

New Federal Agency Gives Boost To Disability Issues

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A major organizational change this week at the federal level could give significantly more voice to those working on developmental disability issues.

The shift announced Monday creates a new Administration for Community Living within the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services.

The new entity will join together three existing bodies — the Administration on Developmental Disabilities, the Office on Disability and the Administration on Aging — under one umbrella to serve seniors and those with disabilities.

Obama administration officials and disability advocates say the bureaucratic change could pay big dividends long-term for people with special needs by pushing disability issues up the food chain at the cabinet-level agency. Specifically, they say, a big plus is that the new head of the community living administration will have a seat at the decision-making table as an assistant secretary directly reporting to Health and Human Services Secretary Kathleen Sebelius.

“It’s the beginning of a much stronger position for disability interests in the Department of Health and Human Services,” said Ari Ne’eman, president of the Autistic Self Advocacy Network, who called the organizational shake-up a “game changer.”

For her part, Sebelius said the reorganization is intended to emphasize the administration’s commitment to community living and build on President Barack Obama’s “Year of Community Living” initiative from 2009.

“We are reinforcing this commitment by bringing together key HHS organizations and offices dedicated to improving the lives of those with functional needs into one coordinated, focused and stronger entity,” Sebelius said.

What’s more, government officials working on developmental disability issues say the shift will allow them to better reflect the lifelong needs of their constituency.

“Previously, (the Administration on Developmental Disabilities) had been located within the Administration for Children and Families in HHS. Our efforts, however, are lifespan and not unique to childhood,” said Sharon Lewis, commissioner of the developmental disabilities agency.

In addition to joining with the Office on Disability and the Administration on Aging, Lewis’ agency is also undergoing a name change. As of this week, the agency will now be called the Administration on Intellectual and Developmental Disabilities, reflecting a similar

terminology update undertaken by numerous entities nationwide.

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