**Disability Services and Supports – A Call to Action**

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**The Issue** – Disability advocacy began in earnest in both the United States and in Canada in the early 1960’s when a spotlight was shone on institutions in both countries and the horrible realities of the treatment of people with disabilities was uncovered. It became clear that institutions needed to be closed, and people with disabilities, children, adults, and older adults would be better served as equal citizens within the community.

As people with disabilities began to leave these institutions (warehouses) the need for viable community services became evident. This led way to the creation of government funded services to help people lead full lives in the community – something all of us want, and no one can deny, regardless of political party or perspective. It was (and still is) just the right thing to do!

Over the ensuing years a variety of laws, and regulations were passed or initiated that focused on successful community engagement. These laws/regulations included housing issues, transportation services, vocational opportunities, health services, and community living supports such as attendant care and adaptive devices. Again, these issues addressed citizens with developmental disabilities, acquired disabilities, and chronic issues and they affect any/all of us regardless of political persuasion.

**The Problem** – Since the inauguration of the Trump Administration however, we have seen a wholesale assault on these very programs and services that we worked so hard to get initiated. This includes the elimination of Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion (DEI), cutbacks in Medicaid to the tune of 800 billion dollars, Social Security cuts and changes, eliminating the Department of Education, and other vital outlets for people with disabilities, Democrat or Republican. These cuts have not been made with any analysis, but rather a cut now, ask questions later approach that even the courts have expressed concerns. Similar cuts are happening in Canada as well, but they are much quieter in scope, but nonetheless as devastating. Both Canada and the United States have done very little to raise people out of poverty. In fact, we would suggest that poverty is increasing to levels never witnessed before.

Disability Advocates in the United States and Canada do not have an issue with efficiency, or reducing fraud and abuse. We support innovation and creativity with funding and supports that enrich the quality of life of people within their community. We agree with this, but to dismantle the very services that people with disabilities, families, advocates, friends and communities have worked so hard to create, and that no one could deny was needed, is absolutely unacceptable. There are smarter ways to examine these issues that will not push us back to the era of institutionalization for people with disabilities.

Further, any citizen, again regardless of political position, would agree that we need to protect and support vulnerable children or individuals with disabilities or encumbrances. These issues are publicly supported and accepted because disability can happen to anyone.

To this end, it is our position that these cuts, in the United States or Canada, will decimate an already fragile support system and have a ripple effect that will result in:

* People being denied services
* Incredible hardships on families who have someone with a disability
* Push thousands of people onto waiting lists
* Lead to a shortage of Direct Support Professionals
* Create more institutional type services that lead to congregation and segregation
* Chip away at other allied strides like Section 505, the ADA, SSDI and other gains

**The Needed Actions**

To say that we are in a crisis by all of this is an understatement. In fact, some advocates estimate that we will need a 10-fold increase in advocacy actions. With this in mind, this paper is a call to action in both the United States and Canada. The needs are clear for some 40 million individuals/families with disabilities in the US, and some 5 million Canadians individuals/families with disabilities.

**Action Steps**:

* A clear, coordinated agenda organized by one of our national disability agencies in our countries. We implore a national group to stand up and lead this cause. They can set up a website that can quarterback these actions. Given Zoom and other virtual platforms, space and travel can be accelerated, or eliminated allowing this action to be closer to “real” time. We must have some centralization of facts, actions, and recommendations.
* Each advocate needs to recruit at least one other person who does not have a disability to join us in this effort. Further, we need focused advocacy in Conservative districts.
* In the United States, search [www.house.gov](http://www.house.gov), [www.senate.gov](http://www.senate.gov), [www.whitehouse.gov](http://www.whitehouse.gov), and find your elected officials in the House and Senate. Go to their website and find their message template. Fill it out with some of the key points in this call to action. Call 202-224-3121 to find your federal official
* In Canada, you can reach your federal Member of Parliament by searching [www.ourcommons.ca/en/contact-us](http://www.ourcommons.ca/en/contact-us)
* To search for your provincial government elected representative please search *“how to reach your member of provincial government”*. For example, in Ontario, you can proceed to [www.ola.org/en/members/current](http://www.ola.org/en/members/current)
* Our messaging must be clear, regular, and specific. We will not accept this senseless, indiscriminate slashing of programs, offices, and services. Each advocate should make at least 3-5 contacts EACH WEEK to key federal, state, provincial, local politicians demanding that life-sustaining programs not be cut (or reinstated).
* This messaging can be in the form of a call, email, webpage correspondence, or direct face to face visit. For politicians who are bold enough to hold town hall meetings, we must fill their town hall with advocates in a unified message. Bring signs, handouts, pictures, stories, other allies. Work hard to have people with disabilities present!
* We need to remember, and add into our messaging, that they (the politicians) work for us, and they should also know, that we will vote them out if they remain insensitive to life sustaining services.
* Monitor how they vote on issues, and thank them when they are supportive, or switch our support to candidates who are sensitive to our positions.
* It is clear that more conservative elected officials are the ones who have voted for these cuts. Recognize that this posture is not friendly to folks with disabilities. In fact, the assault on Diversity Equity and Inclusion has been led by the conservative party. They are looking to repeal DEI initiatives. They must know that “Inclusion” is at the core of Disability issues and being against DEI is, in fact, being AGAINST disability issues.
* No one wants to be disobedient, but sometimes civil disobedience is necessary. The late John Lewis called this “good trouble,” and he was right. We must take a stand and demand that all the work we have done on disability rights, since the 1960’s cannot be decimated by caveat actions, especially when there is no clear data proving fraud and abuse. This is theatre driven inuendo that is baseless and must not be tolerated.

**Conclusion**

The urgency for this action is clear. Every day, another program or service critical to people with disabilities is either cut or targeted for elimination. The American cuts have become a spectacle and make for daily theater. In Canada, the cuts are more subtle, but are present nonetheless. The time for action is now – THIS IS NOT A DRILL!