

Help These Students

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Too bad that in all the hoopla about improving educational opportunities in Connecticut this year, the governor and legislators seem to have forgotten about some of the state's most deserving residents. Funding for further education and social services for clients of the state Department of Mental Retardation graduating from high school this spring has been halved. That means 135 students who thought they would be getting additional on-the-job training will get nothing instead.

No one seems to be exactly sure how it happened, but somehow the DMR's requested \$6.7 million for job training, education and social programs for 270 clients who are graduating soon was cut in half.

Perhaps it's because the DMR services are not mandated, or because they benefit so few citizens. But when the dust settled on the budgets of Gov. M. Jodi Rell and the Democratic majority, the money to continue training and social services for the developmentally challenged students was 50 percent of what is needed.

So on May 1, 135 families in the state received letters from the DMR informing them that the post-graduation plans for their student had been canceled. For many of these clients, the job or training had been the goal for years. Transitional planning begins at age 15 for many special-education students in Connecticut.

So now, these families, who have cared for their children at home, are scrambling to make alternate plans. In some cases, both parents already work outside the home, or the students are the children of single or ailing parents. It is impossible for some of these students to stay home alone. And, in any event, they don't want to stay home and be unproductive.

Advocates of the DMR mounted a petition campaign to sway the governor and legislature to restore the funds, calling the cut "a heartless measure taken against those who most need our help and support."

They are lobbying legislators and anyone else who they believe will work to restore the funding. The money, they say, allows participants to develop life skills that afford some of them the opportunity to lead independent lives.

Gov. Rell knows the funding was cut and says her staff is trying to restore it.

If it's not, in the best-case scenario, many of these students will sit at home rather than be educated, says Tom Sullivan, executive director of The Arc of New London County, which provides programming and training for some of the clients. In the worst case, their families

will be forced to place them in group homes, which would be much more costly to the state.

“It's unconscionable,” says state Rep. Tom Reynolds, whose 42nd District covers Preston, Ledyard and Montville. “To yank the rug out from under them when there are so few other alternatives available is just unfair.”

By some accounts, the state's projected surplus is hovering near \$850 million this year. There are all kinds of hands reaching into the pot for that money, and each special-interest group makes its own good argument. But how can the state justify turning its back on 135 developmentally disabled young adults?

It can't.■