

Legislative Testimony of Annette Baird  
Friday, January 14, 2005

"Madame Chairman and members of the committee, my name is Annette Baird and I live in Helena, Montana. I'd like to begin by thanking you for allowing me to share my story with all of you today.

My husband and I are proud parents of two wonderful children. Our youngest child, Rachel, was diagnosed with autism at 20 months of age. It didn't matter that our child was diagnosed with a severe disability. As her parents, we were willing to do whatever was necessary to provide her a loving home—that was no different from our first born. However, we were overwhelmed with her behaviors and at that time, our parenting skills were no match for her needs.

Since her diagnosis, Family Outreach has been our salvation. They have guided us through the steps of raising a disabled child beginning with the initial evaluations at 18 months of age through the journey of daily struggles with a head strong 3<sup>rd</sup> grader! They have even been there during the lows when I was afraid Rachel would not be able to remain in our household because of her violent and self abusive behaviors. This entire time, we have not been alone. Family Outreach has always been a resource and able to provide emotional support, information, find skilled people to provide care, hab training, and they have a committed staff with a great deal of insight. I can't thank the organization enough, nor express how lost I'd have felt without their guidance these past seven years. Finding myself wanting to give back this organization, I now actively participate on the Board of Directors of Family Outreach.

This brings me to two points I'd like to address here today. They are two fold: (1) the level of funding available to individuals with disabilities, and (2) proposed changes to the system that allocated funding to disabled individuals. My following comments reflect my experiences with Children's Services. I have a basic understanding of Adult Services, but my familiarity with this system is limited.

I have already talked about the help my child and my family has received. Part C, General Fund, Family Education and Support and the Medicaid Waiver ~~Program~~<sup>Services</sup> have provided funding, and resources to help our child. Many families with disabled children are not getting that same help today. Why? **Simply, the funding is not there.** By the time service organizations like Family Outreach cover expenses from children on Part C service--services required by law until age three--the money is spent. In fact, those children who used to get help through General Fund dollars are being added to waiting lists. Those children are not, and will not be served because those dollars are being allocated to Part C kids. If Rachel had been born five years later, my story would not be the same.

My heart goes out to these families. I don't know how families learn how about their child's disability and help the child reach their potential. In some cases, I don't know how they cope. These children are at risk. They risk becoming the strain that rips families apart. They risk becoming wards of the state. They are at risk of never becoming an individual that can achieve independence and contribute to society. These consequences also have monetary implications – long term ones.

Secondly, I am concerned as a parent and a board member about proposed changes to the way disabled individuals will received funding in the future. With severe budget crisis to deal with, the State has to come into compliance with Medicaid requirements or risk losing Federal funding. Change is a given. However, I am afraid that the proposed changes outlined by the Mercer Group is taking a functioning system—with noted problems-- and replacing it with something that could threaten the quality of services received by disabled individuals. I am asking this legislature and you as committee members to keep a watchful eye on proposed changes to this system and ask how will the disabled population benefit from these changes. Rather than making a clean sweep and trashing a system that admittedly has areas that need to be brought into compliance, let's take baby steps and fine tune a system that has stood the test of time.

Let's improve a system that exists and for the most part works. Let's not start over with a system that has so many unknowns.

Madame Chairman and members of the committee, thank you for letting me share my story and my concerns. ~~Please remember that~~ As able bodied citizens of this society, each and every one of us is obligated to take care of individuals who cannot take care of themselves: the elderly, people with mental illness, individuals who live with life altering disabilities. The measure of our society is how well we do this. Through our votes, we have entrusted you, our legislatures to act in our behalf. Please keep this in mind and in your hearts as you complete your work during this session.

Respectfully yours.

Annette Baird.