



Monday Morning Memo, October 13, 2014

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...Public Policy Reports

The Arc and UCP in California (Greg deGiere, Public Policy Director) How to Restore Services for People with Developmental Disabilities

Dear Friends,

I don't think I have to tell you that services and supports for our people have been eroding for years due to state budget freezes and cuts. Now they're not just eroding, they're crumbling.

Last Thursday more than 100 people showed up for a state Senate hearing in LA to tell the Legislature what the problems are. It became clearer than I've ever seen that our service and support system has started to crumble.

The two senators there, already our allies, got the message loud and clear.

And Senator Jim Beall had a message for us too: go talk to the state senators and assemblymembers who are elected from the districts where you live. We've got some strong allies in the Legislature, but we need more if we're serious about restoring our programs.

This fall we're asking you to be part of a coordinated, statewide push to make lawmakers hear from the people who are really affected most - with the goal of making some real progress in 2015.

As someone who worked for legislators for years, I can assure you that it can make a big difference when they hear about problems from voters like you in their own districts. When I walk in to talk to a legislator who has heard from people back home, it can be a night-and-day difference from when I try to get the attention of a one who has no idea what I'm talking about or how it affects their constituents.

(Did I tell you about the time I went to talk to a legislative staffer about developmental services and, after a minute or so, he asked me if I was talking about redevelopment agencies? I'm not making this up.)

The fight over the developmental services budget and some other key issues is going to be as sharp next year as it has been in a long time. We're going to need a few - OK, a lot - more legislators who not only know what we're talking about but feel it personally because they've heard from people like you.

So here's what we're asking you to do. It takes more time (and, let's face it, courage) than the make-a-call or send-an-email Action Alerts I usually send you. And because of that, it will have more impact on your legislators. They'll know you're someone who cares enough to show up, speak up, and maybe even talk to your friends about it. People who keep their jobs in elections care about people like you who do that.

Here's where to start:

You have two legislators, a state senator (no, it's not Dianne Feinstein) and an Assembly representative. If you don't know who they are, they probably don't know who you are, either, and it's time for them to find out. Go to www.TheArcCA.org, scroll down a little to the blue and white "Contact Your Legislators" button, put in your ZIP code, and click on "Go," and then scroll down a little to "My Elected Officials." To get their numbers, click on their names and then on "Contact."

The first thing to know about the two legislators listed there is whether they are going to be out of office at the end of this year. It's easy to find out - call and ask them.

If your senator's term goes on for two more years, or your senator or assemblymember is running for reelection this November, or your assemblymember is running for the Senate in November, you can ask their staffer who answers the phone a couple of things. How do you (or you and a group of people from the developmental disability community, who you can get together later) make an appointment with the legislator? And do they have any town hall meetings, campaign events, or other public events coming up where you can talk to them?

If they're running for election or re-election in November, now is the time to call. They want your votes.

You're more likely to get appointments with the legislators themselves if you can say honestly that you are part of a group, but even an individual can get in to talk to a legislator sometimes. If not, you'll get scheduled with a staffer, and that's OK.

When you talk to the legislator or staffer, start by telling them who you are and why you're there (such as, "My daughter has autism and is having trouble getting the services she needs through our regional center, and I'm here to ask for your help").

Don't feel like you need to know everything before you go talk to them. They don't, why should you? But you do know how the problem effects you and your loved ones, so tell them that. Speak from the heart. Even if your voice shakes.

If you have a specific, individual problem, it may be that the legislator can help solve it with a letter or phone call to the agency involved or a meeting with someone from the agency. That's called constituent work. Legislators like to do it because it's emotionally satisfying to actually solve somebody's problem - and also because they're politicians and they know that they will have earned your gratitude for ever.

More likely, though, your problem is the same, big problem that people all over the state are having. Usually that will be that the Legislature isn't funding the services enough to

meet the needs, though it may be any number of other things.

You don't need to know what the solution is. Make it their problem, and ask them to work on solving it. Feel free to suggest they work on it with your advocates in the Capitol. That's us, among others.

You can also tell them - totally honestly - that the developmental disability community as a whole is asking for an emergency 10% across-the-board increase in provider rates and regional center operating funds. We think that should be enough to stabilize the system, stop the crumbling, and restore some of the cuts, while the Legislature works on a serious overhaul to start making progress again.

If a legislator is going to be out of office at the end of this year, ask their staff who the candidates are running to replace them. Then try to get an appointment or find a campaign event where you can talk to them. If that doesn't work, or if your legislator loses in November, you can start working on the new senator or assemblymember then.

At the end of talking to one of them, sum up what you agreed to do and what you think they agreed to do. ("So I'll get your staff the information you asked for, and then you'll contact the department about it, right?" or "So if you're elected, you'll bring this up in the Legislature next year and get back to me then, correct?")

Last thing before you go, ask them to pose for a picture with you. They'll love that. Send it to use for our web page.

Then follow up with a letter to the legislator thanking him or her (everybody likes to be thanked) and again summing up what you think you and they agreed on.

If you talked with a staffer with or instead of the legislator, get that person's name and number for future use. You have a relationship with them now, and relationships are everything.

Finally, send me an email letting me know who you talked to and how it went. For a professional advocate like me, that information can be pure gold.

How's that for a fall project? It's a lot of work, but I know you're interested in helping with the campaign because you've read this far. If you were satisfied with how everything is going for you and your loved ones, you would have stopped 20 paragraphs ago.

Please make those first calls to your two legislators now.

And thank you for your advocacy.

Greg

PS. And another thing. If you or anybody in your family isn't a registered voter, that's the next step after the two calls. Go to www.RegisterToVote.ca.gov. The legislators' staffs will probably check that about whoever is coming to see them.

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