



WAITING IN WISCONSIN

A bulletin about disability issues in Wisconsin written by Gerry Born
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TAXPAYERS BILL OF RIGHTS DELAYED IN THE STATE SENATE

To the credit of some Republican state senators, the constitutional amendment, TABOR or Taxpayers Bill of Rights, has been put on hold, at least for now. Under the direction of Speaker John Gard of the Assembly, Assembly Republications wanted to put to voters by November 2006 a constitutional amendment that would have limited state and local spending. In this instance, no matter what the circumstances that may have arisen at the state or any local level, only voters could approve spending beyond the limits set. While no one is pushing large tax increases at any level of government, limiting future state and local officials was not seen by many including most local elected officials as the right approach. Local levels of government and specifically county government has had to provide almost all of the needed additional funding for many years just to keep the disability and human service system afloat since the state has not funded its own human service laws and mandates. Any curtailing of local government officials to make such decisions could have a very serious negative impact on disability services.

TAX STATUS OF WISCONSIN

What TABOR has done is generate some discussion on taxes and spending. Previously this Bulletin has discussed this subject and indicated that Wisconsin is not in the top three or four of all the states for taxes and spending as many Republican legislators would want citizens to believe. Two UW professors have come forth with information that contradicts the notion that Wisconsin is one of the worst states for taxes and spending. In general Wisconsin is more average than an extreme tax and spending state.

Professor Andrew Reschovsky at a conference at the UW Memorial Union entitled "Financing Wisconsin's Future" indicated Wisconsin's business taxes are 36th highest in the country or 47th

as a share of total state and local taxes. He also indicated that Wisconsin ranks 15th in all funds raised at the state and local levels, not in the top three to five as many politicians like to contend.

On May 16, 2004 Don Kettl, a well-known UW political science professor and leader of a number of state task forces, refuted some of these tax myths on the Wisconsin State Journal's editorial page. He indicated that Wisconsin was 19th in terms of all the funds Wisconsin takes to run state and local governments. He also indicated that Wisconsin is 18th in terms of state and local spending. He states "These myths have so blinded state policy makers that we're searching for solutions in all the wrong places."

He concludes, "And as long as myths drive our statewide debate, we'll never get where we want to go."

Wisconsin has neither raised the funds nor placed as a priority in recent years spending on human services and for people with disabilities. The Governor and the legislature needs to continue to hear from human services and disability advocates that it must make these programs a priority in future budgets.

WISCONSIN AND MINNESOTA'S WAIVER PROGRAMS

Wisconsin and Minnesota share many similarities. The two states are about the same size, have a strong rural base with a large metro area, have similar ethnic populations, etc. Yet there are significant differences in approach to human services and corrections. Wisconsin has at least three times as many people in the prison population as well as on parole compared to Minnesota. At the same time, Minnesota has a totally different approach from Wisconsin in its DD services and its county system. For many years the Minnesota human service agency has been concerned about people on waiting lists while Wisconsin's DHFS did not want to know about people on waiting lists until the last year or so. Minnesota has also realized there is a cost to provide quality community services. The Minnesota Waiver rate has increased 26% since 1995 while Wisconsin's CIP Waiver rate has increased by only 2.8%. Inflation during this time period has gone up 23%. Nursing homes had their rate increase 20%. ICFs/MR went up 36%, and the state centers' rates went up 59% during this same period of time. This lack of funding has put great stress on community care providers, service recipients, and their families.

Counties have tried to make up for some of these shortcomings, but now counties are finding it harder to provide any increases in this TABOR environment. All of this is creating a serious threat to the community service system. The workforce and waiting list issues must be addressed by the state in the next budget.

IS LITIGATION THE ONLY ANSWER?

However, given that the Governor has not been interested in raising additional funds for state government through even such revenue enhancers as closing some of the loopholes in the sales

tax as proposed several years ago by the Wisconsin Counties Association and the Republican leaders in the state Senate and Assembly are interested in reducing state resources through tax reductions, there appears little hope that workforce, agency funding and possibly survival for some, and the waiting list will be addressed through political action. Added to this is the projected \$224 million shortfall in Medicaid and a possible overall budget deficit of up to \$742 million. This essentially leaves disability advocates with only the courts as a place to turn to in an attempt to gain assistance to have the state provide the resources needed for people with disabilities to live quality lives in the community. A group of disability advocates is studying the possibility of seeking court assistance in the struggle to obtain the needed resources to adequately serve people with disabilities in the community. This is not based on anything specific to DHFS since Department leadership would like to reform the long term care system and provide community services for more people. Overall state government has not been willing to invest in disability services for some time. That is why the courts may be the last hope. This Bulletin will keep readers informed of any decisions made in this regard.

More in a couple of months.

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