

The smart money is on private providers

Take On Life/Brian Koonz (Commentary)

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Over the past eight years, Bethel's Michael Donovan has watched his son, Stephen, take on more and more responsibility.

Stephen makes his own lunch and works one day a week at Duracell. Other days he helps out at a soup kitchen in New Milford, volunteers at a local church and spends time with his friends.

At 34 years old, Stephen Donovan has a full life. With the help of Ability Beyond Disability, he has made Down syndrome a diagnosis rather than a defeat.

Rest assured, no one is happier than Stephen's parents, Michael and Maureen Donovan.

But for how long?

On Monday at 11 a.m., the Donovans and hundreds like them -- maybe even thousands -- will gather at the state Capitol to protest two decades of alleged underfunding of some who serve people with disabilities.

"From what I'm hearing and seeing, Ability Beyond Disability and the other (nonprofit) private providers haven't been taken care of, and we really need to help them," Michael Donovan said Tuesday. "We don't think Gov. (M. Jodi) Rell sees the whole picture."

A deep breath later, Michael Donovan made his most convincing argument of all.

"We're not looking for more money," he insisted. "We're just looking for smarter ways to use it."

Last month, Donovan and 25 other people, most of them advocates for family members with disabilities, went to the state Capitol to give Gov. Rell a petition swollen with 6,000 signatures.

They wanted a town hall-style meeting with the governor, a chance to pitch their pleas for more effective use of state money.

Thus far, Donovan said, the Rell's office has not responded to the petition.

And so we come to Monday's rally.

According to Donovan and other members of the statewide Parent-Empowerment Task Force, nonprofit private providers such as Ability Beyond Disability receive about 52 percent of the state's budget allotment for services for people with disabilities, although they provide more than 70 percent of those services.

Joan Barnish, director of communications for the state's Department of Developmental Services, said Tuesday that nonprofit private providers actually receive 63 percent of budgeted funds.

Either way, Donovan wants these providers to receive "their fair share" of the state's budget pie.

He's not the only one.

"We're working with a zero percent cost of living increase this year," said Kim Bragoli, director of community relations for Ability Beyond Disability.

"It's extremely difficult for private providers to do their jobs in this environment. There are instances across the state where (private) providers are cutting services and not giving pay increases to their staff.

"Fortunately, we're able to make do," Bragoli said, "but if we continue down this path, there are private providers who will have to close their doors."

Maybe this isn't GM and the rest of the hemorrhaging automobile industry in Detroit. But the consequences -- and the costs -- are still troubling.

Barnish concedes state providers cost more than nonprofit private providers.

The benefits package enjoyed by state employees is well known, not to mention the higher wages state employees receive.

Someone has to pay for those additional costs, whether it's the consumer, the insurance companies or a combination of both.

At the same time, Barnish takes exception to allegations by Donovan and other advocates that nonprofit providers have received only a 30 percent increase in funding in the last 20 years.

"Over the past eight years (alone), the private sector has received a 16.5 percent cost of living adjustment," Barnish said in a statement Tuesday.

Although Bragoli welcomes support from family advocates such as the Donovans, she isn't expecting things to change any time soon.

"We've been having rallies at the state Capitol for years," Bragoli said. "Nothing has ever come of it."

That's not going to stop the Donovans from going to Hartford. Or New Fairfield, for that matter.

Every Thursday, the Donovans visit Stephen at his group home. Every other weekend, he comes home to stay in Bethel.

"He's very happy to see us for those sleepovers," Michael Donovan said. "But the next day, he's ready to go back.

"Stephen never did any of the things he's doing now when he was at home. The change in him has been remarkable."

Clearly state employees, backed by their powerful unions, are never going to give back their lush benefits and sweet salaries.

But if Gov. Rell is looking to save money, why not cut nonprofit private providers a bigger slice of the pie? It only makes sense. These providers are doing the same job for smaller wages and a leaner benefits package.

"I know that I'm just one parent with one voice," Michael Donovan said. "But I'll tell you what, I'm going to make sure it's heard."

Contact Brian Koonz at

bkoonz@newstimes.com or at (203) 731-3411.

IF YOU GO WHAT -- A rally for more state funding for nonprofit private providers of services to the disabled. WHEN -- Monday at 11 a.m. WHERE -- North side of the state Capitol, Hartford. For more information, call Mickey Herbst at (203) 247-3622 or (203) 226-9777, or e-mail Herbst at mjherbst@optonline.net. Visit the Web site www.wanict.org (We Are Not Invisible Connecticut.)