

November 10, 2009

Representative Peggy Krusick
Wisconsin State Assembly
P.O. Box 8952
Madison, WI 53708

Dear Representative Krusick:

This letter is concerning the upcoming hearing on Family Care, scheduled for November 12, 2009 by the Assembly Committee on Aging and Long-Term Care. I am a retired special educator having taught students with severe cognitive/multiple disabilities for 20 plus years, high school transition coordinator for 4 years and the county human service disability coordinator for over 11 years. I have been a member of the Columbia County Arc since the mid 1970's and currently serve as Board President. I have had many years experience working with students, adults, families, service providers (residential, vocational and support services) within the framework of IDEA legislation and the 51.42/.437 systems. My career began in the early 70's in the thrust of deinstitutionalization and the implementation of the 51.437 legislation. I have seen Respite Care, COP and CIP come into existence. I have grave concerns over what is happening to the community based service system for individuals with disabilities that we have worked so long to achieve.

In theory, Family Care and Family Care Partnership Programs are a positive in the evolution of the human service delivery system. They were described in terms such as, "outcome driven service plans", giving clients and their families a choice in services, and a collaborative, and common sense approach. Major initiatives were to rid counties of waiting lists and to change from a 72 county system to a regional system of service delivery to save in overhead expenses.

In reality, are the Family Care programs meeting their own goals? Waiting lists....may be shortened, but more people served with less service for all? What exists is a "watered down" system leaving members with unstructured, unsupervised time on their hands, and service providers unable to meet their needs due to lack of funding. Have strides been made in transitioning from a county to a regional service delivery system? Has money been saved in overhead expenses? Choice...when Care WI is the only MCO in the county and current service providers are struggling to exist financially, not to mention developing new choices? A collaborative, common sense approach when many young, inexperienced MCO workers who are unfamiliar with the county, service providers, families and most of all, its members are making "team" decisions without any input from members, legal guardians, school staff, families and service providers? The "team" consists of MCO staff. They are building their own empire.....and not a fiscally sound one from reports that I have heard. They have and will receive whatever it takes from state funding sources to carry on, in an attempt to make the program "succeed". Service providers are being forced to beg for funding to maintain the quality of life and services that are currently in existence, while taking the underlying risk of retribution from "the hand that feeds them". Outcome driven service plans are ideal, but reality must enter in. Members are relying on professionals to assist them in developing their plans; however, all the planning in the world doesn't change the reality of their situations.

Specifically, I am very concerned about the proposed changes to prevocational services within the Family Care and Partnership Program. As an educator and transition coordinator for all EEN students in my school, let me share some of my direct experiences.....

...unemployment among the above population creates two major problems (especially true in a rural county such as ours)...isolation and depression. These factors result in an increase in mental health

issues, many untreated because the individual is "not in the system" and/or family, or lack thereof does not have the resources to deal correctly with the situation

...transportation is a major issue....not just for employment, but for daily living and social experiences.

Work centers, in many counties, have the only well developed transportation network operating.

...alternative living situations for members may be the best environment but are doomed to failure without the supports necessary to assist them to succeed, especially when the vocational services are reduced or eliminated

...DVR has been an ineffective resource.....constant staff turnover, internal turmoil, inconsistent services between counselors, difficulty in accessing the services. This has resulted in the residents of our county underutilizing dollars and services that they are entitled to....especially those with learning disabilities and/or emotional challenges. These are the students who drop out of high school with no supports/services in place. These are the students who could most benefit from DVR, but instead, we read about them in the newspaper

...the DVR system in general works against members with long term care needs. Counselors are evaluated on the basis of numbers of cases closed....why would a counselor want to take on a long term client when they could successfully close several others with less severe needs? I was once told by one of our county's DVR counselors...."the cream of your crop, is the bottom of my heap!" Services are also time limited....so after a client does not achieve successful employment within the time frame what is next? DVR will not authorize prevocational services in a work center, or if they might, when that time runs out....what's next?

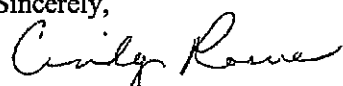
...what about choice??? Many of my former students choose to be at the work center. Many have had jobs in the community which they no longer wish to keep for any number of reasons. They look forward to and benefit from the work atmosphere, the professional and social supports at the work center.

...Northwoods of WI, Inc. is the work center in our county. They have an excellent reputation among clients, their families, service providers, local businesses and employers and school personnel. The transition process for many of my high school students with jobs in the community was seamless, due to their cooperation and professionalism. Northwoods truly lives up to its reputation as a work center, offering many types of vocational experiences....**TO MEET THE INDIVIDUAL NEEDS/DESIRES OF THE CLIENT.** Prevocational services are necessary to provide the incremental steps necessary to reach successful community based employment for some, and employment at a work center for others. Many of my former students enjoy a combination of work(community based and in house) and day services. How much more flexibility in meeting an individual's needs could you ask for?

...a vocational reality check needs to be implemented. Are you aware of how many agencies are competing for the same, few jobs in the community....DVR, the schools, Renewal, Northwoods, Job Centers, temp agencies and individuals themselves??? There simply are not enough to go around, especially in the current economy. The other existing factor is that employers are subletting jobs to other businesses instead of hiring employees of their own. Contracting with Northwoods is another way of supporting people with disabilities in our county. It also provides the professional supports necessary to succeed, whereas among private employers....who is providing the role model and training to the other employees? Would you want your son or daughter placed in a business to be an employee with a job coach who has had only minimal training and probably very limited background in dealing with people with an array of disabilities? Aren't we setting the clients, as future employees of a business, and the business itself, up for frustration, failure and a damaged reputation?

I am beginning to fear that Family Care and the Family Care Partnership Programs, while good in theory, have become the "wolf in sheep's clothing" in practice. Please consider revising the proposed changes, especially regarding prevocational services, by taking a realistic approach to our member's actual circumstances and quality of life. While many training opportunities were offered prior to the implementation of Family Care, there are currently no avenues to evaluate/report implementation issues, and definitely no open collaborative options to include all involved.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in cursive script that reads "Cindy Rowe".

Cindy Rowe, Board President
Columbia County Arc Chapter