



Jacob Chalkey, of Streator, holds signs while dressed as Abraham Lincoln, which coincided with his mother Christine's speech, Tuesday during the Illinois Valley Freedom Quest at Peru Eagles Lodge. A total of 13 rallies are being conducted this week across the state to raise awareness and to ask for equal opportunities for people with disabilities.
Photo: Doug Larson



Photo: doug larson
Members of the Ottawa Friendship House performed several songs Tuesday during the Illinois Valley Freedom Quest at Peru Eagles Lodge.

AWARENESS: Fighting For A Future - Freedom Quest fights for equal opportunities

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Ever since Christine Chalkey's son Jacob was born, Chalkey has waited for a day like Tuesday when agencies from across the state came together to rally for equal rights for people with disabilities.

Chalkey's son Jacob, 14, has been living with a rare brain malformation only 17 people in the nation have. The disability has left him socially and emotionally delayed, said Chalkey, of Streator.

Although her son is not even in high school yet, she and her husband, Gary, worry about Jacob's future given the state's lack of services.

"I'm here. I want to fight for my kid," Chalkey told The Times Tuesday at the Illinois Valley Freedom Quest at Peru Eagles Lodge. The rally Thursday in Springfield was one of 13 rallies across the state.

Jacob's name is one of 17,000 on a waiting list for services in Illinois. Local agencies such as Ottawa Friendship House, Streator Unlimited and Horizon House of Illinois Valley in Peru are a few of several agencies across the state asking for community-based services and less state institutions that offer cookie-cutter care.

Chalkey hopes Jacob will be able to receive services close to home.

"He wants to live in the community with his family and friends. He might have to go over 100 miles for services," she said. "He wants to be treated like every other American."

He wants to choose where he lives. He wants to choose where he works. Chalkey believes with the proper support her son can be independent as an adult. She and her children, Jacob, Cody, 18, and Blake, 11, have traveled to Springfield to speak to legislators regarding more services for people with disabilities.

On Thursday, Mary Hettel, a Freedom writer, and Friendship House Executive Director Beth Mangold, will head to Springfield, where Hettel will speak. In addition, Hettel will speak at Freedom Quest rally in Bloomington Wednesday.

Hettel, 22, said she wishes the state would invest more money in smaller group homes and provide more independence.

Hettel doesn't want to live in a high rise for the elderly or in a state institution. She feels the Illinois Valley does not offer many options for her.

Sue Beatty has worked at Horizon House for six years, but prior to that she worked at Dixon State School in Dixon, Ill., whose name was changed to Dixon Developmental Center in 1975.

She recalled hundreds of people cramped in the one facility with little privacy, wearing the same clothes, participating in the same activities and eating the same meals.

"The facility was a lock down. No one was allowed to go outside," she said. "Everything was a group activity."

She recalled where she works today and the freedom residents receive, from the paint on their walls to what they eat for lunch.

Ottawa, Oglesby, La Salle, Utica and Princeton have signed proclamations declaring Thursday Disability Freedom Quest Day and giving support to people with disabilities to receive equal opportunities.

Illinois care for people with disabilities

Illinois institutionalizes more of its citizens with developmental disabilities than nearly every other state. Institutional care cost more than twice as much as community-based care.

Illinois ranks 51st in provided community integrated supports for people with developmental disabilities.

In Illinois, only 13 percent of people with developmental disabilities who want jobs in the community get them.

Illinois ranks 40th in overall funding for people with developmental disabilities.

Source: Freedom Quest '09