

Testimony of the Effects of the Proposed Budget Cuts for FY 2012
Before the Human Services Commission
September 21, 2011

I am providing testimony to the Human Services Commission regarding the proposed budget cuts for FY 2012. My testimony is from a unique perspective. I speak from my heart as a mother of a young person with a developmental disability as well as the Youth Services Coordinator at Advocates for Access Center for Independent Living in Peoria Heights, IL. Regardless of what hat I happen to wear, it is very evident that the future of young people with disabilities does not seem to be very bright.

The process of transition is most important for a young person with a disability. It is a process that is started in school and continued into the world of adult services. This process helps young people to be as independent as possible and able to work and live in the community. At one time, young people had the ability to get funded through DHS to help them continue through transition. This, however, does not happen anymore. No one gets funded unless they are homeless, in a situation of abuse, or have had caregivers die and there is no one left to take care of them. Even under those circumstances, funding can be difficult at times. So, the rules have changed and no one even bothered to tell us. They just took it away like no one would notice. If that isn't bad enough, they created a list - a PUNS list - to prioritize the needs for services. The number of people on that list has been reported to be about 22,000. This number can't be accurate as there are still plenty of people out there that are unaware that the PUNS list even exists. The last time anyone's name was pulled off that list was June of 2010. So, now that funding apparently doesn't exist anymore... what is left to help these young people and their families? What impact does this lack of funding have on their futures?

The first area of impact is independence. One of the biggest concerns for individuals and their families is where and how they are going to live. The number of group homes and supported living arrangements are dwindling due to this lack of funding. Agencies are not receiving the funds that they need to operate and beds are linked to funding streams for individuals who are not getting funded. We are trying to think outside of the box and find a solution to this "new normal" but it all goes back to lack of funds. Persons with disabilities don't usually have a lot of money - nor are they allowed to - if by chance they do get help. SSI and SSDI are options for help - but turn-around time for application and appeals is way too long a period of time to be able to act any time soon. SSI funding does not provide much independence. It would be great if something could be put in place to assist families that are trying to help their loved ones with the creation of independent housing.

The second area impacted by a lack of funding is the actual transition process. Young people with disabilities are experiencing a "double whammy" as a result of the state budget debacle. Education funds are being cut - which limits schools and teachers in providing education and application of transition skills where students need it the most - in the community. This is where transition should be taking place. Some districts address transition head on but most sit back and wait for someone to raise the red flag before they respond and/or act.

Lastly, the lack of funding challenges the definition of transition itself. As the Youth Services Coordinator at Advocates for Access, I question myself all the time about the meaning of this word. Should it be changed? Are young people truly transitioning anymore and if so, to where? What's still out there? Is anything the same? What supports are still available for persons with disabilities to live independently in their community?

It is estimated that in the next few years approximately 500,000 young people with autism are going to age out of the school setting and transition into our communities. Are we ready for this? Is housing available? Are jobs and job supports identified? Have employers been educated about this and prepared to receive these young people into the work force and community? I can tell you that the answer to all of those questions is a resounding "No." Shame on all of us!

We cannot cut funds to Human Services and continue to refuse to help people. Illinois is at the bottom of the list when it comes to providing services for persons with disabilities, and frankly I find that mortifying – as a mother, as Youth Services Coordinator at Advocates for Access, and as a human being. Please support persons with disabilities and stop cutting funds to services that support them.

Respectfully,

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