

From the Desk of Alan Greene: It's Time to Fully Fund the Wait List

Twenty five years ago New Hampshire took a bold step forward in serving its citizens with disabilities by committing itself to a community based system of services. Local nonprofit area agencies were established and Laconia State School was emptied, bringing us national attention as the first state to close its institution. The unique public-private area agency model proved to be an engine for further change and innovation: self-determination, which was first developed here, became a national model; and we were one of the first states to systematically measure outcomes. We were honored by the ARC as first in the nation in community integration. In 2003, the federal government chose our system as one of 10 “best practice” states, saying “It is distinguished by a number of innovative features, including a single point of entry into the system through Area Agencies, a strong community living program, considerable local control with significant stakeholder input, and finally, innovative program management (including individualized budgets).”

In 2007 we find ourselves with a proud past and a challenging but promising future. For the first time since the closing of Laconia, the Governor, House and Senate have all proposed plans to fully fund the waiting list for services. After a 10 year hiatus, Commissioner Stephen restored rate increases for the state’s current biennial budget. It looks like we are about to make significant strides in serving our most vulnerable citizens. What must be done to ensure that we do not squander this opportunity?

Our elected officials must adequately fund the system. NH is the sixth wealthiest state in the nation, yet we have a large and growing wait list and face an impending crisis in finding enough workers to serve the needs of families and individuals. Individuals with disabilities want the same kind of life we all want, but they need special supports and services to achieve it. It is the proper role of government to provide for this. Our state leadership has recognized this. The rest of the legislature must follow their lead and vote the funds necessary.

The Bureau of Developmental Disabilities, the area agency system, provider agencies and the advocacy and academic communities must work together to find statewide solutions to pressing problems. These include the lack of staff-secure facilities for forensic individuals, consistency in fire safety measures, and the growing shortage of qualified direct care workers. The nature of these problems requires coordinated, system-wide solutions.

Families of individuals with disabilities must educate their elected officials regarding the effects of under funded services, and ask for their support. Support will include full funding of the wait list request currently making its way through the state budget process, and support of rate increases to keep up with inflation. In the last state budget, funding fell short of what was needed. As a result, many people are without services. That will happen again if families do not raise their voices.

It is time for a renewed effort in community building. Basic services for all who need them should be fully funded and delivered through a dynamic service system that continually improves itself. But even the best services do not provide a full life for an individual. That takes place in a community of others: within families; between friends; in neighborhoods, clubs, and churches; and arise from voluntary, not paid, relationships. Community building must play a more important part in our vision, our planning, and our practice. Our agencies must become more involved in their communities. Families must develop support networks of friends and relatives to complement their paid services. Regulations and policies must support this direction, not impede it. The invisible wall between service systems and their communities must come down.

This is a service system we can believe in and one we can afford. Let us make a renewed commitment to it.