

Feedback to the HCBS Transition Plan- Testimony for January 15, 2015

If someone wants the opportunity to move to a different home or to find a different job, they absolutely should be given that opportunity. However, others who want to stay where they currently live or continue working where they currently work, should absolutely be given the same consideration, opportunity, and choice!!! Even if that choice is an ICF and/or a sheltered workshop. Olmstead clearly states that CHOICE is the key, so we need to focus on Choice for future planning.

I do NOT understand and can not fathom WHY CHOICE is not being offered??? An agency along with government officials can decide to force ALL individuals with IDD to be “integrated” in community settings and have socialization with “non-disabled people”. I have heard speakers from the state level, read through reports, websites, the Transition Plan, and listened to the moderators at last week’s Open Forum, and each of these have repeatedly stated over and over and over the following phrases: “develop relationships with non-disabled people”, “better community integration”, “socialization with people with no disabilities”, these phrases all indicate that a relationship with someone WITH a disability is of LESS VALUE than a relationship with someone without a disability!!!! This is discrimination against those with disabilities. This is insulting to those with disabilities. Where I work, Boyd’s Kinsman Home, an ICF Home, we focus on everyone’s ABILITIES. All people have strengths and weaknesses, there are things some of my residents can do which I can’t! Then there are things they can’t do, which is what we are here to provide and help them with. They all call each other brothers and sisters, they call each other family. They call the staff their family, and that’s what they truly are- a Family. Their relationships and bonds are strong and are valuable, even if they don’t fit the definition of the HCBS model.

I implore you to listen to the countless citizens of our state who are clearly speaking out against some of the recommendations made in your plan. I attended the Open Forum in Independence, OH, on Thursday, January 8, 2015, and many parents and individuals (with IDD) themselves spoke very clearly and passionately as to what their desires are. Parents were afraid of what settings their loved ones may have to move to, away from secure and loving homes with quality care. Parents were concerned about where their children would find jobs when many people without disabilities can’t find a job right now. And several adults with IDD shared they want left alone, they want to remain in their current homes, they want to remain in their workshops, they want the CHOICE to decide where to live and work, they don’t want to be taken away from their friends. Some even shared they have been bullied and teased and do not want placed in the community away from their friends who make them feel loved and accepted and secure. There was one man (with IDD) who said he’s looking for a job in the community, and so he should be helped to find a job. But there were many others who stated clearly to leave them in their homes and workshops! There was fear in the parents’ voices, there was a plea to the State to listen to them. So I was extremely disappointed when the moderators were asked if they would report back to you the results of this meeting and the response was “no, we are not required to report back reactions from these meetings”. It’s very disheartening to feel our voices weren’t heard. Further, there were people at the Open Forum last week who stated they did not have access to a computer (including an Amish woman who spoke), each time someone said this, the moderator stated that a mailing address was in a previous slide earlier that evening or found on the website.

Several parents were frustrated by this and asked for the address, but the slide was never put back up.

The residents from my ICF Home, work in a sheltered workshop or attend a Seniors Program. They LOVE where they are. They perform real jobs which contribute to society and they are sooooo proud of themselves. Working contributes to their self-esteem. However, they are in an environment which promotes them to be successful without drawing attention to their needs or differences. The jobs are adapted, the staff help, and they can each work at their own pace. Once the jobs are complete, they are trucked back to the various companies. My residents love to show off their Home and their workshop. They are proud of each. They are proud of the jobs they complete. I have been told repeatedly that the Employment First Initiative does not always mean "employment" but can mean going to the library or food bank or animal shelter. While volunteering is also a wonderful act of service, doing it instead of working is taking away jobs from people who actually want to work! Isn't unemployment in Ohio high enough? The residents spend their hard earned money on entertainment and outings- money they earn at their jobs! They attend concerts, festivals, plays, movies, eating out, shopping, putt-putt, bowling, local sporting events to minor league and professional sporting events, and every year we take our annual family vacation- trips to Columbus, Cleveland, and Cincinnati have been enjoyed as well as trips to Graceland and Nashville, TN, Hershey, PA, Washington, D.C., and most recently to New York City! Their hard earned money is going back into the economy- why make them stop working in jobs where they are successful and thriving, to try something new just for the sake of change?

Further, there are some employers who are currently willing to hire individuals with IDD, and for those who are capable of working and want to work in this environment, this is a perfect partnership. However, if forcing those who don't want to work into a situation that is not healthy or productive for them, you may actually harm the opportunities for those who want to work to find employers willing to still hire.

PLEASE LISTEN to the members of the community, citizens who vote for elected officials, and most importantly the INDIVIDUALS themselves who you claim to be helping. Continue to help those who want a change, but do not disrupt the precious lives of those who are thriving, happy, well cared for, and safe and secure!

In conclusion, I implore you to offer CHOICE, as a one size fits all policy does NOT fit ALL. Therefore, CHOICES offered to those who want a change is wonderful, but CHOICE for those who want to continue living and working in their current settings may keep their RIGHT TO CHOOSE ICF's and sheltered workshops as a valued option, and not be penalized by lack of funding for that Choice!

THANK YOU for your time and future consideration!

Sincerely,
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