

State plan will hurt people with disabilities

By David Ordan
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Imagine a plan to help people with disabilities find jobs in the community that left 78% of these people worse off than before.

Imagine a plan to help people with disabilities earn competitive wages that resulted in just 10 hours a week of work.

Imagine a plan to help people with disabilities that actually eliminates a vital safety net that has served this most vulnerable population for more than 30 years, reducing their life choices, rather than increasing them.

Contrary to what some well-meaning advocates would have you believe, this is exactly what we can expect if Wisconsin's Department of Health Services refuses to modify its five-year plan to eliminate funding for group homes and sheltered workshops

For the moment, let us take the authors of their op-ed at their word ("[Improving lives of people with disabilities.](#)" Aug. 1). Let us agree that 20% to 25% of people with disabilities could indeed benefit from a wider range of living and working options if such options could be made possible.

Does that mean the remaining 75% to 80% should be left with fewer choices as to where they live and work?

To illustrate my point, Eisenhower Center is a vocational program in Milwaukee that provides jobs, day services and special education to nearly 100 people with developmental disabilities. The vast majority of our clients function at well below 30% of non-disabled workers, and many of them have functional capacities of 10% and below. Furthermore, many require one-to-one assistance with such basic daily tasks as eating and using the bathroom facilities.

Once funding for sheltered workshops is eliminated, can any reasonable person expect the majority of our clients to find a job in the community — especially in a down economy? Can anyone expect their employer to take a 300-pound, non-verbal diabetic in a wheelchair to the bathroom, check his insulin or insert a feeding tube during his lunch break?

Furthermore, can we realistically expect their social circles to expand after they are removed from a stable setting in which they interact with more than 100 people every day in favor of staying at home or trying to make their way on their own throughout the city? What about those who live in more rural or distant settings? Will the state pay for personalized transportation for thousands of people with disabilities?

If the experience of other states is any indication, the results of this transition plan is likely to be disappointing at best — and an utter disaster at worst.

In 2011, the Vermont Developmental Disabilities Council reported on the results of that state's decision to eliminate center-based programs in 2005. Six years after the programs were eliminated, just 36% of people with disabilities had found employment — at an average of just 10 hours a week. The remaining 64% had no job whatsoever — and essentially nowhere to go during the day.

The results in Maine were worse, with just 23% finding jobs after that state eliminated its workshop programs.

So much for the move to encourage integrated employment.

No one would argue that we as a society should do everything we can to improve the lives of people with disabilities and help them live as fully and independently as possible.

However, claiming to increase choices when you are actually taking them away does a disservice not only to people with disabilities but to anyone who cares about their plight.

Governor, don't let them do this. Fix the plan.

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