it can be understated, how critical this is not just to the oral health of the people of New Hampshire, but to the, to the physical health of the people of New Hampshire.

**Scott Spradling:** Thank you, Jeff. I'll come back to you in just a minute. Let's go back to the live audience. Audrey, if you can help me find Bonnie Dunham. Audrey is our microphone holder. So Bonnie. your question.

**Bonnie:** Thank you. New Hampshire clarifies the federal special education law, the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act, to make it more user friendly.

And we also exceed it in a few areas to reflect new Hampshire's values of meaningful parent participation of keeping kids safe from aversives like, harmful behavior management techniques and to provide clarity and accountability and transparency. Over the past several years, there have been several attempts, some of them pretty back alley, to defeat that, to require New Hampshire to lower our standards, to the minimum allowed by federal law. How would you ensure that New Hampshire continues to protect existing rights and protections for children with disabilities and their parents?

**Senator Tom Sherman:** Well, thank you for the question. And it's a great question. So frankly, sorry I hit my microphone, but frankly, I would like to make sure that we are meeting the needs. You know, just because we have standards, what if those standards are now falling short?

So maybe the standards actually need to be elevated. You know, maybe we need to move forward because the standards that we have, aren't really meeting the needs of the population it's meant to serve. But to take a step back, when we're seeing across the state, what we do with children is less and less and less.

That's the wrong direction. I mean, clearly we see this in mental health, we see this in DCYF, we see this in all of the different areas where the state government interacts with children who are in need. We have to make sure that our children are okay. We have to make sure that those standards meet the needs of the children, not go backwards.

If there were, a bill passed or if it was put in the budget that those would have to be decreased. I wouldn't be signing that budget. I wouldn't be signing that bill. That's how adamant I am about making sure we are meeting the needs of the children of New Hampshire, not just with disabilities, but across the board.

My mother was a child therapist and I put in a bill this year to enable towns to look at doing pre-K. I called it Jeanne's law after my mom who died two years ago. That is where we should be putting our investment, not taking it away from other places, but we have to make sure our children are okay, are thriving. And when we do that, guess what, they do better as adults. I know I'm preaching to the choir here, but this is what was instilled in me by my mom. And it's why I think that we have to really look at all levels of programming for children and in the disabled population, there is no way we're gonna take a step back.

The question is, do we need to take a step forward?

**Scott Spradling:** Thank you, Senator Bonnie. Thank you for that question, Audrey. I'm now looking for Zoe Suitor. I kind of feel like this is the Price is Right. And, you know, waiting for someone to jump up.

**Senator Tom Sherman:** Well, I hope you all know that we really can't see you.

**Scott Spradling:** This is lit beautifully. We can't see any of you. So Zoe your question.

**Zoe:** Hello.

**Scott Spradling:** Hello.

**Zoe:** My question is in regards to the BDS redesign. So the Bureau of Developmental Services received recommendations from A & M regarding the redesign that were based solely on interviews with leadership and no, no other stakeholder involvement or notice. My question is first, why is the Bureau of Developmental Services and HHS actively ignoring family priorities and input when families are the ones who have to implement any and all changes, especially when family financial contributions to the system are estimated to be worth 300 million per year.

And second, are you not worried that families will subsequently stop providing hundreds of millions of dollars of free support leaving our state to default to institutions that cost far more per year, per individual, rather than maintaining community based support for our loved ones.

**Senator Tom Sherman:** Great question. So I I'd go back to something that was done correctly, which is the 10 year mental health plan.

And that was a few years ago. See, I was starting in the senate so it was about 2018, I think it was launched. All stakeholders were involved. Everybody had say in it, and guess what, when it comes out, everybody's embracing it. When you don't include the very people you're trying to serve, or the people who are doing the bulk of the work, which are the parents, you've just not only lost all that valuable input, but you've also lost that valuable support. I would want them to go back and start over. I, I, it's just that fundamental. Really quick story, my hospital down in Virginia, where I was working was doing a 50 million renovation. They didn't ask any of us, what they, the architects just presented it.

And we said "nuh uh". Now we're going back to the planning board. And we were actually actively involved in how to design that. Now the outside was still just as ugly as it was at the beginning of the design program, but the inside worked and that's what you're asking for. And I would ask them to go back, and it's unacceptable that, that the parents weren't a part of this, and that the caregivers weren't a part of it.

We see this, but that product is neither going to be accurate, nor is it gonna be something that's supportable by the people that's trying to serve.

**Scott Spradling:** Thank you, Zoe. Senator, thank you. I'm gonna redirect attention over here to, to Jeff who I think has, at least a couple more questions, Jeff fire away.

**Jeff Dickinson:** Absolutely. The first one is a live zoom question from one of the participants. Steven asks under the federal Bipartisan Infrastructure and Jobs Act, New Hampshire will receive significantly more funding to support community transportation services, paratransit, ADA, older adults, et cetera.

However, this funding requires at least 20% matching state funds. We know that transportation is a significant barrier to quality of life and access to care. So please tell us how you would ensure that the state will raise the necessary matching funds so that federal money is not left on the table.

**Senator Tom Sherman:** Well, thank you. That's a great question. So that, everywhere I've gone, whether it's Nashua, manchester or in the towns. Actually I was up in, Conway and we were talking about transportation. It's a statewide problem because lack of transportation can isolate either an entire region, or it can isolate individuals.

So when you think about it, what would be the benefit of fully investing in this transportation opportunity? It's not just the mobility of people. And I was down at the Bookery right down the road, and met this great guy who said he moved up here from Boston and he loved the fact that there were buses.

He didn't have to have a car, he could use his bike, but he, but it came once a once an hour. And I was with Joyce Craig at the time. And she was saying, yeah, it is, but we need more. But imagine he can ride his bike. He can walk and he can drive. Imagine if you can't do those things. It locks you in. This is critical to mobility, but not just for the disabled population, in people with substance use disorder, people with addiction, one of the top five reasons, if not the third, I can't remember the exact order, for not being able to participate in treatment is transportation. So think of the benefits, the disabled population, being able to get out, be more mobile, get to a job. The substance use, you know, we just learned that Nashua is likely to have one of the highest overdose rates it has seen since 2015.

That's how badly we are doing as a state to answer that need. Well, one of the key factors, one of the top five factors is transportation. People with chronic illness, which we're also focusing on here. Again, we get into transportation, you know, down on the sea coast, we have volunteers transporting people who otherwise could get from point A to point B, but they can't either because of their disability, their chronic illness, and that's where these volunteer organizations step up. Imagine if we actually had that availability on a regular scheduled basis. I'm a hundred percent behind this. And I think that kind of 20/80 match is very similar to what we saw with Medicaid expansion, which as you mentioned at the beginning, I worked very hard to make sure we had that.

That was a, that's a 10/90 percent match. We could afford it. Not only could we afford it, the actual return on that investment was many fold over. Can you imagine if people, all of a sudden became mobile who previously weren't, that is an investment that will have incredible returns. So I'm a hundred percent behind that.

**Scott Spradling:** Thank you, Senator. Jeff, you got another one.

**Jeff Dickinson:** One more related to education, a bit more. What action steps will you take to support plans for disabled youth transitioning to adulthood

**Senator Tom Sherman:** Transition to

**Jeff Dickinson:** Into adulthood?

**Senator Tom Sherman:** Right. We, we did a fair amount this year with that. And the, the first thing I would do is make sure that what we did hit the mark. You know, you may have noticed, but the legislature doesn't always get it right a hundred percent of the time. And, and you know, we often have to come back and say, okay, was it adequate? Did it really answer the need? Did it make this transition better? Sometimes it actually makes things worse. And then we have to reconfigure what we're doing. That would be number one. Number two is, you know, I think going back to, I think it was the first question.

It's great to have these programs in place, but if you don't have the staffing, the programs fail. And, and that's something that this whole issue of workforce is one that I've been working on for the last four years, working with the community college system, the CTE programs at the high schools, we have to make sure the pipeline exists within the state of New Hampshire to support the, the disabled population, whether they are children or adults in the area agencies or the vendors of the area agencies.

And part of that is making sure that we have people coming through who want to do this, who are passionate about it, and who are adequately reimbursed. So one is the bill that we, that we passed. It's now law, but two is making sure that once that bill is passed, that it's fully supported, not just. By the fact that people are adhering to it, but that we actually have the supports in place, the resources in place to make it a reality.

**Scott Spradling:** Thank you, Senator. Thanks, Jeff. Is, Deborah here, Deborah Abramala. Deborah right here up front. So question from Deborah. Thank you.

**Deborah:** The current DHHS commissioner is stepping down soon. Can you tell us how knowledge and experience with disabilities will play into your choice for her replacement?

**Senator Tom Sherman:** Yes, it, you know, the person who steps into DHHS as commissioner, needs to be somebody who understands fundamentally. what people are going through. And I guess the best word that I come up with is empathy. They have to understand the challenges that each of the populations of people that DHHS serves are dealing with.

You know, I, I had a bill that I was prime sponsor on called the State Health Assessment, State Health Improvement Plan. And I thought I knew what was happening in the medical community of the state. I've been in it for a decade. Wow. What an incredible education I got. I was chair of the advisory council when it formed. We have around 40 people who are specialists from all over the state. I didn't have a clue how the, the diversity, the need, the unmet need, the services. And now I have a much better sense of that. Our commissioner needs to understand all of that and understand this, the people that we are trying to serve. When I was in my medical profession, technically I'm per diem now, which means they can call me back in, but I've always been guided by the patient being it. Nothing else mattered.

I talked to other people, but I was always focused on the patient. As a state rep and a state Senator, the constituent. Doesn't matter if they're a lobbyist, sorry, Jeff. If there are advocates, it's all about the constituent. We need to make sure that the next commissioner has that same laser focus on the people they are serving and understands all of the different people they are serving. It's it's an enormous job as I'm sure, you know. It's all the way from infants to children, to adults, it's people with behavioral health diagnoses, substance use disorder, hospital licensure. It's a huge job, but they cannot lose the focus on the person they're trying to serve, which is you and everyone sitting here.

And that's gonna be my number one.

**Scott Spradling:** Thank you, Deborah Senator. Thank you. I'm now looking for Kelly Nye-Lengerman. Kelly, is Kelly here?

**Deb:** Kelly's not here.

**Scott Spradling:** She's not. Okay. Thank you, Deb. How about, Sarah. Is Sarah here?

**Sarah:** Good evening, my name is Sarah Livernois, I'm 13 years old and I'm from Londonderry. As a child with an immune deficiency, I have an invisible disability. Which means that I am more susceptible to catching diseases and infections, my body doesn't produce the antibodies to fight them off. Because of the recent pandemic, I haven't been able to access most things in the community that I should be able to. And this happens every year when cold and flu season come around. Things like going out to eat, or any kind of event can be dangerous to my health. My family has to take my sister out to places in her wheelchair. There's always a safe place for her to be.

And I often wonder if that was because of her physically prominent disability. Whenever I go out to places such as a restaurant, there isn't always that sort of safe place for me. Even if I or my parents asked for less crowded or safer seating, they aren't always able or willing to provide safer accommodations. Even though my disability is just as important as my sister's were. As governor, what will you do to best help support kids and families like mine to have safer access to public places?

**Senator Tom Sherman:** That's a great question. So fundamentally we need to make New Hampshire as welcoming and as accommodating as possible. And I have over the years had a ton of patients in the exact same, as adults, I never saw children unless their big brother slapped them while they had a nail in their mouth, and I had to go get it out of their stomach. Believe it or not. I did that. But the, what you're talking about is how do we allow people with chronic illness or disability to lead as full a life as possible. We've done that this year, with a bill that really forced all, commercial areas to allow somebody believe it or not to use the bathroom, if they needed to. It doesn't sound like rocket science to me, but it's a game changer to so many people in the state to be able to access something without having to have an accident or have a problem, they are able to access the bathroom.

No, even if it's not a public bathroom, the facility has to allow them that access. So if we take that concept and we say, you know, if you walk in and you say, I really need a private table, or I need a space, we can do the same kind of thing where we say you are asked as a, as a restaurant or as a business to do everything you possibly can to accommodate that, within safety standards for that facility. Which is exactly what we did with this bill this year, I would be happy to work with you and with the legislature to craft something that would give that kind of protection.

As you know, there is a certain amount of risk, even when you're wearing a mask, even when you're sitting off by yourself. That's just unavoidable if you're going to get, but there are steps we can take to make it exponentially safer for you. And that's something where I would love to work with you to, to do that.

**Scott Spradling:** Thank you, Sarah. Senator, I think we have one time for one more question and Jeff, I'm gonna let it come from you from the zoom audience.

**Jeff Dickinson:** Okay. Just to sort of summarize it, cuz it's a longer one. How would you as governor encourage and enable, interagency cooperation, between the various departments and agencies of the state, so that we don't have situations of, you know, people with disabilities or children or whomever dropping through the proverbial cracks.

**Senator Tom Sherman:** Right.

**Scott Spradling:** Thank you, Jeff.

**Senator Tom Sherman:** Great question. You know, most state governments suffer from something called siloing, which is where each department is a different silo. And what's really frustrating is sometimes within one department, you've got a bunch of silos and bridging those silos. There are several different ways to do it.

You can compel it through law. We've done that. I know there are people out in the audience who are concerned about PFAS and arsenic, and we actually on the, Commission to study Environmentally Triggered Illness, we actually created a memorandum understanding between the Department of Environmental Services and the Department of Health and Human Services to make sure by law, they work together on, on environmental exposures and illness.

So we can do that. We can also create less formal understandings between them. What I would want to do is I would want to create a culture of open communication between departments. And one other thing, I would really like to look at the idea of having, I know this is gonna be really wild, having the idea of you walk up as a citizen, a resident of New Hampshire, and you say, I have this question, and that one stop shopping will be able to helped you.

Direct you to the right person and be advocating for you to make sure all of your needs were met. I did this on a much smaller scale in my hospital in Virginia. We called it the concierge, which was, I guess, a very catchy term back then. But the person's job was to make sure that if a patient came up and had a question, that question was going to be answered and followed up by that person so that you are not expected to go to 14 different agencies and know how to navigate all of those agencies.

My partner, and I discovered the hepatitis C outbreak at Exeter hospital. If you may remember, it's about 11 years ago, I set up the program, after that, we called it concierge, where one person helped all of those 32 patients. Whenever they had a question. They would call and that person knew where to direct them, bring them together, make sure all of their needs were being met.

Can you imagine a state government where you had that kind of guidance, that kind of direction, that kind of, we don't have to call it a concierge, but you know, it, the idea is that we are here to serve you not make your lives harder. And oh, by the way, it's actually, from a health standpoint, it has better outcomes, if you don't have to struggle. It takes less resources and you get better quicker. You get the services you need quicker. That's sort of my big goal of how we pull all of this together and get rid of those silos. And I think it will be a game changer in terms of the interaction between the residents of New Hampshire and state government.

**Scott Spradling:** Senator we've already come to the end of our hour. We have a, just a couple minutes left. The floor's yours for a closing thought. And we thank you for your time.

**Senator Tom Sherman:** I just want to tell you that as, as, not just as a doctor, but as someone who has lived, very closely, with people with disability and chronic illness, I feel completely at home with you all.

I think Jeff and I have worked together over the years, NAMI New Hampshire, and I have worked together over the years. Many of you know, the work that I did during COVID with the senior support team, this, I like solving problems. In fact, I kind of love solving problems and people rev me up. I get charged by being a part of solving problems for them that makes their lives better.

And I, that has been sort of my theme throughout my years in the legislature. And then before that, my 35 years as a doctor and I am so looking forward to the opportunity as your governor, to really once and for all be able to create that culture that I talked about right at the beginning. That culture where we are all one community.

It's not people here, people here, but we're all one community. So I hope with that, I have answered your questions. If I haven't, if you still have questions, please reach out to the campaign or reach out to my Senate office since I'm still a Senator for a couple more months. But also recognize that your vision of whether you have chronic illness or you have a disability, your vision of being a part, an integral, regular part of your community is my vision too.

And I will always have an open door for you as governor. Thank you so much for having me.

**Scott Spradling:** Tom Sherman. Thank you so much for your time. We appreciate you, best of luck in your future endeavors for those in the room, and for those watching online, just hang tight for a minute. We're going to do a quick pause for a reset with Governor Sununu. We'll be right back and thank you very much.

Once again, good evening. And welcome back to the 2022 Gubernatorial Candidates Town Hall on Disability and Chronic Conditions. An event being held both in person and virtually to maximize access and volume to this discussion. We're thrilled to be here. Thank you so much again for joining us. There are nine advocacy groups and nonprofits co-sponsoring this town hall tonight. Lead sponsor Granite State Independent Living, working in collaboration with ABLE New Hampshire, Disability Rights Center of New Hampshire, the New Hampshire Council on Developmental Disabilities, Community Support Network Inc., the Council for Youth with Chronic Conditions, the Brain Injury Association of New Hampshire, the Institute on Disability at UNH, and the Parent Information Center.

Representing those groups I'd like once again to welcome Jill Bille from, GSIL the CFO. Hi, Jill,

**Gov. Chris Sununu:** Hi Jill.

**Jill Bille:** Thank you, Scott. And welcome everyone. It's an honor to represent a coalition of such important advocacy groups. Many thanks to all the work you do to make this moment a reality. The topics we will discuss here today are critical, but not just to those impacted directly by the answers.

The very fact that we're having this dialogue and focusing on ability of this population of Granite Staters sends a message to all that we matter, that we contribute, and we deserve to be heard. We thank Senator Sherman and Governor Sununu. For adding their voices and their volume to these issues. And many thanks to Elaine Hamel of Girls at Work today's event host. Elaine and her team do amazing things that operate with paralleled mission to the many groups co-sponsoring today's event.

We are honored to be here and thank you for all that you do, Scott.

**Scott Spradling:** Thanks again, Jill. By the way, these chairs were made by Girls at Work. So they are, wickedly comfortable.

**Gov. Chris Sununu:** They're nice. They're very nice. Is Elaine here? I can't see anything.

**Scott Spradling:** She's around here somewhere. It's a back porch dialogue though, with these chairs. It's perfect. So once again, for the next hour, we'll dive back into issues affecting this community. We'll have our three questions posed from the group. Then open it up to the live Q&A. I'd like to remind those watching via zoom, that they can write questions into the Q&A function, and we will read them here via GSIL policy director, Jeff Dickinson.

Now for the introduction, Chris Sununu is New Hampshire's 82nd governor. He's wrapping up his third term in office. According to his official bio under the governor's leadership, New Hampshire is ranked first in the country for personal freedoms by the Cato Institute. Named the nation's most fiscally responsible governor, the governor has delivered three balanced state budgets with no new taxes. In the wake of the COVID 19 pandemic, Governor Sununu took unprecedented action to balance the health and safety of Granite Staters, while keeping the state's economy strong. New Hampshire's always ranked among the safest states for COVID.

And today the Granite State is also the fastest growing state in the Northeast. Governor Sununu lives in Newfields with his wife, Valerie and their three children. And is the star of a recent music video covering "I've Been Everywhere" with Brooks Young. I hope you've seen it, cuz it is an instant classic. Governor, welcome,

**Gov. Chris Sununu:** Thank you

**Scott Spradling:** The floor is yours.

**Gov. Chris Sununu:** That last part was not in the bio, I don't think.

**Scott Spradling:** It's not official

**Gov. Chris Sununu:** throwing in there.

**Scott Spradling:** No, I threw that in.

**Gov. Chris Sununu:** Yeah, there's a lot of, that was, that was fun. A lot of, the governor singing is never usually a good thing, but that one's okay. Well, great. Well, this is terrific. We used to do this in like that office?

**Scott Spradling:** Yes.

**Gov. Chris Sununu:** Yes. This is a lot more fun, although I can't see much out there. So I assume you guys are all out there cause I'm a little blinded by the lights, but, it, the, great opportunity and we're kind of back and we're kind of normal again, a little bit, a little bit, a lot of it really. We, I don't think we could do this in 2020 if I, if I remember. I think we did a little something virtually, which was, a little bit different.

So it is obviously great to, to kind of get everyone back and look, the state is, in really good shape. I mean, relatively speaking, we, 49 other governors would love to be, where I'm sitting right now. Everything from the economic opportunity that we provide, the, the freedoms that we provide, we don't have a lot of the issues that you see in the south.

We don't have a lot of the ultra political divide. That isn't easy, takes a lot of management to actually keep both sides, playing fairly nicely in the sandbox together. And by, by doing that again, the result is we get stuff done. And I'm a big believer. If you're gonna get elected every two years as governor, you better get stuff done.

It'd be really easy just to start fundraising everything after the, the last campaign and all that kind of stuff, but we don't do that. I don't do it. We really focus on ignoring the politics at least for the first 18 months, of the process through both legislative sessions. And by doing that, you get, you just get so much more done.

And the, the, you know, where I come from, just at the 30,000 foot level is the days of asking you to fit your needs into our system, are done. That is the old way of doing it. And still most states in the federal government absolutely, still works that way. I just don't believe in that. We have to go the extra mile to wrap our system around your needs, cuz every single person's needs are, are a little bit different, one way or another.

Everyone has a different story. Everyone has a different background, whether it's dealing with yourself, or your child, or schools, or business, or whatever it is. We need to find a way to wrap around your needs. It's it's kind of a sense of customer service if you will. Right? That's a lot harder to do, but the results are 10 times greater, right? Than saying, well, we have this one grant program, this one opportunity, and this one agency, and you and your child have to fit through that one door.

And if it doesn't really work for you, sorry, that's just the way we're doing it. We try to create as much flexibility in our systems. It's hard to do that cuz a lot of times you need, I just can't magically do it. I need legislative approval often, to do it. It means kind of restructuring some of our systems when we're talking about the IDD community.

I mean functionally our system, that we work with at, at HHS within the state level that you and your family's work in, hasn't really changed in the last 35 to 40 years. I mean, even the technologies are horribly antiquated. I mean, we're, we're still doing some billing with Excel spreadsheets and emails, right?

With some of the Area Agencies. It's, it's horribly behind the times, which is why we're going after the waivers in Washington, DC, why we're going after the flexibility. Now, when you talk about Medicaid and even those that might have dual Medicaid, Medicare, it, it gets very difficult because Washington has their way, right?

Washington is still in that, you know, you have to fit through our door. So we're trying to kind of overcome a lot of those, challenges by having community services and community based area agencies, which is great, a decentralized system, which has its opportunities, but you have to make sure that those systems are moving on par with each other.

And whether it's with technology, whether it's increasing rates, whether it's increasing rates for DSPs, workforce issues, what happens with workforce in the Southeast might be very different than what happens with workforce in the North Country. We are one of the few states that has the opportunity to really engage at that local level.

And the accessibility, I'll, I'll go back to, a time and again, being, being accessible to those that are to those decision makers, you, you just don't have it in most other places like you have in New Hampshire. You have 400 representatives, the 24 senators, the governor. I mean, everyone has my cell number by now.

It's just been the same cell number for 20 years is all over the internet. If you don't have it, just grab me afterwards. I mean, that's just how we do it here. Right. So we try to break down those barriers as much as we can, as long as you respect privacy. And that's been crossed a little bit, here and there, but that's okay.

We, all we ask is respect our privacy and we'll give you all the accessibility you need. Does it mean we can wave a magic wand and just, just make it all happen? No, we, we, can't. The biggest challenge I have as governor is saying, well, we have a need over here, but not a need over here. But you can't create a system where you have winners and losers, right.

If you create an opportunity for somebody, it really has to be an opportunity for everybody. And so, you know, making sure that we can fulfill on those opportunities across the state, whether you're in the west side of the state or you're in downtown Manchester, those could be two very different dynamics. But making sure you're, you're playing fair, ultimately, and allowing those systems to move again up, equally, as opposed to all our money's gonna go to Nashua and Manchester.

The state did that for years. It's a horrible way of doing business, right? It's easy to do it. Oh, we're just gonna flood more money in and those nonprofits and those groups will just keep getting the money and we'll check the box and call it a day. No, no way. That, that is not gonna get us where we need to be. Not today, but I'm worried about five and 10 and 15 years, down the road with everything from our MMIS system, with the investments that we need to make.

And again, getting that input to say, okay, we need to change things. So where are we gonna go with this? And, and what, what are the opportunities to make sure that we can still wrap our, our needs around that individual.

**Scott Spradling:** Governor, thank you.

**Gov. Chris Sununu:** Yeah, you bet.

**Scott Spradling:** I'd like to move to the three questions that were asked also previously with Senator Sherman. People with disabilities want to live fully inclusive lives in their communities in order to avoid placement in a nursing home or an institutional setting, in or out of state, people with disabilities need access to home and community based support services.

What's your plan to increase the workforce, serving the home and community based system for people with disabilities?

**Gov. Chris Sununu:** That's the, that's the word right? Workforce. So first thing is, I don't wanna be like every other New England state and drive workforce out. Right? We're the only state in New England that is actually growing in population.

And let's start, not to, I don't want to answer the question just by highlighting, what's going wrong in other states, but, talk to some of counter your counterparts in Vermont or Maine, where they have just absolutely canceled services. They're not just short on services. They're not asking people to do overtime.

They're just canceling services, especially in rural areas, saying, "Sorry, it's just not going to happen." So first and foremost, at the core, you need to be a place where workforce wants to come. Again, we're very, we have all the economic freedoms and we have the low tax base and all that kind of things.

And so we have those kind of core, core things that families and young people, and we have more young people moving into the state right now than we have in the past 15 years. It's not enough, because there's so many more businesses moving in as well. Right. We have, you know, and it is a cool, cool fact since 2019, since just before the pandemic, there are 4,000 new businesses. 4,000 new registered businesses in this state. And they're entrepreneurial businesses, they're they're new manufacturing businesses, they're large, they're small, they're here, they're there. Which is great economically.

But what it means is there's so much more competition, and we've seen a lot of people leave, leave this world, folks that would otherwise work in home services, work in nursing, work in the DD community on a variety of different ways, mental health, whole different issue, but you know, we've seen people say, look, we've kind of done our time, we're a little bit burnt out. We're being offered insane amounts of money to go elsewhere. And you have the Googles and the Amazons and all these big companies, even outta state companies, taking our workers, they're still here. They live here, but they're kind of pulling, drawing folks outta that workforce.

There's nowhere in this state that is not suffering massive drains on workforce. From state police, to corrections, I think at the state level that the state just offered $10,000 retention bonus just to keep our nurses, at the New Hampshire hospital. So, we know workforce is a big issue. The biggest barrier to workforce is first licensing, which we've now fast tracked.

The old way of doing licensing is gone. So we've, we're fast tracking that. We have our office of licensure and, of professional licensure, where we get almost instant reciprocity for folks. If they want to come across state lines, they don't have to wait six to nine months anymore. Right to get licensed, they can be there, and in those services.

We're expanding our waiver so that we can increase the rates for those in-home services. Now, I think you could double the rates for the in-home services and you still won't have enough money to really retain enough workforce. So it has to be more than money because money's not really the problem at this point.

We have a ma- I'm very fiscally responsible in terms of the budget. We have a massive surplus at the state level. So money isn't really the issue. It's about making sure that those dollars are going in the right area. Well, we're just gonna do a 10% or 5% rate increase here or there. And, and we think that that's gonna solve the workforce problem, it's not.

Housing. Right? I created the Invest NH Housing program. A hundred million dollar program, state had never done anything like, because folks that want to work here, say, yeah, I would love to work over in Ringe in, in, in this world and do more in-home services. I can't find a place to live. Okay. I guess I'll stay in Worcester, and they don't come.

So housing is the biggest barrier that we have, which is why we're gonna put thousands of more housing units online. Multifamily housing units, exactly what this world needs and what, what we, what we want, to allow that workforce to come in. It's the number one reason people take a job and then, then end up backing out of it because they take the job.

And then they say, oh, I guess I can't do that. And they end up, you know, living at home or whatever it is, out of state. So we are being very attractive to folks, but you gotta deal with those barriers in terms of coming in. We're still economically attractive to folks coming in. I mean, everyone gets, I tell people from Massachusetts, everyone gets a 5% raise when you come to Mass-, when you come to New Hampshire.

You know, no income tax, right? Doesn't cost you a thing, but everyone gets the 5% raise. So we have the fundamentals there, but I think by challenging ourselves with housing, continuing to streamline licensure, which I think we've done pretty good. COVID that was one of the silver linings of COVID. I try not to use the, the C word, the COVID word brings back like these horrible memories for me.

It was hard. I mean, everyone, everyone knows hard for everybody. You know, we have 1.4 million people in this state. 1.4 million people went through some really tough times in COVID, but we did overall. We, we, as a team, I think we came through really, really great. Ah, I'm happy to talk about it obviously, but one of the silver linings of COVID was it forced us, it allowed me through an executive power, to force our teams to streamline certain systems.

And there were systems that we were previously told, well, you can't streamline that. That'll never work. But then when the legislature went away and I had to just kind of do things myself, we forced it to work and we showed that it could work. Which was actually pretty exciting. And so we're allowed, so I got the legislature to continue some of those opportunities, through our rule making process and whatnot.

So it's gonna, is, is workforce gonna get better in six months? No. Nationally we have a massive workforce, crunch. We really do. I think it's gonna be here for the next 5 to 10 years. We have to accept that the next generation is having less kids, later in life, all of that sort of thing. There's just giant demographic challenges that we are facing, within our communities.

New Hampshire's holding our own. Again, the only state to be growing in New England in population, but overall there is an exodus in New England, and you know, today's ups could be tomorrow's down. So you can't take that for granted. We're all, we're gonna have a workforce challenge for some time. So you go after those exact barriers that are there.

Right. And, I think if you, if we're targeted about it, we can create the opportunities to hopefully keep drivin 'em in.

**Scott Spradling:** Our next question. Through Education Freedom Accounts, millions of dollars are moving from local public schools into private schools, which are not legally bound to follow IDEA, the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act. Some are also permitted to deny enrollment to students with disabilities, this type of financial loss places, pressure on local districts who must deliver special education services.

**Gov. Chris Sununu:** Yeah.

**Scott Spradling:** How will you ensure that special education students will receive an equitable and inclusive education on the age of,

**Gov. Chris Sununu:** Can I see that question?

**Scott Spradling:** Diminishing school budgets?

**Gov. Chris Sununu:** Sorry, I just wanna see it..

**Scott Spradling:** Yeah, absolutely.

**Gov. Chris Sununu:** Yeah. So no, everyone has IDEA. You can't lose your rights. You cannot lose your rights as an individual with IDEA absolutely.

Now if there's a school, if there's, so let's back up, let's just talk about ESAs as a whole, right. Education Savings Accounts. I'll tell you they've been phenomenally successful. And a huge proportion of people that are leaving those schools and saying, well, that's just not, for me. It's a couple thousand outta the hundreds, hundred thousand kids that we have, maybe 1 or 2 percent of the kids.

Where the four traditional walls, and our public schools are fantastic by the way, it is not a knock on our public schools, but you're gonna always gonna have 1 or 2 percent where it's just not working. A lot of those folks are, are leaving because the special education isn't, wasn't meeting their needs. So what are the, what's the opportunity.

Now they can take the state portion, which is about, let's say a third of the money. Two thirds still stays in the public schools. The, that public schools are have two thirds of the money for the student that isn't even there. And that individual can go get services any which way they want. They can go to a private school, they can get, get home tutoring.

They can get additional special education services. But make, make, let's be very clear. No one loses their rights for IDEA. And if anyone tells you any differently, then you need to, then again, your public schools are bound to provide those services. I know because my son had to have those services, even though he wasn't going to that public school.

So you have to make sure that that system is there. The idea that that money is just flooding out of the schools, again, absolutely wrong. First, if the child decides not to go, the public school still keeps two thirds of the money. Be, so they can provide the special ed services or the other types of services that might be there.

And, all, one third of the, that state portion doesn't even leave right away. And the next year a hundred percent, a hundred percent stays with the school. The next year, 50% of the state money stays with the school. In the third year, three years after the student leaves, they still get 25% of the state money, even though the child hasn't been in that system for years.

So this is a, if I may, this is a Democrat falsehood. This idea that we are, money is flooding out of the schools. Our education trust fund has more money than ever before. So money again, money is not the problem. An event, I, I gotta, I, I get scared reading that question, that someone thinks that they're being robbed of their rights.

You're not. Right. There's lots of opportunities. Now, if you go to private school, a lot of the private schools have ISPs, right? You guys know ISPs? Where the private schools create a partnership with the public school to make sure that those services are being provided. That's how the vast majority of students look for it.

ESAs look, a lot of kids that do ESAs, you know, where they end up going? To public schools. They just go to a different district. We have families that live in one district, but they're taking certain classes in Dover because their district didn't offer them. We have families that are, that have just moved from one district to another.

We have families where a parent has left, you know, and, maybe the parent leaves, but they wanted their child to stay in that school district. So again, they're taking the state money so they can pay that school district and stay in there. It's about the individual, not the system. It's their money. It's your money.

It's not my money. It's not the government's money. It's your money. So we want you to use your portion of your money for your child, exactly, as you want to use it. So, I that's, I gotta be super clear about that. And this idea that we're robbing school, public schools, do you see public schools standing up and saying, this system is bankrupting us?

No, no, no. Find me. Then you find me afterwards and you find me the school that's saying that, and I will go find their financials and show you that we have put in more dollars per child than any administration. You can argue that we're taking money from children in public schools. Well, where was the complaints with Maggie Hasson because I'll tell you the previous administration put, didn't put in nearly as much money as we did, but there were no complaints there.

We have to meet adequacy. That's a legal requirement and adequacy isn't just for public school kids. It's for all children, whether they're going down a traditional path, whether they have maybe they have mental health issues and they have to go to a separate school for that. Are we gonna leave them behind?

Maybe they need additional special ed supports. Are we gonna leave them behind? No. The money is there, the rights of that individual are there. And I just ask folks to, again, explore that, look at the actual facts and data, and we don't, I can, I tell you, we don't have anybody coming to the state saying this system has bankrupted us.

This system has drained our funds and we can't do, we can no longer do X, Y, and Z. Especially on the special ed front. And I'm so passionate about that. I'm the one that created a special ed advocate to make sure that every child actually can walk the path. So that parents have a say in making sure that if there is someone that isn't, that has been told, oh, you're gonna lose your rights and IDEA, you don't.

And now we're gonna have a special ed advocate that can work directly with those families for the first time ever, to make sure that those commitments are being met.

**Scott Spradling:** Governor third question. In light of the shortage of affordable housing, which you've talked about in the state of New Hampshire, especially accessible housing.

What, in your role as governor will you do to ensure that people with disabilities have access to affordable, community based, accessible housing so that folks can live meaningful lives in their communities?

**Gov. Chris Sununu:** Yeah.

**Scott Spradling:** What's the role of government for that?

**Gov. Chris Sununu:** Yeah, so, well, I'm kind of expanding the role of government in that a little bit.

Look, the government has never created a housing program per se, and like Invest NH, right. This is a hundred million program for multifamily housing all across the state. Not just in Nashua or just in Manchester, cause that's traditionally where folks wanna put the multifamily. It has to be everywhere.

Cuz you need the workforce everywhere. You need the workforce in Claremont, you need the workforce in, Newton. You need the workforce in Newbury. You need the workforce all the way up, all the way up in Pittsburgh. Because, you know, you shouldn't have to be limited just because of your geography in terms of the services that you get.

That's the way it's it. We know that that's always going to be a barrier, but that doesn't mean we just ignore it and accept it. Right. So when we created Invest NH it was pretty cool. We had a co- a couple folks come in and said, well, why don't we create a portion of that, you know, just for, for the DD community. Or a portion of that just for the mental health community. Or a portion of that just, and we literally, I think, I don't know the exact number.

I think we had like 17 different constituencies that wanted a, a carve out. And what we realized really quick is that if we do that, the whole program was gonna fall apart. It was only gonna go to certain constituencies and really not attack the problem as a whole. So the legislature gave me pushback on it.

I kind of publicly shamed them into making sure it moved forward because I believe very strongly in multifamily housing, and they got it. We had to, I, I exaggerate when I say that. But they finally got it. They realized, yeah, housing is the biggest barrier and whatnot. There's, one of the biggest barriers in housing, when you talk specifically with the DD community,

**Scott Spradling:** Mm-hmm

**Gov. Chris Sununu:** Is local permitting and zoning, right.

For those of you, I've dealt with that a little bit, maybe some of you have as well, where you propose some type of, of housing program specifically for the DD community. And it never quite gets through the permitting and zoning process and you get stalled for whatever reason. And they just say no, or whatever it is.

So we've provided money now for the first time, so that all of these zoning boards or towns that don't even have zoning and planning regulations, or maybe they're just completely antiquated, they can all update them. And they can all participate that so that we, not that everyone is gonna be the same, but we can actually get them to expand their thought process a little bit, and effectively, the ability to put that in.

So. I, I said, we're gonna do the Invest NH program. We're gonna keep it to the hundred million. We're gonna keep it to multifamily. I have no doubt it's gonna be successful. We're gonna put a couple thousand units on the market. The hope is that when the legislature now comes back, we still have a surplus.

Right. We have a big surplus, not huge, but yeah, it's really huge. It's a record surplus to be sure. But we'll have a couple hundred million dollars potentially sitting, waiting this January, February. And I think showing the success of the Invest NH program can now, when we go for the waiver, combining a state portion with an additional IMD waiver, that comes out of, HHS, hopefully those programs can now start matching together.

So we get the match funds. Because the, the entire cost shouldn't be on the, just the developer or the community to do it. So I think the, the hope is that this Invest NH is now gonna kick open a door for a variety of different constituent and constituencies and communities, and that we can kind of move together and it's, not just the DD community. Like I said, it's, it's mental health. It's, folks in recovery. It's corrections. There's all these folks that need this. Whether transitional by transitional, that could be two months or could be 20 years, but some type of housing to actually have some stability within their system.

Cuz right now they're kind of left to the whims of, of the community that they're in. And there again, it's not that the government's gonna solve all your problems, but the government can come in and provide those supports and the opportunity to finally get it going. We've never done it before. This is, you know, investing in housing is something the state has really never done before. But we're finally opening that door, which is pretty exciting.

Let's take some questions from the audience and, and Audrey, why don't we get a microphone back over to Justin Bonnie?

**Justin:** Yeah. So, we're lucky enough to live in a state that has so many wonderful outdoor attractions and you know, Mount Washington, no too far away, and we have many different hiking trails. The problem is, is although those hiking trails may have, you know, roads to get, roads to get there and paths. Those aren't always accessible to, you know, people in wheelchairs.

And I often find myself getting, you know, stuck on those, on those, hiking trails. So my question to you is, what would you do to make the outdoors more accessible to people that use mobility devices?

**Scott Spradling:** That's a great question though.

**Gov. Chris Sununu:** Great questions.

**Scott Spradling:** Those hiking trails and such and, and giving that access.

**Gov. Chris Sununu:** Yeah.

**Scott Spradling:** What can you do?

**Gov. Chris Sununu:** Accessibility? It's it's huge. So there's a couple things, I'm quite passionate. Before I did Waterville, we were doing a resort in, the Caribbean that was that specialized around the concepts of accessibility for everybody. Right? You wanna go windsurfing? I don't care what your disability is.

There's, there's an opportunity there and there's gotta be a way to do it. And the technologies are definitely there to do it. Northeast, which is right here in the Granite State has done some great stuff in terms of expanding that. So a couple, let me give you a couple projects that we're looking at right now.

Let's just start there first. We have our park system, right? So we know we're always trying to, we have, for the first time, in a long time, our park system is in the black. We actually have money in our park system to make infrastructure investments, and we are. And we always make sure that we include in these new facilities, whether they, something as simple as the bathhouses at, at Jenness beach or, the expansion of camping sites, or whatever it might be. Up in the north country, we're doing a lot of that, that we're always having the, accessibility piece added in. Out in the beach and the seacoast there's a pretty exciting project to build the pier.

Is that what they're calling it, the pier? Basically a giant pier that goes out into the ocean. But its primary purpose, the folks that came up with this idea and why it's being championed so strongly, its primary purpose is really about accessibility, right? We brought in all of the, you know, the giant wheels on the wheelchair, so folks could finally get down to the beach. We have those at our public parks now, so you can actually go through the sand and all of that sort of thing. If you are wheelchair, in a wheelchair. But, the idea of a new pier, it's big. I mean, and people go, oh, this thing will be huge. I said, yeah, it's awesome.

You know, in New Hampshire, we typically don't like big stuff. I think it's gonna be great. Mount Washington is one where again, the Mount, just to take that as an example, the Mount Washington commission for years, it was kind of always fighting with each other. And we've straightened all that out and we've straightened that out to the point where now we can move forward and they're gonna make some pretty significant investments, both in the Cog Railway and what we're doing at the, at the Summit and the Peak.

And with those investments for the first time can come, I mean, we have some accessibility, but it's really not where, where it needs to be. Especially, on the, when, if you come up the auto road, making sure you can get from the auto road to the, to the very, very top when it's very crowded can get very, very difficult.

If you're in a, if you're in a van or something like that, it can be done. We finally got the whole thing paved, but, it does present its challenges. But for the first time that commission is actually making real investments. And when they expand the Cog, when they expand the facilities at the top, there's some facilities at the bottom as well, to make sure that that those types of things are there.

One of the challenges that we have, on the trail side, is so many of our trails go through the White Mountain National Forest. That's federal, and the federal government is kind of good at this stuff, but not really to be honest. So I think they could do a lot better in getting kind of attention here in little old, New Hampshire, when they're dealing with, you know, we don't have national park, a national park here.

For certain reasons, that's kind of a, you don't really want a national park here. For a variety of reasons because the accessibility, not in terms of the, the DD community, but just the, the accessibility for average visitors becomes very limited. But it's hard to get the federal government to make the upgrades they need on their trail side.

And, and so the boundary issues become a little more severe on some of our, our more intense trail systems. But the, I think the emphasis for the state over the past few years and where we've made huge strides, has been Hampton beach, it's gonna be coming on Mount Washington, which is great, in our camp sites and our parks, right?

Making sure that those parks are accessible. Now we have a lot of amazing parks here. Some of which are like in your communities and you wouldn't even know are there. So we kind of started with the big ones, you know, Pawtuckaway and some of these larger ones, Mount Kearsarge. And I think we've made huge strides there.

We're gonna do a huge upgrade at Cannon in the next couple years. And again, that will come with a whole rebuild. When you're dealing with mountains, you have to get pretty creative about how to make sure that those things are accessible. We're not, you know, it's not like grass flatlands that that brings a that's a little easier to do, but it doesn't mean that we don't overcome the challenge.

So I'm pretty excited if our park system was financially strapped or something like that, it would, it would have a whole different, different problem. But we do have some cash there, and with that, I mean, I think this year alone, we're doing 45 million dollars in upgrades in our parks. And so with that always comes the ability to, to upgrade with new technologies and new accessibility, because the outdoors is so much of what we do.

Right? And it has to be there for everyone. Absolutely everybody. Yeah.

**Scott Spradling:** Thank you, Justin. Let's go to Zoe for a question, I think. Up at the front, Audrey, thank you.

**Zoe:** My question is in regards to the BDS redesign. The Bureau of Developmental Services received recommendations from A & M regarding the decision, that were, regarding the decision based solely on interviews from leadership, and no other stakeholder involvement or notice.

My question is first, why is the Bureau of Developmental Services and HHS actively ignoring family priorities and input, when families are the ones who have to implement any and all changes. And especially when family financial contributions to the system are estimated to be worth more than 300 million per year. Are you not worried that families will subsequently stop providing hundreds of millions of dollars of free support and instead leave our state to default to institutions that cost far more per year, rather than maintaining community based support?

**Gov. Chris Sununu:** Yeah. Okay. So good question. A couple things there A & M has come into the state and they're looking at rebuilding pretty much everything out, giving us recommendations on everything in HHS. Again, the systems are over, some of these systems are 30 to 40 years old, so of course they need change.

Of course they need upgrade. They came in and gave us recommendations, which we would never act on without community input. Based on, you said interviews with the senior leadership, very few. What we'd really try, we basically gave them data. Because this was a group that looked has looked at 50 different systems from outside the country.

And we said, we want, we don't want to give you input and tell us what we think it should be based on what we see inside the bubble. We want some outside perspective. So even we gave very little input. I didn't, I didn't sit down with A & M and say, so I want you to give recommendations, but we think this is where it should go.

No, just the opposite. We gave them very little. We gave 'em all the data, all the access. That was it. And then we said, what do, based on what you see here and the opportunities that you see being created in other parts of the country, where, what needs to go through drastic change? What are the, where's the low hanging fruit, what are the long-term changes and all of that.

Then with those recommendations, we did nothing. Then we inter- to say that we have, didn't interact with, with stakeholders is not true. Since October of '21, for the past year, every month, we have a stakeholder input group. We did a public forum in every single Area Agency where families were invited. We've done a half a dozen virtual forums with agencies, we have stakeholder groups where a family member, someone from local Area Agencies, are all included as part of these stakeholder groups. I think they've had 50 meetings of those groups where folks can see what's happening. So the initial recommendations didn't come with input, very few virtually none from the state, because we wanted to see what was truly out there.

We didn't want a biased view of, don't change our system, hey, we're just gonna defend how good we are, defend some of the things. No, we want a total blank slate approach to it, kind of that whiteboard approach. And then we'll see, look, there's some recommendations they made that probably just can't get done for certain reasons that don't, that functionally might work in Florida or Texas or New York, but aren't gonna actually work here for various reasons.

Centralized, they've looked at opportunities with centralizing systems. Look, there's probably some middle ground there, but we don't want to re-institutionalize and recentralize everything, right. They look at the, the disparity we have between our Area Agencies. Some of our Area Agencies do a great job.

And to be frank, some of our Area Agencies need better staffing. With, like I said, they're still using Excel spreadsheets and emails, like to process their stuff. So things get delayed. So the opportunity, it is, to say that we're somehow afraid of families is completely false and I'm gonna push back on that all day.

And so again, we've had dozens, dozens of stakeholder meetings, as these initial recommendations roll out. And we'll take all that input before we decide any changes that are going to be made. And again, I see that's a very easy narrative. Oh, you didn't ask us what we wanted, you know, before this outside group came in, well, this is the first time any outside group has come in again, in 30 years to say, look, your system is acting like it's 1995. Your families deserve better. There's massive efficiencies. You're wasting a lot of money in these areas that could be put to more modernized, better programs. Your technologies are way outdated, right? So those are the types of things that we want them to look at.

And then with that comes the opportunity for new programs at the federal level where we can match funding and get more federal funding on this side with the increased, increased rates. But let's make sure we're actually do you know, we haven't done a rate review since 2007? 2007. We haven't 15 years, the state hasn't done a rate review.

That's nuts. So yes, I'm going to be very insistent that we do rate reviews and that we challenge ourselves to push those limits that previous administrations weren't willing to do. But if you're, if you need, I think on our website, it lists all the working groups. I think there's five or six working groups, maybe four or five working groups that participate under, the BDS, recommendations. So you can participate in all of those. And again, we've gone to all the Area Agencies. I think we did that in just May, June and July. That was very successful. It's like the virtual stuff was very successful, cuz we got a lot of participation with the virtual meetings, which was great.

I'm just doing this off the top of my head, but we've been integrating with the stakeholders pretty aggressively to make sure that we're getting that feedback to design a better system. But we are going to redesign a better system. The system right now is not working for you. I mean, that's the number one thing that you all, I think we can all agree on.

It's not. So let's challenge ourselves to see what's out there. And that's the other piece, because the federal government keeps, you know, shifting goal posts and shifting their ways of doing it. The fact that we don't do these internal reviews or have I, I should say external reviews to see what we're doing on our level means that we are missing opportunities.

Like the federal government is creating programs, they're creating waivers, they're creating stuff that sometimes we could completely miss, because we just keep doing it the same way. But we're not gonna do that. So getting all that stakeholder input, I think in total, I think we've held over 50 different stakeholder meetings if I were to add it all up.

And making sure that it's there from both the agencies and the parents is exactly what we need to do before we move with any changes.

**Scott Spradling:** Zoe, thank you. Governor, I wanna direct your attention over here to Jeff Dickinson. You know, the GSIL policy director, he's been monitoring some of the questions that came in from the virtual audience who's also watching. And Jeff, you got a question?

**Jeff Dickinson:** Yeah, thank you. Governor, one of the questions that, has come through and you just raised it, so it seemed like a good time to address it. Is that, you mentioned your least favorite word, I think, COVID so I won't use it much.

**Gov. Chris Sununu:** Yeah, there you go.

**Jeff Dickinson:** But during that pandemic, one of the things that was sort of a positive outcome was a lot of, legislative and government and other meetings were available remotely,

**Gov. Chris Sununu:** Mm-hmm

**Jeff Dickinson:** And even you were able to participate, in most of them remotely and give testimony, et cetera. As you know, once the emergency orders from COVID expired, a lot of that, ability wasn't continued.

**Gov. Chris Sununu:** Mm-hmm

**Jeff Dickinson:** So I guess what I'm asking is, what is your view of remote access for citizens, to government.

**Gov. Chris Sununu:** Yeah, you need it. That's the, that's the new way of doing things. Absolutely. So if by, if there's some specific meeting or something that it wasn't available, I know, I'm gonna, I'm don't mean to jump off topic, but at certain town levels, there's certain town- if you're talking about like a planning board or citizens coming into, and, and a lot of that stuff was virtual, but now the town rules force it back in.

But most meetings I think at the state level can still happen. I don't think there's rules that prevent it from happening virtually, so we can do that. I'll gonna throw in my 2 cents here, it doesn't work unless you have broadband. Doesn't work, unless you have real connectivity. And this state's gonna put out 250 million dollars in new connectivity.

In fact, we're gonna be the first, the second, or the third, or the middle, the first state in the country to actually utilize all of our, all of our broadband funds to make sure that everybody across the state is hooked up. The value of that isn't just being able to participate in a zoom call or zoom meeting or something like that.

The value of that, is the ability of teleservice right, in a variety of ways, whether it's medical, whether there's mental health, whether it's even through social services, community engagement, that can't happen unless you have that broadband connection, but that's really the, the wave of the future.

Now I'm a, of course we all, I think we all understand, if you can get in the room and actually have a, more of a conversation as opposed to, you know, taking your turn to be able to speak on zoom, but even just to be able to hear and participate in that is, is, is absolutely huge. I think even everything from like the executive council meetings.

I mean, those things have been going on since 1680, right. And it's great, they're public, you can come in, but for the first time ever, those are now broadcast and, and people can actually, tele you know, get in on telephonically. And I think they're getting a camera system or something for it. So, no, that's just, that's the new way of doing things, but if there's specific meetings or discussions that aren't happening now, I'm, I'm not gonna zoom every meeting I have in the corner office.

I hope everyone understands that , there are certain limitations, of course, but if there are public meetings, at least where folks can participate and they're not being given, you know, access, you know, I'm happy to look at that, but yeah.

**Scott Spradling:** Thank you, Jeff. Do you have another question from, from the list?

**Jeff Dickinson:** Yeah. One of the ones that came up, was regarding the Medicaid dental coverage that recently, was passed and signed, by you. I, my question is, what is your commitment to that moving forward and how do you, what do you see needs to be done?

**Gov. Chris Sununu:** Yeah.

**Jeff Dickinson:** Make sure that that's a success.

**Gov. Chris Sununu:** Well, I, I better be committed. I forced them to do it. Which was great. I mean, that was, that was something that, this, again, one of those things that the state had talked about for years and years and years, but no one really had the will to push it over the line. And I was able to do that. I'm very proud to have done that.

The commitment is right now getting the providers. We have a couple providers that are looking at it. And again, we always have Medicaid for children with dental, but we don't have it with adults. It's hugely needed. You want folks to reengage with the workforce, they need the dental work. It's actually a big workforce issue.

So, very much committed to it working specific with Delta Dental and a couple other providers, cuz they're the ones driving, getting those actual dentists to say, yes, we'll take those Medicaid patients and yep. We'll take those rates and all that. So that's kind of the next step in the process. It's having some success.

I wanna say what's today, what's it is it late September?

**Scott Spradling:** Yeah.

**Gov. Chris Sununu:** I think they're supposed to come in, in like mid-November with, kind of a, where they are with, with signing providers up. But it's, it's absolutely huge. And you know, I, the original plan looked to be, it was gonna be a minimum of 10, but upwards of 25 million dollars.

And when we were told it was gonna be two or three, so we said, whoa, whoa, whoa, let's figure this thing out. So we kind of, I made 'em, everybody go back and they said, well, this just can't be done. And I said, well, it's gonna be done. We're gonna figure it out. We had a lot of individuals that really helped and I could spend all day, thanking everyone that, that actually made it happen.

But we were committed to it all, all the way. And I don't know how many votes that passed by, but it wasn't many, but we got it done. But now we have to, actually, again, it's not, it's one of those things where, well, the government could pat themselves on the back and we checked a box. We created the program, we provided the funding and then we walk away.

No, no, no, no, no, no. A lot of times we do that. We don't do that. We're not doing that here in New Hampshire anymore. We're making sure that the providers are connecting. Making sure that folks can actually sign up into the system, making sure that folks don't have to do a 10, 10 or 12 page application, you know, typical Medicaid type stuff.

Making sure that it is a seamless transition if you're already in the Medicaid system and then figuring out how we can get the private, you know, the, our three Medicaid payers to make sure that they're participating in the process, you know, at the level they need to. And I think we've done a pretty good job.

They, we have issues with our three Medicaid, managed Medicaid companies. We hold 'em accountable. You know, we bring 'em in. If something isn't working, we bring 'em into the council meetings. We bring them in to the stakeholder meetings, whatever it is, we kind of force their hand if something isn't working.

So we'll stay right on top of it. And I have no doubt. It'll be a success.

**Scott Spradling:** Thanks, Jeff.

**Gov. Chris Sununu:** Yeah,

**Scott Spradling:** Let's go to, oh, I think the front row here to Chris Emerson, who can ask a question through an interpreter, I believe, and Audrey right up here, up front.

**Interpreter offscreen:** Good afternoon, Governor Sununu. I'd actually like to address the issues of education for deaf children in New Hampshire. That, and if I don't have time now to talk so much about deaf seniors, But we do know that deaf seniors are isolated around the state where there's no communication, there are no nursing homes, no opportunities. We really need a standalone deaf program where deaf seniors can be cared for together. And no one seems to find the money for that.

So deaf seniors are isolated and that really needs to be dealt with as soon as possible because we are aging and it's a giant concern. So, can you, rather than the education issue, can you address what could be done? Another time around education, if we could, I'll, I'll get back to you about that, but, I really do wanna find out what, what your ideas are about making sure that deaf seniors can be cared for in a communication accessible environment where people, where they, where they're understood.

**Scott Spradling:** Thank you, Chris.

**Gov. Chris Sununu:** No, thank you. So couple things, we've had a couple different ideas. We've had a few folks come and say, we need one centralized location for the deaf and hard of hearing community. That doesn't fly very well when you go and talk to the family members of that community. Cuz they want their loved ones in the commu, in their community, in their counties or whatever it might be.

So again, it would be easy to centralize an answer for that community, but I don't think the community would, would like it. So the answer comes back to education and training and I would love to see a training, you know, to increase our training programs there. Especially it's not just, you know, ASL anymore.

It's a, you know, it's, it's a much more expressive as, as I learned from my friend David through COVID and everyone got to know David very well, who stood up with me every day, through the, through the COVID process. Making sure that you're, have the education programs that are meeting the needs of tomorrow, but in a variety of areas.

I just don't, I, I'm not a fan of, of the centralized, one shop fits all. We'll just put all the elderly into one location and they'll have the best of services. Ultimately, that's a cheaper way to do it. But it's not necessarily the best way. There's a variety of services in our county nursing homes, again, whether it's services for the community, with, that are deaf and hard of hearing, or maybe it's folks with mental illness or it's folks in different parts of the DD population.

Geriatric care is very, that workforce is very hard to come by. We're trying again, to decentralize a lot of that. I think it would be great to get more programs. The vast majority of people that work in that field, grew up, in a household with a family member, a brother, a sister, a parent, or whatever it might be that was deaf or hard of hearing. But to get more people involved, outside of that world, because that just, that's limiting your world. So you gotta be able to get more, more folks involved to create those programs. Don't wait till college to try to find them. I think those programs could be created in the eighth and ninth grade. Right. Has anyone ever asked an eighth or ninth grader if they would like to, as a, instead of taking Spanish or French to learn sign language? That would be awesome.

Right? I think they should be able to learn computer coding. I think they should learn sign language. I think again, we should create the opportunity for them, but no one has ever even asked that, that quote and I guarantee you, a lot of kids would, would potentially take it out. So those are the types of opportunities in our public schools to create.

And I'm maybe there are some schools that actually do it, but I, I think you gotta go after that workforce and to do it earlier on.

**Scott Spradling:** Thank you, Chris. Deborah,

**Deborah:** Governor, thank you for taking, thank you for taking my question.

**Gov. Chris Sununu:** Sure.

**Deborah:** The current, commissioner of HSS is stepping down soon.

**Gov. Chris Sununu:** Lori, yeah.

**Deborah:** Lori in December, I believe.

**Gov. Chris Sununu:** I'm reminded every day. She's the best.

**Deborah:** Can you tell us how knowledge and experience with disability will play into your next choice for her replacement?

**Scott Spradling:** Thank you, Deborah.

**Gov. Chris Sununu:** Yeah. Well, considering it's a half a billion dollars over the biennium, yeah, it's huge. Folks have, this is, look, this is one of the, the biggest challenges the state is going to face over the next 5 to 10 years.

I think it's one of the biggest challenges the states has faced over the last 20. And I think you've been, the community's been quasi ignored, right? Because no one has had the courage to say let's make it better. Let's change the system a little bit. So this is gonna be one of the biggest fundamental changes that we have with stakeholder input, which we've already begun to do, making sure that it's right for New Hampshire, as opposed to a centralized Washington, you know, top down Medicare and Medicaid say this, so-that's-all-we-can-do type system. Challenging ourselves on waivers, challenging ourselves on designing that local system. So of course, anybody that steps into that role is gonna have to really know, it's not about, it's not a numbers game. Right? Remember when I first came into office, you know, anyone ever said to me, are you gonna fully fund the DD wait list?

That was the only thing. Pretty much people would come up and ask me about with the DD community. And I used to be floored by that. As if, if we just funded it, everything would be taken care of, right? I'm sorry. That's a very Democrat, liberal, big government type approach to things. And that, isn't what it's about.

We've been able to fully fund the DD wait list easily. Very, we're very fiscally responsible. In fact, we have money coming back to us, which I don't want back. I want you guys to be spending it in your Area Agencies, and driving, you know, more workforce and creating these types of programs. So we don't want the money back.

So we're challenging ourselves, like no administration ever before, to create a better system around the individual. And those days of are we, are we funding it? Are we funding it? Those days are, I'm trying to get past those days. Seems what all anybody wants to talk about at the state house, it has to be about the individual.

It has to be about the agencies. It has to be about accountability in the systems. We need to challenge our Area Agencies to get better outcomes. What outcomes do we demand of our agencies? Right? When do we ask our agencies to show us their success rate? Not how much money they have. That's not success.

That's old school, government success. That's not success. You know, how many folks were delivered certain services? How many different services were you provided? How many were actually taken advantage of? You know, one thing we haven't talked about yet is transportation. Nobody ever wants to you. If you can't get from here to there, the service ain't gonna happen, but we have a huge transportation issue.

And so we've been banging on the doors to try to open up transportation opportunities, especially in rural communities. Manchester may be not such an issue Nashua not such an issue, but the other 80% of the state, it is an issue. Right? And so challenging ourselves on the things that nobody wanted to talk about for a while, to insist on better outcomes for the individual.

That's huge. And that, and it has to start from the top. It does. I think we've got a phenomenal team at HHS, phenomenal team. They never get nearly the credit that they deserve. We try, but they never get, it's a hard job, right? Because we do create such an open opportunity for families to say, Hey, this didn't work for me or an individual say that didn't work for me.

So we do hear a lot of the complaints. That's good though. We wanna hear the complaints. I can't broke it. I can't fix it, if I don't know it's broken, right. You don't get that in other states. Other states, you're a number. They say, well, we checked the box, we gave you funding, go talk to somebody else. That's not the way we're doing it here.

Right. And so insisting on wrapping those services around that individual is critical. And having the leadership that understands that, I'll say customer service aspect, is gonna be huge. We're already starting it with special education, where it should start, with kids. It's about the kids, it's not about the system.

It's about the kids, it's not about the union. And I'm, and again, I will push back all day to anybody who tells me that we're not fully funding education in this state, because I worked really, really hard to make sure that we put more dollars per child than ever before. And we worked really hard to meet the adequacy that wasn't being met in places like Berlin or some of the more severely, Claremont, Colebrook. Some of the more severe underserved communities. And we made up that gap, right. And then we did other things on top of that, safe school infrastructure and all this kind of stuff. So by making sure that not just the funding is there, but the programs are there. It's so easy to say, oh, you're not doing this, you're not doing that. Look, you gotta have somebody that's willing to challenge themselves on the individual. Take, I, hey, Lori, and I've done it, Lori, I need you to take a call for Mrs. Smith in Pittsburgh. Let's pick a town. I've been everywhere. Can't remember the town names,

**Scott Spradling:** man.

**Gov. Chris Sununu:** Ma'am. So, and Lori will do that. Her team will do that. Her teams will pick up the phones to indivi. When the commissioner of the state will pick up the phone and talk to these individual families. I think that's a huge opportunity. And that is one of the key things that we're gonna insist out of whoever the next commissioner. I have no idea who it is.

I know that we have a committee, not just my choice, but I mean, ultimately it is the buck stops here. But we have a committee that's accepting applications and doing reviews. And that committee has a, has a great background in all of this, from local services to how the state government works, to folks that, you know, understand how the federal system works, cuz so much of this drives on, on the feds, right?

So much of this relies on, federal cooperation, which is hard to get right now. I mean, it really is. You know, here's another one for you. You know, when, when the federal government came down with their rule, which I think is completely ridiculous, that said, if you're an agency, you know, making recommendations, you can't provide services either, right?

The Conflict of Interest Rule, you guys are aware of this? In some areas, not a big deal in some areas, that's a huge problem. Right? And we told, we asked the federal delegation, stand up, make sure that you fight back on this. Nothing. Nope. Washington's gonna have it Washington's way. You know, that Conflict of Interest Rule, which I get theoretically, why they did it, but it really doesn't work for New Hampshire and we can't get out of it.

So we're gonna have to rebuild the system around that. So you also need somebody there that understands and is willing to fight DC a little bit. Cuz DC has not been our friend in this world at all. I once sent a waiver request, here's funny story. I sent a waiver request to CMS once. And after about a month, I said, can we get some input here?

What's going on? And they said, well, the lawyers are reviewing it. I said, oh, okay. I came back two weeks later, did the lawyer review it? No, we have a few more lawyers. I said, how many lawyers are reviewing this? I said, and they actually sent this to me cuz I knew, I knew the head of CMS and she sent me, 76 lawyers who reviewing our waiver request.

How is anything gonna happen when 76 DC lawyers are reviewing our request to create a better system for our citizens? So yes, no wonder government slows down. That swamp just brings everything to a grinding halt. So the way I do things, the way we do things, is very different than what Washington wants to see.

So you gotta have somebody in there that's gonna fight for that system as well.

**Scott Spradling:** Governor, we wanna thank you for your time.

**Gov. Chris Sununu:** Oh sure, are we out-

**Scott Spradling:** The hours already.

**Gov. Chris Sununu:** That was fast

**Scott Spradling:** Yeah, that was was quick. So before we let you the floor is yours for any closing sentiments to the group.

**Gov. Chris Sununu:** Oh, well look, it's great to, and thanks to Elaine and Girls at Work for allowing us to be here. And it's great to see everybody. We're back! We're back in action, which is terrific. You know, one and there's a couple other issues that, I mean we can touch upon, you know, I guess we're out of time, but. You know, really making, I mean, independent living is huge, right? We, we don't want to centralize the, we don't want to institutionalize.

Right. We'll use that word. We were institutionalized until the eighties. And then we, we created a system that said, no, we're gonna be community based. And that was, that was a really huge step. And it was scary. For those of you who weren't there, I was only a kid at the time, but because, you know, my dad was the one doing it, frankly.

It was a scary time. And him and Don and, Shumway for those who don't know, him and Shumway really worked on instilling some confidence in getting, and after, very quickly I think people realized, oh wait, this was the way to do it. Now we've had basically the same system for 35 years. We're not going back to the institution, but there has to be a middle ground there that says for folks that want certain security of independent living for adults, we're not putting 'em back in institutions, but there has to be better congregate living settings and congregate living opportunities so that those parents know that their loved one is going to be safe and secure if, and when, you know, they were to pass on. And that we can provide that security, you know, all the way through, not just for a certain age group.

I mean, just expanding. We didn't talk about this yet. I had, I fought hard to expand the ability for folks to get services up to 21. Right? Cause so many of your kids were getting cut off at an early age. And just to be able to have that bridge, you guys were, were given a gap. This like 18 month gap that was horribly painful for families.

And we finally worked with the legislature and convinced them, okay, we're gonna get there. And we were able to finally bridge that gap. That's not an end-all, be-all. That just gets you to 22 years old, right. You know, Voc Rehab, you know, those Voc programs that were horribly managed in the previous administration. Within a year, we realized we had millions of dollars that, that weren't gonna be met, of needs.

And the whole Voc program was gonna go away, right. But we went down, we fought hard, we got the Department of Education to reinvest in those Voc programs. A huge success force, specifically within your community, to make sure kids had those programs, those workforce opportunity, you know, chances, and that they didn't, they didn't disappear because they are so critical.

Are they critical for 150,000 people in the state? No, but they're critical for the individual and that individual family. And just because it isn't the largest community in the world doesn't mean we turn our back on it or doesn't mean it falls to the bottom of the pile. That's the fundamental difference, we're trying to bring those successes that my administration has had. Those are the things we wanna bring to the rest of the system. So that we can push back a little bit, show our successes, and when you show the successes, that's where huge doors of opportunity open up. Thank you, this was fun.

**Scott Spradling:** Governor Sununu, thank you so much. To, all of you here. Thanks to the governor, on behalf of Granite State Independent Living and the eight wonderful co-sponsors of this event. Thank you so much for being here, for those in the room, and those watching online, we appreciate it. Have a wonderful fall. Best of luck to you on the campaign trail, governor.

Thank you very much. Take care.