

We need more champions for people with disabilities

Wednesday, Feb. 13, 2008

The Rosewood Center, a troubled state institution for people with developmental disabilities, is finally closing.

This will mean people with disabilities will finally be afforded the same opportunity to live in a community as you and I. Some of you may not realize how this happens. It can be very simple.

Committed community agencies provide the ongoing support and staffing for individuals so they can live and work in the community, without the isolation of an institution.

They can offer choices as to where they live, who they live with and what type of supports they need.

Community-based services cost taxpayers less, and maximize independence, yet the state has continually underfunded them year after year. The governor and the General Assembly have a responsibility to every Marylander with a developmental disability and their family to adequately fund the system of community-based services such as the ones people from Rosewood will turn to.

The state's budget crunch will result in another year of underfunding. Because of the skyrocketing costs of things like gasoline, utilities, rent and food, the state's own rate-setting commission has determined that agencies need a 4 percent increase just to keep up with 2009 inflation. The governor's budget includes a mere 1.5 percent inflationary increase.

How long can agencies provide quality services without a responsible commitment from the governor for cost-of-living increases? Agencies fear direct care staff will suffer and seek higher pay elsewhere.

Agencies must pay for fuel, oil, electricity and rising health care costs just like you and me. People receiving services are already feeling the sting of changes many agencies have had to make due to inadequate funding.

While Charles County is very fortunate to have a member of the General Assembly, Sen. "Mac" Middleton, who understands the importance of community services and who has been a longtime champion for people with disabilities, the governor and the General Assembly need to act now to stabilize and strengthen community-based supports for people with developmental disabilities. We can't afford to wait any longer.

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