

Letter to the Editor
David L. Westling

What Would You Say?

What would you say about a young man who struggled, but worked really hard to complete college, find a good job, get an apartment and become a contributing member of his community? What would you say if I told you this young man's goal in life was to help other people, so he found a job working for Graham County Emergency Medical Service in Western North Carolina? And if I also told you that this young man had never had a bit of trouble with the law, was well-respected and liked by his family, friends, and neighbors; was very responsible, always paying his bills on time and keeping his obligations... what would you say?

Then, what if I told you that this 28 year old man, despite being a stellar member of his community was facing the prospect of having his very full and happy life taken away from him? What if I told you his apartment, which he helps pay for and keeps as neat as a pin, was not going to be his anymore, was going to be lost. And that his job -- a job he loves and performs well, and through which he earns a decent paycheck -- was not likely to be available to him. What would you say?

Doesn't sound fair, does it? Because what we all value is the attitude and commitment demonstrated by this young man: Working hard to be independent, holding down a job, contributing to his community, staying out of trouble.

The young man is my friend David Maennle. He's 28 and finished the University Participant program at Western Carolina University four years ago. And he is now living his dream. But if he had been born 40 years ago, David would have none of this. Because David, who has Down Syndrome, would have been confined to an institution or to another congregate living facility where he would not be able to enjoy his own home, not be able to select his roommates, and not be able to come and go as he wishes.

Right now David lives in his own home because of support from a program called "Innovations." This is the term used in North Carolina for the Medicaid Home and Community-Based Services (HCBS) provisions. This Medicaid provision was signed into law in 1981 by no one other than the great American President, Ronald Reagan. President Reagan knew that when people like David can live in their own homes, they are more likely to have community jobs, be happier, and be safer than when they live in institutions. David's life represents a major accomplishment in the support system for people with developmental disabilities in the U.S. and, by the way, it is also less expensive than institutional care!

So now the U.S. Senate is going to vote to cut Medicaid and my friend David and his family are wondering what will happen to him and his life if he is not able to continue receiving Innovations support. So what do you say? Is this fair? Is it fair to a young man and a family who have worked so hard just to have a little piece of the American Dream?

If you don't think this is fair there is one simple thing you can do. Call Senator Richard Burr (202-224-3154) and Senator Thom Tillis (202-224-6342) and let them know that David Maennle should be able to have his own home and that they should support the HCBW services provision in the new health care law. No one is asking for a government giveaway, it just seems wrong that Americans who want to be good citizens should have their homes taken away from them. My friend David and I appreciate you making the call.

Sincerely,

David L. Westling
Fletcher, NC