

# ELEVATING LIVED EXPERTISE IN NH POLICY

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## From Citizen Legislature to Unheard Voices

New Hampshire's legislature was designed as a "citizen legislature"—by and for the people.

- Run by everyday people
- Grounded in community voices
- Driven by public input
- Not dominated by career politicians



## The Reality Today

- Decisions shaped by individual lawmakers & special interests
- Public testimony is mostly reactive
- Community influence is weakened
- Underrepresented voices are least heard

### BILL TRACKING

In March 2026, dozens of bills, including NHCDD priorities, "died" without a vote because House leadership did not allocate time for them.

Two bills that I tracked failed to advance despite clear public support:

- **HB 1593-FN:** Would prohibit disability discrimination in publicly funded programs and allow individuals to challenge violations  
**305 support | 8 oppose\***
- **HB 1316:** Would restrict state use of autism-related data, requiring consent and strong privacy protections  
**446 support | 46 oppose\***

\*These numbers reflect remote testimony only.



## Factors Limiting Impact of Input

### PARTISAN DYNAMICS



Outweigh community dynamics

### ONLINE TESTIMONY



Expands access, but rarely changes outcome

### TIME LIMITS



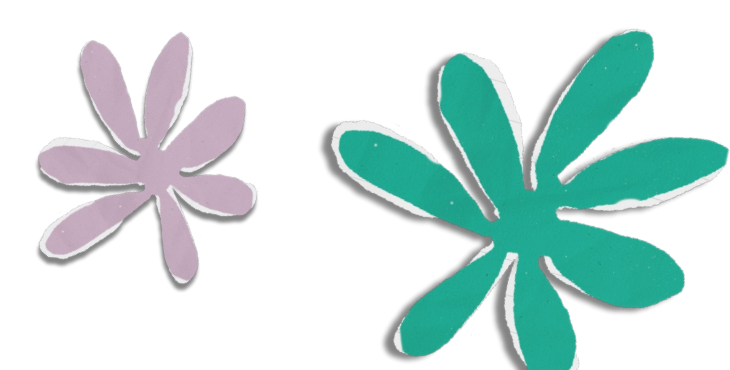
Restrict meaningful debate

### PROCEDURAL CONSTRAINTS



Limit engagement with complex rules

NH Council on Developmental Disabilities (NHCDD) is a federally funded state agency dedicated to working alongside NH residents with intellectual and developmental disabilities to strengthen access and expand choices for all people in New Hampshire communities.



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## Unconference: Elevating Lived Expertise

### TRADITIONAL CONFERENCES

"Expert"-led; power imbalance; one-way presentations

### UNCONFERENCE MODEL

Participant-driven; collaborative agenda-setting; shared power

In disability services, where hierarchical systems often exclude key voices, **the unconference model disrupts traditional power structures** to enable more inclusive, responsive decision-making.

## Principles of Unconferences



Center voices of those most impacted



Share knowledge; solve problems together



Generate community-driven ideas



Open structure invites creative solutions to complex issues

## Conclusion

- ➔ The gap between public participation and policy outcomes is a challenge in NH.
- ➔ The unconference model shows that centering lived experience and collaboration generates innovative, experience-driven ideas that can meaningfully shape outcomes.
- ➔ Extending these principles into policymaking creates a more responsive, inclusive, and effective system.
- \* **When participation shapes decisions, the citizen legislature fulfills its promise.**



Buttons given to Unconference attendees

## NHCDD Pilot Unconference

NH Caregiver's Conference Workshop | November 2025  
Focus: "What do you hope for in the future of direct support professional (DSP) work?"

## Facilitation Approach

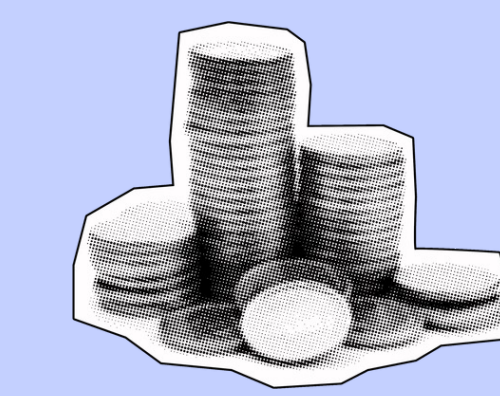
Facilitators created a light structure and set the tone sharing experiences and generating solutions. Three steps guided the process:

- **Dreaming Together:** Participants shared solution-focused ideas on a "Dream Wall"
- **Theme Sorting:** Ideas were grouped and prioritized through voting
- **Idea Harvest:** Small groups explored barriers, stakeholders, and initial steps they could take

## Major Themes Identified



Respect & Recognition



Pay & Benefits



Training & Connection



Awareness & Recruitment



Quality Supervision

## Future Directions Identified

- Increase awareness of DSP roles and public engagement
- Support peer networks and culture change initiatives

## Pilot Feedback & Reflections

- **Qualitative:** "Very collaborative and safe space"  
"Excellent brainstorming"  
"Everyone made me feel welcome"
- **Evaluation (1-10):** Recommend: 9.6 | Learned skills: 9.5  
Format fit: 9.6 | Gained understanding: 9.2
- **What Worked:** Participants felt valued; format generated diverse ideas
- **Challenges:** Small group size limited diverse perspectives; time constraints

References available on request.



iod.unh.edu/nh-me-lead

