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DCYF says cuts won't imperil mentally disabled

01:00 AM EST on Thursday, March 8, 2007

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Teddy Munro, left, and Cory Shottek, right, accompanied by Domenic Mattia, a treatment teacher at the Groden Center, return to the center's van after they deliver a meal for Meals on Wheels.

The Providence Journal / Mary Murphy

Barbara Remington's son was too difficult for every school in South Kingstown. Teachers didn't know how to control him. Born with cerebral palsy, autism and other problems, Teddy Munro was apt to injure himself and damage property.

When Teddy was 14, he enrolled in the Groden Center, a Providence treatment center for children with autism and other developmental disabilities. At 16, when it was decided he would do best in a residential treatment setting, Teddy came under the care of the state Department of Children, Youth and Families and moved into a Groden Center group home.

Remington said Teddy's improvement since then "is nothing short of a miracle." But now, Teddy is 18. That means that — under Governor Carcieri's budget proposal — he will be dropped from the DCYF. The governor has proposed saving \$12 million by having DCYF care for children only until age 18 instead of age 21.

People such as Teddy, who have severe mental impairment, were always the state's responsibility even as adults. In the past, they transitioned into adult group homes run or financed by the state Department

of Mental Health, Retardation and Hospitals — when they turned 21.

Now, it looks to Remington and other parents of disabled young adults that a huge gap in care is coming at a critical moment in their children's development. As far as these parents can tell, the governor's budget proposal contains no money for mentally disabled youngsters between age 18 and 21. Several plan to testify today before the Senate Finance Committee.

“Just the thought of his funding being pulled is frightening,” Remington said.

But yesterday, Jorge Garcia, deputy DCYF director, said the governor never intended to cut the money for this group of young adults. Rather, according to Garcia, the plan had always been to transition them immediately into the adult system at the MHRH, and to move the full \$3 million spent on them directly from the DCYF into the MHRH. (Garcia estimated that about 60 people with developmental disabilities or severe mental illness are now 17½ or older, and would be transferred from the DCYF to the MHRH.) He said that through an oversight, the \$3 million was omitted from the MHRH budget but the money is supposed to be there.

Garcia said that people such as Teddy might be able to stay where they are, as long as the MHRH contracts with their treatment provider.

This information was apparently not conveyed to Remington and other parents interviewed by The Journal, nor did the word get to June Groden, director of the Groden Center, who said she had been trying, unsuccessfully, to arrange a meeting with DCYF director Patricia Martinez.

Even Ellen Nelson, MHRH director, said she didn't have enough information yesterday to say how these young adults would be cared for, but pledged to “responsibly meet their needs.”

Remington says that she talked to DCYF director Martinez on the phone, and Martinez only spoke regretfully of the possibility of cutting the program.

Claudia Swiader, who has two autistic sons in a Groden Center group home, said that in conversations with staff members at the DCYF and the MHRH, she received no assurances that her sons, ages 17 and 19, would be cared for.

Garcia said the DCYF staff believed that parents were merely concerned about the transition from children's services to adult services, but that the money for their care had always been in the budget.

“No one called to say what would happen to those children,” said Groden. She said it looked like the Groden Center, which has had a state contract for 30 years, was about to lose \$2 million.

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