

THEIR FUTURE'S AT STAKE

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Concerned that state funds for people with disabilities and mental illness continue to decline, more than 90 community agencies have banded together to ask Illinois gubernatorial candidates what they will do to help thousands of people like Andrew Kesich.

Kesich, 20, desperately wants a paycheck so he has been working with a job coach at Cornerstone Services Inc. so he can learn how to stock shelves and bag groceries.

"It gives me confidence to do it. It is a challenge and I like challenges," said Kesich of New Lenox, who has been looking for a job since July after he graduated from Country Club Hills Tech & Trade Center.

"I was trying desperately to get a job. That has been my goal," he said.

Kesich, however, is lucky because he is getting help.

"There are 24,000 students annually exiting special education high school services -- many of whom need support from community agencies in terms of getting a job and keeping a job," said Jim Hogan, executive director of Cornerstone Services in Joliet. "As a result many persons with disabilities who turn 22 and who then have to leave special education services being provided at the high school level are sitting at home because there is no further help for them in a vocational manner."

He estimates there are only about 45 out of 1,200 local youths who receive services after leaving high school each year.

"There are many people in Will County who are in that situation because the state of Illinois is improperly funding community agencies which serve persons with disabilities in order for those agencies to meet the need that exists in their community," he said.

Ongoing problem

But it's an old song that Hogan and his colleagues have been singing for a long time as they have seen the funding in Illinois for people with disabilities decrease. In 1974, Illinois ranked No. 24 in the nation in the amount of money provided to people with disabilities, dropping to No. 43 in 2005.

To get the state back to No. 24, Hogan said the state needs to provide a 10 percent increase in funding for the next eight years.

That's why the agencies that serve people with disabilities and mental illness have joined together to form One Illinois: A Community Initiative for Persons with Disabilities. Representing about 2.2 million voters, One Illinois developed its own platform of needs and asked the three gubernatorial candidates what they will support.

"We are providing the candidates' responses to our questions to help educate people so they can make an informed choice when they vote," said Matt Keppler, legislative director of Illinois Association of Rehabilitation Facilities.

The answers from gubernatorial candidates, Democratic Gov. Rod Blagojevich, GOP challenger Judy Barr Topinka and Green Party candidate Rich Whitney can be found on the Web site at www.oneillinois.info.

The group asked if the candidates would establish a department that focuses specifically on disability services as a state agency to be headed and staffed by people with experience and expertise in serving people with disabilities and mental illness. The new department would include Developmental Disabilities, Mental Health, Alcohol and Substance Abuse, Rehabilitation Services, and Early Intervention services for adults and children.

"We would need to further discuss it," said Sheila Nix, deputy campaign manager for communications and policy for Blagojevich.

"I am willing to give this idea consideration," Topinka replied in a written response. "It has been nearly a decade since the state reorganized its human services agencies and it is time to conduct a review of the reorganization, its effectiveness and alternative structures. We cannot ignore, though, that the state has immense budgetary problems and any reorganization plans must also consider cost implications."

Whitney said, "It is indeed troubling that the Department of Human Services covers everything from Community Health and Prevention to HIPAA enforcement to the Office of Hispanic and Latino Affairs. I would rather see such departments relocated to more appropriate agencies, so that the Department of Human Services can be more focused on delivering care to persons with disabilities and/or mental illness, as well as other persons with special, individualized needs."

Funding an issue

Other questions included more funding in order to have less staff turnover and to decrease the waiting list for those needing services.

In Illinois about 3,200 people with a developmental disability have urgent need for residential services and supports.

There are 430 people in Will County and 27 people in Grundy County who are on a waiting list, said Dick Bell, executive director of Service of Will, Grundy and Kankakee Counties Inc.

The agency is working with 1,400 infants and toddlers with developmental disabilities in Will, Grundy, Kankakee and LaSalle counties.

While the numbers of children needing services has increased, the funding hasn't.

"That program hasn't had an increase of any kind in seven years -- not even cost-of- living," Bell said.

"We have a lot of turnover because people can't make enough money to support their families."