



## Georgia doesn't have to be last in developmental disability funds

By Dave Blanchard

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When a family member is living with a developmental disability like cerebral palsy, Down syndrome or autism, life is filled with daunting challenges.

Some we would expect, such as ensuring quality education and securing safe housing. But there are also challenges with the everyday activities, such as getting to the store or dialing 911 in an emergency.

Families in Georgia, where more than 90,000 individuals are reported as living with developmental disabilities, find these experiences even more challenging. Georgia is ranked 50th in the nation in fiscal support given to individuals with developmental disabilities. That's dead last. Most of these families do not have access to sufficient support to meet the most basic needs. More than half of Georgia families who are living with developmental disability are living in poverty.

As an organization devoted to this issue for more than 50 years, All About Developmental Disabilities knows that it can't be ignored. More than 40 percent of our participants have experienced violence or sexual exploitation, and they are more likely to be taken advantage of by others, experience homelessness or encounter the criminal justice system. The impact doesn't end with their families. The impact of every critical community challenge — from homelessness to health care to crime — is multiplied by the effect of developmental disability.

A settlement between Georgia and the U.S. Department of Justice offers hope. The settlement has empowered the state to increase its support of people living with developmental disabilities. It also opens the door to new, more effective avenues for allocating funding — with methods that will improve care and increase access to services. But it's only a beginning.

The Georgia General Assembly still needs to approve funding before Georgia's families can realize the full benefits of this important ruling. One of the settlement's most important benefits is that individuals with developmental disabilities will no longer be relegated to inhumane state hospitals, and all individuals now under state hospital care will be integrated back into their communities by 2015.

The antiquated, centuries-old policy of institutionalizing individuals with developmental disabilities has been both harmful to individuals with developmental disability and fiscally detrimental to the state budget.

The settlement also contains an economic stimulus that creates jobs. Entities offering services to individuals with developmental or mental health disability will need to significantly expand their work force to meet the mandates of the settlement. This means Georgia can provide positive, productive support to more residents, while also positively impacting the state's economy.

I am hopeful that our legislators will do the right thing by supporting and fully funding the settlement. Our legislators have an opportunity to move our tax dollars into a more efficient investment that will create jobs that Georgia needs now, and ensure that people with disabilities have the supports they need for a rewarding life. We have been trailing the nation on this issue for too long. Georgia must seize this moment to address our embarrassing national standing with respect to how we care for and support individuals with developmental disability.

Disability is a natural part of the human condition. The settlement requires us to engage individuals with disabilities as productive contributors in their communities. Our families and communities are better when everyone contributes. Individuals with disability are an important part of the fabric of our state. We all benefit when they play an active role.

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