

THE "AMERICAN JOBS PLAN" OFFERS VITAL SUPPORT FOR DISABLED

There is good news on the horizon for families of individuals with disabilities. The Biden Administration has proposed much-needed funding increases for vital services that are currently on hold.

One of the more frustrating aspects for persons with disabilities is receiving services desperately needed to help make life a bit more manageable. This includes behavior support, housing assistance, therapeutic services, employment training and so much more. Under the general heading of Home and Community Based Services (HCBS) states are allocated funds to help meet these needs. In some cases assistance is mandatory. But in many examples the states are allowed to place a cap on the number of persons they serve based on financial resources within the state budget. This includes many of the waiver programs designed for specific needs of individuals. Typically, when states have reached their capacity for funding, persons seeking services are placed on a waiting list. A person can be on a waiting list for many years. Their needs may not improve – most likely they will increase – but they still are forced to go without the necessary services.

I know from first hand experience how frustrating it can be to be sitting on a waiting list for these services. Nationwide, there are currently over 219,000 individuals on HCBS waiting lists. I understand funding is always an issue, and you cannot spend money you do not have. But we are talking about basic life needs. Persons with disabilities are so easily brushed aside and denied access to achieve some semblance of human dignity and value. By and large legislators and administrators are so far removed from this segment of the population that they find ways to ignore them. Unfortunately, many caregivers and family members do not understand the ins and outs of how to receive funds or advocate for change. The system is extremely complicated. Let's be honest, the government does not make anything easy! Yet, how many people know, for example, if their state has capped an approved waiver at 5,000 recipients, but the legislature only allocates funds for 4,500, the state is still required to serve the 500 people who do not receive the waiver?¹ This requires the applicant to know how many people are approved and how many the State claims to serve, but this information is not readily available. One's only recourse is to be diligent and to advocate, using every possible resource available. It is especially effective to write to your State Legislators, government officials, county agencies and perhaps even submit letters to the editor of your local newspaper, to constantly seek the services necessary and/or prompt changes in policy.

Another issue that needs to be addressed is the pay scale for professionals and staff members providing direct care. In far too many cases they are underpaid for the work they do. Studies show that increased salaries for caregivers leads to better quality care, greater productivity and fewer health violations.

These changes are absolutely crucial and long overdue. To address these concerns, the Biden Administration proposed new legislation last week known as the American Jobs Plan. It calls for \$400 billion to expand current programs.

"These investments will help hundreds of thousands of Americans finally obtain the long-term services and support they need, while creating new jobs and offering caregiving workers a long-overdue raise, stronger benefits, and an opportunity to organize or join a union and collectively bargain," the White House said.

This is all part of the infrastructure package designed to create jobs and provide needed improvements to transportation, schools and utilities. President Biden correctly argues that caregiving for our vulnerable citizens will enhance the nation as a whole. I am so glad that our government has enough insight and wisdom to identify this and offer concrete solutions for the long haul. These proposals are intended to unfold over the next eight years and will be paid for through corporate tax increases.

Already there are members of Congress complaining that the cost of the total package is excessive and will cause problems for the economy. Yet these very same Senators and Representatives quickly and enthusiastically voted for the insanely huge tax cuts of 2017. Those tax cuts culminated some forty years during which the 400 wealthiest families in America saw their tax rates gradually and steadily decline. But in 2017 their taxes dropped sharply to the point where these same families, each of which had net worth in the billions of dollars, were now paying taxes at a lower rate than the bottom 50 percent of American families.²

It is always difficult to place a price tag on human suffering. But I would argue that we must be held accountable for the way we treat and care for the disabled among us. It just is not fair for hundreds of thousands of U. S. citizens to have to wait years before they are given the care and the therapy they need to function in a world that is stacked against them. It is the right thing to do, whether from a social perspective or a religious one. For those of us who claim to be Christians, I would call attention to the New Testament. There are so many passages I could quote calling us to be compassionate and to bear the burdens of others, but I will single out one for now: ***“If anyone has material possessions and sees his brother in need but has no pity on him, how can the love of God be in him?”*** (1 John 3:17 NIV).

My question for you, therefore, is simple. Is the love of God in you? If so, I would argue that it is our responsibility to support this important legislation and contact your Senators and Representative to let your views be known.

Endnotes

1. *“Waiting Lists and Medicaid Home and Community Based Services”, by the National Association of State Directors of Developmental Disabilities Services. November 2017*
2. *Newsweek 10/9/2019*