

ACCESS LIVING TESTIMONY

for the DEFICIT REDUCTION COMMITTEE

March 10, 2009

Access Living is a non-residential center for independent living which advocates on behalf of and provides services to anyone with any kind of disability in the city of Chicago. Today we are representing the thousands of people in Chicago who receive or who need long term care services in their home through the Department of Human Services Home Service Program. In FY 2008 over 33, 000 people were served statewide.

We are concerned that the lack of fiscal responsibility is putting our people in danger of losing the extremely important services they need to remain in their homes. Personal assistants provide home care such as: bathing assistance, cooking, shopping, personal grooming, toileting, laundry and transferring from the wheelchair to the bed. These home services cost the state less than half as much as the equivalent care in a nursing home. For many years now we have urged the state to rebalance long term care and allow people to choose where they will receive services because we know most seniors and people with disabilities want to live in their own homes and as other states have shown, it also saves money.

We see proposals coming from the Department of Human Services that would severely restrict eligibility to services in the Home Services Program. They would exclude people under the age of 18. This would affect 1,500 individuals and families. They would exclude people who have a cognitive impairment as their primary disability cutting off 3,500 people from services. They would move people with psychiatric disabilities to a proposed new waiver. This we could support if the services were equivalent or better than those currently received. They want to exclude people over the age of 60 from receiving services under the Traumatic Brain Injury waiver forcing them to go into the Department of Aging's Community Care Program. This program has long been inadequate for keeping many seniors out of nursing homes with a maximum of 20 hours a week delivered only Monday through Friday, when long experience tells us that

people need more hours and service 7 days a week to prevent premature moves to nursing homes when adequate home care would be cheaper and meet their preference to age in place. The seniors in the Traumatic Brain Injury Waiver who are now successfully living in the community would be left with inadequate services and be forced into nursing homes.

The Division of Rehabilitation Services has proposed other cuts as well, including raising the bar to qualify for home care services and making all service plans reflect the same amount of time to complete certain tasks. As individuals have different needs and each person's disability has unique aspects, it can take one person a shorter period than another for things like completing bowel programs or with assistance with eating.

We have seen that in the Home Services Program there have not been enough Case Counselors as the state has frozen hiring and squeezed budgets year after year. Case loads are frequently over 300 people and the quality of the service has already suffered. We have seen counselors refuse new service hours to consumers whose condition has worsened because the clear message of the central office is to save any bit of money you can.

We need a thriving Home Services Program. We need to rebalance long term care to meet the public's wishes and to build an affordable system of long term care. None of this is possible if the state goes down the road of slashing home services to address the enormous deficit. A responsible person would see that we have been derelict in allowing a large structural deficit to develop. It is time that we raise the revenues needed to provide the urgently needed services that people with disabilities count on to live productive independent lives in the community.