abused and betrayed

The Sexual Assault Epidemic No One Talks About

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Editor's note: *This report includes graphic and disturbing descriptions of assault.*

Pauline wants to tell her story — about that night in the basement, about the boys and about the abuse she wanted to stop.

But she's nervous. "Take a deep breath," she says out loud to herself. She takes a deep and audible breath. And then she tells the story of what happened on the night that turned her life upside down.

Pauline sits after practice for a Christmas show with fellow group members of a day program at the Arc Northeastern Pennsylvania. Pauline, who has intellectual disabilities, has been with the Arc program since 2014, after an emergency removal from her previous caretaker's home by Adult Protective Services when she was sexually assaulted.

Michelle Gustafson for NPR

"The two boys took advantage of me," she begins. "I didn't like it at all."

ABUSED AND BETRAYED: KEY FINDINGS

At a moment of reckoning in the United States about sexual harassment and sexual assault, a yearlong NPR investigation finds that there is little recognition of a group of Americans that is one of the most at risk: people with intellectual disabilities.

- People with intellectual disabilities are sexually assaulted at a rate seven times higher than those without disabilities. That number comes from data run for NPR by the Justice Department from unpublished federal crime data.
- People with intellectual disabilities are at heightened risk at all moments of their daily lives. The NPR data show they are more likely to be assaulted by someone they know and during daytime hours.
- Predators target people with intellectual disabilities because they know they are easily manipulated and will have difficulty testifying later. These crimes go mostly unrecognized, unprosecuted and unpunished. And the abuser is free to abuse again.
- Police and prosecutors are often reluctant to take these cases because they are difficult to win in court.

Pauline is a woman with an intellectual disability. At a time when more women are speaking up about sexual assault — and naming the men who assault or harass them — Pauline, too, wants her story told.

Her story, NPR found in a yearlong investigation, is a common one for people with intellectual disabilities.

NPR obtained unpublished Justice Department data on sex crimes. The results show that people with intellectual disabilities — women and men — are the victims of sexual assaults at rates more than seven times those for people without disabilities.

It's one of the highest rates of sexual assault of any group in America, and it's hardly talked about at all.

Pauline was part of that silent population. But she says she decided to speak publicly about what happened to her because she wants to "help other women."

NPR's investigation found that people with intellectual disabilities are at heightened risk during all parts of their day. They are more likely than others to be assaulted by someone they know. The assaults, often repeat assaults, happen in places where they are supposed to be protected and safe, often by a person they have been taught to trust and rely upon.

Pauline is 46, with a quick smile and an easy laugh. (NPR uses rape survivors' first name, unless they prefer their full name be used.) She has red hair and stylish, coppery-orange glasses.

In February 2016, Pauline was living with her longtime caretaker and that woman's extended family.

Pauline (far right) leads fellow group home housemates into a day program at the Arc Northeastern Pennsylvania.
Michelle Gustafson for NPR

On the night of Feb. 20, she was in the basement of the family's second home, in Pennsylvania. According to the police criminal complaint, Pauline was raped by two boys who were part of the family.

She told them repeatedly to stop. They warned her not to tell.

But she did.

Raise your hand

At a conference in a large ballroom, Leigh Ann Davis asked the audience in front of her a question: How many of them had dealt with sexual assault or sexual harassment in their lives? Davis was referencing the #MeToo campaign on social media. Almost every woman — about 30 of them — raised her hand.

Davis runs criminal justice programs for The Arc, a national advocacy group for the 4.7 million people with intellectual disabilities, their families and the professionals who work with them. This was at the group's convention in November in San Diego. The room was filled with professionals and parents as well as people with intellectual disabilities themselves.

Then Davis posed a second question: How many in the audience knew someone with an intellectual disability who had been the victim of sexual harassment or assault? Only two hands went up.

Pauline stands in her room after coming home from a day program for adults with intellectual disabilities.
Michelle Gustafson for NPR

"What does that say about where we are as a society?" Davis asked. "Where people with intellectual disabilities are more likely to be victimized, but we don't see more hands being raised."

Davis focuses on the issue of sexual violence. She is familiar with the high number of rape reports among people with intellectual disabilities.

"It means people with disabilities still don't feel safe enough to talk abut what's going on in their lives," she said. "Or we haven't given them the foundation to do that. ... That there are not enough places to go where they'll feel they'll be believed."

Unrecognized, unprosecuted and unpunished

Intellectual disability is now the preferred term for what was once called "mental retardation." The American Association on Intellectual and Developmental Disabilities, which represents professionals and helps determine the official definition, describes an intellectual disability as "characterized by significant limitation in both intellectual functioning and in adaptive behaviors." Those adaptive skills include social skills — such as the ability to deal with other people, to follow rules and avoid being victimized — and practical skills, things like being able to work and take care of one's health and safety.

"Developmental disability" is another commonly used term. And while this mostly refers to people with intellectual disabilities, it describes a larger group of people, including some without intellectual disabilities. People with cerebral palsy and autism, for example, are counted as having a developmental disability.

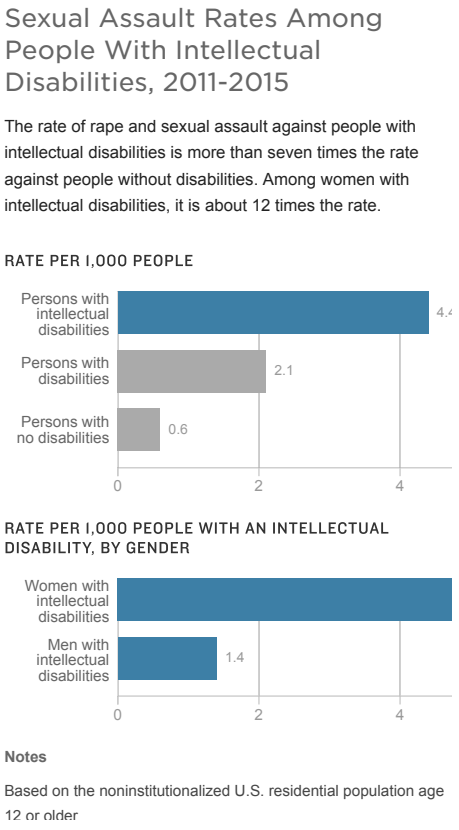
Completed jigsaw puzzles are displayed at the Arc Northeastern Pennsylvania.
Michelle Gustafson for NPR

NPR reviewed hundreds of cases of sexual assault against people with intellectual disabilities. We looked at state and federal data, including those new numbers we obtained from the Justice Department. We read court records. We followed media accounts and put together a database of 150 assaults so serious that they garnered rare local and national media attention. We talked to victims, their guardians, family, staff and friends.

We found that there is an epidemic of sexual abuse against people with intellectual disabilities. These crimes go mostly unrecognized, unprosecuted and unpunished. A frequent result was that the abuser was free to abuse again. The survivor is often re-victimized multiple times.

"It's not surprising, because they do have that high level of victimization," says Erika Harrell, a statistician at the Bureau of Justice Statistics. "That high vulnerability is just reflected in our numbers."

Harrell writes the Justice Department's annual report about



crime against all people with disabilities. But the report doesn't break out sex crimes against people with intellectual disabilities. When NPR requested those data, she came up with the stunning numbers that show people with intellectual disabilities are sexually assaulted at much higher numbers — "more than seven times higher than the rate for persons with no disabilities."

"If this were any other population, the world would be up in arms," says Nancy Thaler, a deputy secretary of Pennsylvania's Department of Human Services who runs the state's developmental disability programs. "We would be irate and it would be the No. 1 health crisis in this country."

For people in the field, like her, the high rates of assault have been an open secret.

"Folks with intellectual disabilities are the perfect victim," says Thaler, who has been a leader in the field for more than 40 years — in top state, federal and national association jobs. She is also a parent of an adult son with an intellectual disability.

"They are people who often cannot speak or their speech is not well-developed. They are generally taught from childhood up to be compliant, to obey, to go along with people. Because of the intellectual disability, people tend not to believe them, to think that they are not credible or that what they saying, they are making up or imagining," she explains. "And so for all these reasons, a perpetrator sees an opportunity, a safe opportunity to victimize people."

Harrell could think of only one other group that might have a higher risk of assault: women between the ages of 18 and 24 — but only those who are not in college. Those young women tend to be poorer and more marginalized. Compared with women with intellectual disabilities, they have an almost identical rate of assault, just slightly higher.

Erika Harrell writes the Justice Department's annual report about crime against all people with disabilities.
Jennifer Kerrigan/NPR

But the rate for people with intellectual disabilities — the Justice Department numbers count people ages 12 and older — is almost certainly an underestimate, the government statistician said. Because those numbers from household surveys don't include people living in institutions — where, Harrell said, research shows people are even more vulnerable to assault. Also not counted are the 373,000 people living in group homes.

The 1998 law that requires the Justice Department to keep statistics on disabled victims of crime — the Crime Victims with Disabilities Awareness Act — actually only mentions people with developmental disabilities. It calls for a report to spur research to "understand the nature and extent of crimes against individuals with developmental disabilities." But the DOJ expanded its collection to look at people with all disabilities and made a more useful annual report.

Vulnerable everywhere

Most rape victims — in general — are assaulted by someone they know, not by a stranger. But NPR's numbers from the Justice Department found that people with intellectual disabilities are even more likely to be raped by someone they know. For women without disabilities, the rapist is a stranger 24 percent of the time, but for a woman with an intellectual disability it is less than 14 percent of the time.

And the risk comes at any time of day. Half the sexual assaults take place during the day. For the rest of the population, about 40 percent of sexual assaults occur during daytime. The federal numbers, and the results of our own database, show that people with intellectual disabilities are vulnerable everywhere, including in places where they should feel safest: where they live, work, go to school; on van rides to medical appointments and in public places. Most of the time, the perpetrators are people they have learned to count on the most — sometimes their own family, caregivers or staffers, and friends.

Often it's another person with a disability — at a group home, or a day program, or work — who commits the assault. Pennsylvania, at NPR's request, compiled data from more than 500 cases of suspected abuse in 2016. Of those, 42 percent of the suspected offenders were themselves people with intellectual disabilities. Staff made up 14 percent of the suspects; relatives were 12 percent; and friends, 11 percent.

One reason for the high rates of victimization is that so many adults come in and out of the lives of people with intellectual disabilities, according to Beverly Frantz of Temple University's Institute on Disabilities. Frantz estimates that a typical person with an intellectual disability who lives in a group home or a state institution deals with hundreds of different caregivers every year.

"If you think two to three different shifts, five days a week, 365 days a year, it adds up pretty quickly," she says.

Pauline helps set the table for dinner at her group home. "I was scared the first day I went to the house," she says, referring to the group home she currently lives in. "I didn't know anyone." Since coming into the group home, Pauline says, she is happier.

Michelle Gustafson for NPR

The high number includes the consideration of weekend shifts, too; high staff turnover, staffers on vacations or on sick leave, plus assistance from family members.

The vast majority are professional, dedicated and caring. But for someone who wants to be abusive, the opportunity is there. Caregivers have a role that gives them power. They may assist with the most intimate care — dressing, bathing, toileting — for some with significant physical disabilities. A person with intellectual disability is often very dependent upon those caregivers.

"We treat them as children," Frantz says. "We teach them to be compliant."

For many people with intellectual disabilities, caregivers — including professional staff — become their friends, often their best friends, among the people who know them best and care about them the most. But that, too, is a line that can be easily crossed.

"We use the word 'friend' a lot, and the boundaries are sometimes nonexistent," Frantz explains.

"It was a predator's dream"

Stephen DeProspero is serving 40 years in prison for filming himself sexually assaulting a severely disabled 10-year-old boy he cared for at a state institution in New Hartford, N.Y.

"There was nothing in the back of my mind that caused me to seek out a job with vulnerable people so I could take advantage of them," he wrote in response to a query from NPR. "I wholly prided myself on doing a selfless job for people who are disabled and can tell you many nice stories about all the lives I touched in a positive way."

When the boy's family sued the state, DeProspero said in a handwritten affidavit that it was easy in the house to abuse the boy unseen. "I could have stayed in that house for years and abused him every day without anybody even noticing at all," he wrote. "It was a predator's dream."

DeProspero now regrets those words, he told NPR in his letter, because he says he wasn't a serial predator. He blames his crime on an addiction to pornography, including child pornography.

GOATS AND SODA

In Interviews With 122 Rapists, Student Pursues Not-So-Simple Question: Why?

NPR wrote to several men in prison or awaiting trial for sexually abusing an adult or child with an intellectual disability. Most of the men did not write back. Some claimed that the sex was consensual.

In his letter from the Attica Correctional Facility, DeProspero says he has spent years trying to understand why he raped a disabled child. He speaks of having a difficult childhood. As an adult, he had few friends, he says.

He took a job at a group home for children with severe disabilities in 2004. There he met and cared for the young boy who could not communicate with words.

"I took a liking to him," DeProspero wrote. "I spent the most time with him and taught him how to brush his teeth, tie his sneakers and even ride a bike. I would often take him for [shoulder] rides, at his request, and carry him around the residence."

One day, DeProspero wrote, the boy was upset and alone in his room. "My memory of child porn videos sprang back into my mind," he says, and he forced the boy to perform a sex act.

For weeks afterward, DeProspero says, he was "beside myself with guilt and grief."

He says he looked for another job. He got one, at a group home for adults with intellectual disabilities. But first he went back to sexually assault the boy one more time, and this time filmed it as "a momento *[sic]* to remember him."

That act, too, went unnoticed. Five years later it was discovered, by accident.

Police investigating Internet child porn seized DeProspero's computer and cameras — and found images of children. He was given a six-month sentence.

Afterward, his lawyer asked police to return DeProspero's computer and cameras. They agreed but first did one last check of the equipment. That's when they discovered more pictures, including the film clip of DeProspero, from years before, assaulting the 10-year-old boy.

"I let this child down in the worst way imaginable," DeProspero said the day he was sentenced.

The state of New York paid the boy's family $3 million in damages.

"People who perpetrate these crimes are always looking for justification for what they do. It's never their fault. It's always someone else's fault. ... They're very manipulative people," says Dawn Lupi, the Oneida County prosecutor in the case.

One of the most memorable moments in the case, Lupi said, was when she met with the other staffers in the large group home where the boy was raped by DeProspero. "They were very caring," she says. "They were devastated that they didn't stop it."

Barriers to prosecution

It's rare for these cases to go to court. Some people with intellectual disabilities do have trouble speaking or describing things in detail, or in proper time sequence. Our investigation found that makes it harder for police to investigate and for prosecutors to win these cases in court.

Even when these cases do go to court, there are barriers. In 2012, a jury in Georgia found a man guilty of raping a 24-year-old woman with Down syndrome three times over one night and the following morning. Appeals Court Judge Christopher McFadden, two years later, overturned the decision, saying the woman did not "behave like a victim." McFadden, who presided over the original trial, questioned why

the woman waited a day to report the rape and said that she did not exhibit "visible distress." The jury had heard evidence that the man's semen was found in the victim's bed and that a doctor who examined the woman found evidence consistent with a sexual assault.

Pauline leaves for home after a day program at the Arc Northeastern Pennsylania.
Michelle Gustafson for NPR

The man was retried in 2015, and a new jury convicted him. The woman's mother said afterward it had been traumatic for her daughter to go back to court and tell her story again.

In another case, a psychologist hired by the Los Angeles Unified School District said in court in 2013 that a young girl with an intellectual disability probably was less traumatized, because of her disability. The trial was for damages for a 9-year-old girl who had been sexually assaulted five times by an older boy at her school. Stan Katz, the psychologist, testified it was "very possible" that the girl had a "protective factor" against emotional trauma because of her low IQ.

The jury didn't buy it and awarded the girl $1.4 million in damages, far more than the girl's family was even seeking.

"It's not your fault"

When Pauline — the woman who wants her story told — was raped on Feb. 20, 2016, she was living with her longtime caretaker, a social worker named Cheryl McClain, and

that woman's extended family. Pauline had lived half her life with McClain and called her "Mommy."

The family lived in Brooklyn, N.Y., but had bought that second home in the Pocono Mountains, in Pennsylvania.

That's where the rape happened.

Pauline was assaulted by two boys, just 12 and 13. These details come from the police criminal complaint. One boy, McClain explains, was her foster child. The other, she says, was her adopted son.

According to the police complaint, the two boys confessed right away to the police that they had raped Pauline and that she had told them to stop. Both boys, according to the complaint, "confessed to raping the victim and both related that the victim repeatedly told both juveniles to stop assaulting her."

It was McClain who called the police that night. But after police charged the boys with rape, McClain seemed to have second thoughts.

Pauline, 46, puts together a puzzle at her day program. Adults with intellectual disabilities are among groups with one of the highest rates of sexual assault in the United States, according to previously unpublished sex crime data from the Justice Department.

Michelle Gustafson for NPR

She pressured Pauline to change her story.

One way we know: Cheryl McClain recorded herself coaching Pauline. Telling the woman with an intellectual disability that maybe it wasn't really rape, that she'd enjoyed the sex.

"You wanted to do it," McClain tells Pauline on the recording.

NPR obtained parts of the transcript from the recording, which was attached to the police complaint.

McClain goes from expressing anger at the boys who assaulted her to telling Pauline that she was at fault, too.

"Even though I know they started with you first," McClain told Pauline, "a lady has to say 'No.' She has to mean 'No.' "

McClain told NPR that she had warned the boys to be respectful of the woman with an intellectual disability. "They knew not to touch her, that I love her so much, that to touch her would be trouble," McClain says. "I would throw them out of the house."

Pauline puts together a small bag with two screws each for Arlington Industries as a part of prevocational skills training during a day program at the Arc Northeastern Pennsylvania.
Michelle Gustafson for NPR

But on the recording, it's Pauline who, McClain threatens, will have to leave the house. If Pauline's charge against the boys stands, McClain tells her, "the only way to fix this, the only way it could work out, you just would have to not be with me. ... You wouldn't be able to live with me if I had any boys here."

McClain says if she had known the boys were abusing Pauline, she would have stopped them. But Pauline says she did tell McClain about previous assaults. Just the week before that assault in Pennsylvania, Pauline had told McClain that there had been earlier assaults, according to the police complaint. She said both boys had abused her, in the house in New York and the house in Pennsylvania. The police complaint shows that McClain said she called the police in New York. As a result, the 13-year-old was detained at a New York juvenile facility for four days, and then released back to the family.

That was just days before the sexual assault in Pennsylvania. This time, both boys were removed to a juvenile detention center, this one in Easton, Pa.

McClain and Pauline had lived together for more than 20 years and were like mother and daughter. Pauline said McClain was often nice to her, but sometimes mean. She'd sometimes yell at her. "Used to call me names. Call me 'stupid.' 'Retarded,' " Pauline says.

McClain denies that she ever mistreated Pauline or used those words.

But Pauline says that in the days after the sexual assault in Pennsylvania, there was a lot of tension.

"Because of the boys and stuff," Pauline recalls. "She said, 'It's your fault, Pauline.' "

Pauline pauses, and then reassures herself: "It's not your fault."

Roxanne Kiehart, one of the caretakers at Pauline's group home, puts in a movie for Pauline and a housemate after they returned home from a day program.

Michelle Gustafson for NPR

On Feb. 22, two days after the assault, McClain called Pennsylvania State Police Trooper Shamus Kelleher, who had investigated the rape. She told the officer that Pauline had changed her story and now said the sex acts had been consensual and that Pauline said she "enjoyed it."

But when Kelleher asked to talk to Pauline, McClain refused to let Pauline speak. In his complaint, Kelleher noted that McClain's claim that Pauline had agreed to sex with the boys had been made "solely" by McClain "and was not in any way verified by the victim even after requested by this Trooper."

Kelleher already had a sense of Pauline. He had taken her statement two days before, when she was "visibly upset and I observed her to be crying," he reported, as she talked about the assault. Pauline had told him she never wanted to see the two boys again.

Then, on March 1, the night before the boys were to appear in juvenile court, McClain took Pauline — the rape victim — to the office of the public defender who was representing one of the boys — a rape suspect. McClain told the lawyer that the sex acts were consensual. The attorney, William Watkins, stopped her. If that were true, then Pauline might have been guilty of committing a crime against the two boys.

The next day at the Monroe County Courthouse, news of McClain's bringing Pauline to the public defender's office was relayed to the judge. The Monroe County district attorney, police and an Adult Protective Services worker tried to speak to Pauline to see whether she had, in fact, changed her story. But every time someone approached Pauline, either McClain or her husband, Kinard McClain, "would physically restrict any possible communications with the victim," according to the police criminal complaint against McClain.

Pauline, Kelleher would write in a police criminal complaint, "became visibly upset and agitated during these proceedings and on numerous occasions stated she did not want anyone to go to jail."

Pauline helps pour juice for dinner at her group home.

Michelle Gustafson for NPR

But she did not change her story that she had been raped.

That's when McClain revealed she had those recordings on her phone.

McClain played one of the recordings. Kelleher wrote in the police complaint that rather than hearing — as McClain claimed — Pauline retracting her story, he heard "a heated discussion regarding the sexual assaults."

Police ordered McClain to turn over her cellphone with the recordings as potential evidence. But she refused, and hid the Samsung Galaxy phone inside her shirt.

The judge had taken an unusual step. To protect Pauline, he assigned her a lawyer. Usually, a crime victim is represented by the district attorney. But to prosecute crimes against people with intellectual disabilities, courts often need to take extra steps, sometimes creative or rare ones. Now, in addition to the district attorney prosecuting the crime, Pauline had her own lawyer.

Syzane Arifaj, a former public defender for juveniles, had worked with clients with disabilities. When she met Pauline for the first time, the thing that struck her was that Pauline was "consistent." Her story about how the two boys raped her did not change. That was important, Arifaj says, because "a lot of people who have intellectual disabilities are very malleable. So if you just repeatedly tell them this happened and this didn't happen, they're sort of prone to taking the suggestion."

Pauline was torn, though, facing heavy pressure from McClain, whom she had long relied on.

"Pauline didn't want to upset anybody," Arifaj says. "From the start, her thing was, she didn't want anybody to be mad at her."

She had learned to survive by pleasing the people she depended upon for help. And when told she was putting people she lived with in danger with the law, Pauline said she didn't want anyone to go to jail.

The difficulty of prosecution

Arifaj says it's harder for people with intellectual disabilities to seek justice.

"They don't act independently so if someone who is taking care of them is not advocating for them, that makes the situation very difficult because they're not in a position to take care of themselves," she explains. "Mrs. McClain was taking care of her. That's all she knew."

There's long been reluctance by many prosecutors to take on rape cases against people with intellectual disabilities. That's largely because a person with an intellectual disability may have difficulty recalling details from a crime, or remembering them consistently. And they often have difficulty remembering time sequence — when something happened or in what order.

That made prosecuting crimes against Pauline difficult. She was unsure of dates of the different times she had been assaulted and which assaults had happened at the family's house in New York or at the house in Pennsylvania. And it wasn't just Pauline who found it confusing; prosecutors did too.

Pauline dances along to a video during a morning exercise routine at the Arc Northeastern Pennsylvania.
Michelle Gustafson for NPR

It helped prosecutors in Pennsylvania, Arifaj says, that the boys had quickly confessed to police investigators that night.

According to court records, the two boys were charged with rape, involuntary deviate sexual intercourse and other sex crimes.

Separately, McClain became a defendant, too. She was charged with six felonies — including intimidating a witness and interfering with an investigation — and two misdemeanors. Prosecutors would eventually drop the felony charges.

Last June, McClain pleaded guilty to misdemeanor charges of giving false information to police with the intent to try to implicate someone. She was fined $15,000 and put on probation for two years.

A calendar detailing the weekly schedule for adults with intellectual disabilities hangs in a room at the Arc Northeastern Pennsylvania.

Michelle Gustafson for NPR

In 2016, the two juveniles were found guilty — "adjudicated delinquent" is the terminology — and sent to a state treatment center, according to attorneys involved in the case and what Pauline's new guardian in Pennsylvania was told.

McClain still disputes the charges against her. She notes that she was the one who called the police the night Pauline was assaulted. And when McClain told authorities a different story — that it wasn't rape but consensual sex — she thinks police and prosecutors refused to believe her because they thought she was now fearful of losing Pauline's Social Security disability benefits. Social Security sent Pauline's check to McClain as her representative, according to the police complaint.

"If I was afraid I would lose the check, I never had to pick up that phone and not tell anyone," McClain says.

She says she pleaded guilty because she feared prosecutors. "I felt those people were coming to destroy my life."

McClain says that she loves Pauline and wants her to come back to the home in Brooklyn.

A new life

When Pauline was raped in Pennsylvania, her life turned upside down. Suddenly, she lost the life she had worked hard to establish in Brooklyn.

McClain, for more than 20 years, had helped Pauline make her way in the world. In Pennsylvania, Pauline would have to make a new life for herself.

Most days, it starts at a busy day program run by the Arc Northeastern Pennsylvania. At this center in a city in the northeastern part of the state, people with intellectual disabilities, like Pauline, spend the day, get meals, socialize and do some work for minimal pay.

One day last April started with an exercise video. Nine adults lined up in a row, faced the screen and moved their arms and bodies to the music. A woman in a wheelchair scooted back and forth.

Erica Francis, a direct support professional, helps Pauline as they restock a vending machine at Arc of Northeastern Pennsylvania.
Michelle Gustafson for NPR

Pauline smiles during the cha-cha step. She's a smooth dancer.

"I like any kind of music," Pauline says. "I like Michael Jackson. Stevie Wonder. Diana Ross. I like any kind of music. They play music. I'll dance to it. I like to dance."

As it was just a few days before Easter, the big excitement was around an impending visit from the Easter Bunny.

And when the guest of honor — the staffer who fit into the furry costume with straight-up ears and a goofy smile — arrived with a basket of chocolates, the room of adults — in their 30s, 40s, some in their 60s — erupted in delight, with applause and cheers.

Sometimes adults with intellectual disabilities still take joy in childish things. And maybe that's because they're often treated as children for so much of their lives.

There's debate among professionals about moments like this. Many argue that to do things with adults that are normally done with children is condescending and "infantilizing." Some argue that it stops adults from learning adult skills appropriate for their age.

A view of the outside of the day program room.

Michelle Gustafson for NPR

Pat Quinn, who runs adult day and residential services at the Arc Northeastern Pennsylvania, points out the difficulty around this dilemma. His agency makes respect a primary value. But as he watches the excitement of the adults receiving candy from the Easter Bunny, he asks, "How could you deny them this?"

Often people with intellectual disability are described this way: They're 30 years old or 40 years old, but they have the "developmental age" of a child.

Many professionals in the field say that kind of description can be misleading.

Mainly because, as Quinn notes, adults with intellectual disabilities are not children. They have a lifetime of experience. They want things other adults want: jobs and

community; friendships, relationships — and that includes romantic relationships, sex, and maybe marriage.

But it's difficult because there are limits when it comes to learning, problem solving and everyday social skills.

Pauline stands in her neighborhood. She is slowly adjusting to her new life away from Brooklyn.
Michelle Gustafson for NPR

Often, it's the law that treats them like children. In 32 states, according to an NPR count of state statutes, the same laws that protect children from physical and sexual abuse are used to protect adults with intellectual disabilities.

And there's some good reason for that. Like children, adults with intellectual disabilities — who grow up trusting and relying upon other people — may have trouble telling when someone tries to trick them. Like kids generally, they're just more vulnerable to abuse. Often they need the assistance that they find in a place like a group home.

Pauline lives with three other women in a group home now. It's a one-level red brick house with white columns in a residential neighborhood.

At first, Pauline says, she was upset coming to this unfamiliar house. But those feelings evolved.

"I got used to it," she says. "It took me a while."

Now she thinks it's better for her to live here — "Because I feel safe. I feel happy. The staff take good care of me. I'm really happy here."

Pauline shows a photograph from her wedding day. After the wedding, her husband, David, moved into a room with Pauline in her caretaker's home. Now they talk on the phone most nights and David sends her cards to stay in touch.

Michelle Gustafson for NPR

The staff at this group home — run by the Arc — took Pauline to doctors. She has a new pair of glasses — the coppery orange ones. Pauline and her caregivers said she had gone for years without glasses. McClain disputes that and says Pauline lost glasses she had previously had. Pauline and Roxanne Kiehart, the house supervisor, say the day Pauline got those new glasses, she was stunned by how her vision changed. She ran around the optometrist's shop, yelling, "I can see. I can see."

She can see the TV screen now. In New York, she says, she never had time to watch TV. Her day began making the beds in the house. Then she went to a job busing tables at a pizza parlor in Brooklyn. She took two subways, by herself, to work. The money she earned went back to McClain, to the house, to pay for groceries. Most nights, the family went to church.

At the new house in Pennsylvania, it's still hard to get Pauline to relax and just take time for herself, Kiehart explains. Pauline likes to set the table and help with dinner.

"She always wants to be busy," Kiehart says. "She always wants to help."

Part of that, Kiehart explains — and Pauline agrees — is that Pauline stayed busy doing chores at the house in Brooklyn.

Now, Pauline says, she gets to keep money from her Social Security check and from her job. And, for the first time, she goes shopping and picks out her own clothes. McClain says she gave Pauline money and that there's an entire closet at the house in the Poconos with Pauline's dresses, ones that she bought herself.

Pauline gives a tour of the house: The kitchen where she likes to help make pasta stuffed with cheese, the backyard with the tall trees, her bedroom with seashells over the bed.

There was one more thing Pauline wanted to show off: the pictures from her wedding.

They are in frames on the dresser in her bedroom. "I have a beautiful wedding dress," she said. "It's white. And it's like a thing you put around your hair" (her veil).

When Pauline was living with McClain, she met David, a man with an intellectual disability, at church.

Pauline says McClain told her if she wanted to be with David, they would have to get married. The wedding was at the church, where McClain is active; Pauline in the white dress, David in a dark tuxedo. They had a white wedding cake with red rose petals.

Pauline sits in her room in a group home in Pennsylvania. Like other adults with intellectual disabilities, Pauline wants love, romance and marriage.

Michelle Gustafson for NPR

David moved into the house, sharing a room with Pauline.

She holds out her left hand to show the twisted silver wedding band with a small stone.

Pauline reflects on what it means to her to be married and to have a husband.

"He really loves me so much," she says. "That's where you feel special."

But now, miles apart and in different states, David and Pauline talk on the phone most nights. On the dresser in her bedroom, there are pictures of David and the cards he sends — birthday cards, holiday cards, romantic cards. He signs them with his first and last name.

Pauline misses David's kisses. She misses him in her bed. But she won't go back to her old family. That's where she was raped. And David won't, on his own, leave that house and move to a new state. He lives with McClain and depends upon her. McClain insists David doesn't want to move. He has a job he likes and is active in the church.

Like other adults with intellectual disabilities, Pauline wants love, romance and marriage. But like so many other adults with intellectual disabilities, a history of rape gets in the way.

Meg Anderson, Robert Benincasa and Barbara Van Woerkom assisted with reporting for this story.

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