



Make Your Voice Heard to Help Individuals with Developmental Disabilities

by Sylvia James-Miller

By all accounts, Florida's economy is bouncing back. Home prices are again on the rise, tourists are visiting the state in record numbers, tax collections are up, corporations are reporting record profits and even our state government spending continues to increase slightly each year.

So, why is it that so many of the needs of so many of our most vulnerable citizens – including children, those with intellectual and/or developmental challenges, those with mental illnesses and the elderly – still need to be addressed?

In most cases, it's because those that make the critical decisions that affect the care that our most vulnerable citizens receive are unaware of their problems. Our legislators cannot address the needs they know very little, if anything, about. How do the individuals and families who need care, and those who endeavor to provide care for them, make their voices heard above the din?

We join hands. We link arms. We raise our voices individually and collectively.

As we head into the holiday season – and look beyond it – our next opportunity is presenting itself. The 2016 Legislative Session begins January 12. We encourage all advocates for those who are vulnerable and in need – and those who love and care for them – to prepare to get out in numbers and teach their legislators about the issues they are facing.

We'll be shining a brilliant spotlight on disability issues and taking them directly to our legislators for the 2016 Session. It is vitally important that our lawmakers hear the voices of those with intellectual/developmental disabilities, their families, their caregivers, and their advocates, to help them understand the need for adequate funding that provides fundamental, life-saving services.

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

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

The iBudget Waiver makes it possible for 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 14.17 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 provider staffing for delivering waiver services. This can only be done by increasing the compensation providers receive.

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. This year we are advocating that 1222 individuals come off the waitlist.

Employment First

Currently, the “Employment First” initiative, based on an executive order by Governor Rick Scott, provides much needed supports for individuals with intellectual and developmental disabilities who want to be gainfully employed. We want to see it put into law with a statutory foundation. This would provide guidance and support for the strategic action implementation plan which was developed by the Employment First Collaborative Team, and Employment Partnership Coalition, and agreed to by nine state agencies and organizations in an interagency cooperative agreement. SB 7010 and HB 7003 include Employment First and other employment initiatives for people with developmental disabilities.

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.

Deinstitutionalization for Individuals with Intellectual and Developmental Disabilities

A large number of individuals with intellectual and developmental disabilities still reside in institutions when they could be receiving home-based or community-based care. In fact, Florida Statute Chapter 393 calls for the removal of individuals from unnecessary institutional placements and abating the use of large institutions. We ask that the Legislature require the Agency for Persons with Disabilities to create and implement a comprehensive five-year plan to significantly reduce the number of individuals with intellectual and developmental disabilities who reside in Florida’s remaining institutions and follow the directive per that statute.

Children’s Issues

There are five issues relating to children with intellectual and developmental disabilities that we also hope our Legislators will give their attention – we urge support of inclusive postsecondary education opportunities, and the establishment of comprehensive transition programs – we want to see guidelines established for the prevention and reduction of the use of physical restraints on young people with intellectual and developmental disabilities in the public school system – we urge support of continued funding for the critically important Florida Early Steps and Help Me Grow Florida programs – and we support the removal of children with medically complex conditions from institutional-type settings and their placement into family homes with the services they need to help them thrive, learn and grow.

To learn more about these 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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Sylvia James-Miller is an Ocala resident and parent advocate who serves as chair of the Florida Developmental Disabilities Council, Inc. She can be reached by phone at: (352) 843-3202 or by email at sajm19@embarqmail.com.