



Justice Center for the Protection of People With Special Needs

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Warren County Caregiver Arrested on Charges He Left Individuals with Special Needs Unattended in Vehicle

Case investigated and prosecuted by the Justice Center

Glens Falls, NY – NYS Justice Center for the Protection of People with Special Needs Special Prosecutor Patricia E. Gunning announced the indictment of a direct care worker who was arrested and arraigned on felony endangerment charges for allegedly abandoning four individuals with developmental disabilities in a service van he was driving. Two of the individuals left the van while they were unattended and were later located by police but not before one of the individuals, with significant developmental disabilities, entered the home of a local resident.

Eric Straight (DOB: 11/12/82) of Glens Falls, employed at a residential facility operated by Capital District DDSO, was arraigned in Warren County Court before the Honorable John S. Hall, Jr. on the following charges:

- Four counts of Endangering the Welfare of an Incompetent or Physically Disabled person in the First Degree, a class "E" felony; and
- Four counts of Endangering the Welfare of an Incompetent or Physically Disabled person in the Second Degree, a class "A" misdemeanor.

The defendant pled not guilty to the charges in Warren County Court. Bail was set at \$5,000 cash/\$15,000 bond. Justice Center Assistant Special Prosecutor Rachel Dunn is prosecuting the case. The defendant was placed on administrative leave.

An investigation conducted by the Justice Center, with assistance from the Glens Falls Police Department, found the defendant left four service recipients in his care unsupervised during an outing purportedly to view Christmas lights in an incident from December 15, 2015. Straight allegedly drove to his residence in Glens Falls where he went inside leaving the individuals unattended in the van. When one of the individuals left the van and entered a nearby apartment, the occupant called the police. A second service recipient left the van in search of the individual who went into the apartment.

“Direct care workers have an incredibly important responsibility to protect the safety and well-being of individuals in their care,” said Special Prosecutor Gunning. “For direct care staff, like this defendant, to disregard that responsibility is unacceptable and in this case, constitutes criminal conduct. The risk to these vulnerable New Yorkers is not just what happened here, but unattended vulnerable persons in general are at risk in many ways that we at the Justice Center have identified and warned against.”

To raise public awareness about the dangers of leaving individuals with special needs unattended in vehicles, the Justice Center last year launched the [second in a series](#) of Spotlight on Prevention toolkits designed to provide safety tips that can be used by drivers, transport aides, provider agency personnel and the public to prevent an accidental tragedy from occurring.

The Justice Center and its statewide hotline and incident reporting system began operations on June 30, 2013. It is staffed 24-hours a day, seven days a week by trained professionals who receive reports of allegations of abuse and neglect of people with special needs. Once a report is received by its Vulnerable Persons Central Register (VPCR) Hotline, it is logged and assessed. Serious cases of abuse or neglect are assigned to the Justice Center's investigation team or, when appropriate, to a local law enforcement agency for follow-up. Through the services provided by the Justice Center's Individual and Family Support Unit – victims, their families, personal representatives and guardians receive guidance and information about the reporting and investigation process and support during criminal cases and court proceedings.

The Justice Center also maintains a statewide registry of all persons who have been found to be responsible for serious or repeated acts of abuse and neglect. Once placed on the registry, known as the "Staff Exclusion List" or SEL, they are prohibited by law from ever working again with people with disabilities or special needs.

Capital District DDSO is operated by the Office for People With Developmental Disabilities (OPWDD). OPWDD is one of six state agencies under the jurisdiction of the Justice Center. The Justice Center also oversees certain facilities or programs that are operated, licensed or certified by the Office of Children and Family Services (OCFS), the Office of Mental Health (OMH), the Department of Health (DOH), the Office of Alcoholism and Substance Abuse Services (OASAS), and the State Education Department (SED).

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Editor's note: In compliance with Disciplinary Rule 7-107A of the Code of Professional Responsibility, you are advised that a charge is an accusation and that a defendant is presumed innocent until and unless proven guilty.



Eric Straight (DOB: 11/12/82)