

Rally to focus on rights of disabled

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For The Telegraph

SPRINGFIELD - Advocates from around the state will ride in a caravan and hold a rally Thursday at the Illinois State Capitol to raise awareness for the rights of disabled citizens.

According to the Human Services Resource Institute, nearly 17,000 Illinois residents are on a state waiting list for support and services related to a developmental disability.

The event, dubbed "Freedom Quest '09," pushes for the Illinois General Assembly to pass an initiative that would overhaul the state's developmental disability system. Advocates are pushing to end the trend of placing individuals in large institutions. The study proposes cost-effective methods that would allow disabled people to live independently.

"People are currently receiving expensive treatment in these isolated institutions that they don't need," said Charlotte Cronin of the Family Support Network.

Cronin said she feels the new plan, which proposes to increase investment in community-based services, can eliminate this wasteful overspending and reduce the number of people on the Prioritization of Urgency of Need for Services waiting list for support.

"Illinois has more institutions than many states, with many of the beds empty. Taxpayers pay for those beds," said Missy Kichline, independent living specialist for IMPACT Inc. of Alton.

"The system is antiquated. It really doesn't make sense in today's world," said Wendy Wood, an independent living and home services specialist for IMPACT.

The initiative depends on the fate of two bills in the Legislature. The first is a bill based on "The Blueprint," an eight-year study completed by the HSRI, which outlined the plan to reform the disability system.

The second is the state's fiscal bill, which had strong support with a vote of 104-12 in the Illinois House.

"It has been a disastrous fiscal year," Cronin said. "If there ends up being a tax increase, we need to make sure this is part of it."

If both bills pass, Cronin said she feels the seven-year plan is a reasonable time frame to see real change in the system.

"The seven-year plan involves a lot of different organizations working with the (Illinois Department of Human Services)," she said. "We may not all have the same priorities, but the big thing is that we start."

Similarly rooted legislation, the Community Choice Act, was proposed in 2007. Its failure generally was attributed to the state's dire financial situation.

"There are a lot of complications, including misinformation and misunderstanding. Money is always thrown out as a reason," Kichlin said.

Advocates will convene from across the state Wednesday to rally support for the initiative and raise awareness. Three different routes have been planned across the state from the Northeast, Northwest and Southern regions. The Southern route starts in Carbondale, then moves through Mount Vernon, Charleston and Alton. All of the itineraries will finish in Springfield in the Capitol Building Rotunda.

Members of IMPACT expect the caravan to arrive in Alton after 3 p.m. Wednesday. IMPACT will host an open event in the front lot at 2735 E. Broadway. The event will include snacks and car decorating. IMPACT is sponsoring a panel of speakers with developmental disabilities who have moved from communal institutions to more independent living. New Alton Mayor Tom Hoechst is scheduled to appear at the event.

IMPACT members and supporters are invited to stand in line for an aerial photograph spelling out "FQ09" to commemorate the event.