



January 30, 2009

End warehousing of developmentally disabled

There are more than 45,000 people living in large, congregate institutions that are not wholly conducive to allow those they house to live independently and productively.

There are an estimated 500,000 persons with developmental disabilities on waiting lists throughout the United States. There are also those on the waiting list that are waiting for nothing more than a job or some minor support. However, experience shows that if these small problems are not addressed early on, they eventually become big problems.

It should be noted that many people with developmental disabilities have lived within the confines of these institutions for 40 years or more. There has been a reduction in this population over the last three decades; however, this effort has been the result of various forms of litigation due to the inferior conditions of those relegated to live in these facilities. In my home state of New Jersey there are approximately 3,400 people living in these institutions with taxpayer costs averaging well over \$240,000 a year per person, with the median cost for the same person to live independently in a community setting virtually reducing these expenses by half. The taxpayer money saved could be reallocated to support other community programs.

Incentive and Employment: A leadership approach on the part of the Obama administration to create dual funding for states to jump start the closure of warehouse institutions needs to be implemented in order to revise the current ineffective system. The issue of creating an incentive to alter this infrastructure will have a substantial impact on the lives of people with disabilities, which will trickle down to the general populace.

Unemployment rapidly approaches cataclysmic numbers and some economists estimate the tally to reach as high as 9 percent. According the U.S. Census Bureau, in 2005 54.4 million people had some level of disability, with less than half of those between ages 21 and 64 being employed. Imagine if only a fraction of this number gained employment. This not to mention the various caretakers who could also help fill positions, giving those with disabilities support. Existing institutional staff could be placed into other areas of state government (as was done in Minnesota and most of New England). Parenthetically, if incentives were created through federal Medicaid inducements to individual state's methodologies already been put into practice, they would merely have to be accelerated. In other words, the conveyor belt already exists. All the Obama team needs to do is give relative states an incentive to accelerate this program.

Housing Solution: There is also the residual effect of the housing market. If more than 50,000 people were placed into three- or four-person homes, it would account for more than 12,000 homes purchased and renovated in a soft real estate market.

Existing government programs could provide financing or other forms of bonding, and approximately 500 existing nonprofits throughout the United States stand posed to meet this initiative. The large vacant buildings resulting from these placements as well as their campuses with seemingly little to no real estate value will offer tremendous use to the community infrastructure. There have been, for example, buildings used for community centers, residential development, university expansion, and in some instances prison space.

This process would create three of the most viable solutions:

- Most of the 50,000 of those living in institutions could be placed in a home in the community;
- Most of the horrific waiting lists could be abolished;
- Thousands of Americans with and without disabilities would gain jobs.

We need a policy to accelerate and implement the closure of institutions for people with developmental disabilities across the United States. Living in a community is not a new or a controversial idea. It is an inalienable constitutional right.

Robert Stack is president and chief executive officer of Community Options Inc., Princeton.
