

Make Your Voice Heard in Support of People with Disabilities

by Susan Kabot and Richard "Dick" Bradley

March is the gateway to spring, a time of renewal and hope as it roars in like a lion and exits like a lamb. It marks the changing of our clocks as we "spring forward." It signals the "madness" of the NCAA basketball tournament. It marks the beginning of another "big dance" – in Florida politics – as it brings the start of the 2017 legislative session. And, it heralds national Developmental Disabilities Awareness Month – a critically important time to focus on the needs of people with intellectual and developmental disabilities.

That focus will be crystal clear on March 21, when hundreds of people with disabilities, their families, caregivers, service providers and other advocates converge in Tallahassee at the State Capitol for Developmental Disabilities Awareness Day. They will make their voices heard at a rally in the Capitol Courtyard, in the halls of the Capitol building and in the offices of their legislators to ensure lawmakers are able to make positive and informed decisions on the issues that affect their daily lives – from the diminishing availability of care providers and provider agencies closing, a long waiting list to receive services and a lack of transportation for employment-related tasks.

Here's a glimpse of some of the key issues to which we're hoping to draw attention:

The Individual Budgeting/Home- and Community-Based Services Waiver (iBudget/HCBS)

The iBudget Waiver makes it possible for nearly 30,000 individuals with intellectual and developmental disabilities to choose the supports and services they need in order to live safely and as independently as possible in their own homes and communities. It has been under funded for many years, and providers receive highly inadequate compensation for their diligent and caring work. Today's Agency for Persons with Disabilities (APD) iBudget Waiver reimbursement rates are, on average, 11 percent lower than they were in 2003. Providers need greater compensation. We urge the Florida Legislature to ensure that individuals with intellectual and developmental disabilities and their families who receive the Individual Budgeting/Home-and Community-Based Services Waiver have stable and qualified service providers for delivering waiver services. This can only be done by increasing the compensation providers receive. This year, we are advocating for \$30 million dollars to increase provider rates so they are closer to 2003 levels.

In addition, the Individual Budgeting/Home-and Community-Based Services Waiver waitlist continues to be long and excessive due to inadequate funding. It is critical that the Legislature make a meaningful long-term commitment to eliminate the waitlist. Currently, there are approximately 20,000 Floridians on the waitlist – and many of them have been waiting for more than five years. This year we are advocating that 1,500 individuals come off the waitlist.

Department of Labor Wage Requirements

Last year the Florida Legislature approved funding for rates for Florida's iBudget services to meet the new Department of Labor (DOL) minimum wage requirement that became effective on October 13, 2015. The reimbursement rates affected by the DOL changes include the following services: Live-In Residential Habilitation daily rate, Personal Supports daily rate, and Companion services. This funding was provided to adjust these rates so that individuals with intellectual and developmental disabilities would continue to have choices and options for residential living services.

Unfortunately this allocation was only provided for one year as nonrecurring funding. We believe it is critical for this funding to be included in the regular base budget of the Agency for Persons with Disabilities on a recurring basis.

Transportation for Individuals with Intellectual and Developmental Disabilities

We urge the Florida Legislature to provide resources for employment-related transportation for individuals with intellectual and developmental disabilities. Transportation remains a critical issue and a key factor in the successful independence and productivity of those with intellectual and developmental disabilities across our state.

With the spotlight shining brighter than ever these days on state and national politics, it's become more important than ever for individuals affected by the decisions of government leaders to make their voices heard on issues that will have a direct impact on their lives. That is particularly true for the decisions that will be made during the current legislative session that will impact some of our most vulnerable citizens – those with intellectual and developmental disabilities.

Developmental Disabilities Day offers a great opportunity to encourage awareness and involvement in support of systemic changes that will enable those with disabilities to lead meaningful, comfortable and productive lives.

To learn more about the issues, Developmental Disabilities Awareness Day and how you can make your voice heard, visit the Florida Developmental Disabilities Council's website at www.fddc.org or call toll-free (800) 580-7801.

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