

Policy Changes Needed
By: Robert Stack

My mother always taught me to praise in public and criticize in private. I guess that's why I was taken aback by the President's criticism of the Supreme Court in the State of the Union address on January 27th.

However, as the President and CEO of Community Options, Inc., one of the nation's largest nonprofits supporting community based and work programs for persons with developmental disabilities, I am quite frankly afraid of the de-evolution that will occur in the non-profit paradigm as a result of their ruling, that reversed previous decisions limiting corporate spending on political campaigns. With close to 3,000 employees nationwide, we work hard to obtain government funding, but also rely heavily on fundraising. And in these difficult times, it remains more complex to raise money from the private sector.

When I founded my organization 21 years ago with a group of friends, parents, and persons with disabilities, I knew I had to be bi-partisan because support came from both sides. Republican President Bush signed the Americans with Disabilities Act; however, Secretary Sebelius dramatically improved the lives of persons with disabilities when she was the Democratic Governor of Kansas. Therefore, I work with members of both parties in order to further my organization's mission. For example, I acted as the Chair of Governor Christie's (R-NJ) transition team for disabilities and attended President Obama's White House holiday party this year. I also personally contributed to both of their campaigns, even though I cannot be reimbursed for my contributions, because I believe in certain positions of both candidates.

I like to think that the combination of my expertise and my support of their candidacy enhanced my opportunity to be in a position to suggest policy changes that would fundamentally improve the lives of persons with disabilities. However, my board of directors has mixed views on who should be supported and who should not in a particular election. So, will this new ruling by the Supreme Court augment the position of my board and tell me how much (if any) of our fundraising dollars should be allocated to a particular PAC?

When I meet with a donor, I show that administrative costs comprise less than 11% of our funds. Due to our unique organizational structure, a little more than 89 cents of every dollar donated goes directly to support persons with disabilities. Now what am I supposed to do? Say that x% goes to the republicans, y% to the democrats and z% to the libertarians? Is this a good utilization of the financial support of private contributors?

In my opinion, the position of the political leader is important regardless of his or her party. It is my responsibility to educate the political leader of the best policies to support people with disabilities in the community. Questions remain: Does my organization need to educate or finance a political leader? How will this affect the donor base? How will this fundamentally obfuscate the efficacy of a non-profit charitable entity, as we know it?

