

## ADVOCACY: TIME TO CHANGE STRATEGIES

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People with disabilities face the worst threats since our movement began almost fifty years ago. These threats have grown even worse since the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) was passed in 1990.

Those threats put our wellbeing, our livelihoods and our lives at great risk. These threats will kill many of us if we do not act. Less of us will die if we do.

These threats come from our federal, state and local governments, the courts, the economic system we live under, the inadequate health care that we get and the attitudes and behaviors of people without disabilities.

### Threats From Government:

President Bush's proposed budget for fiscal year 2008 and beyond will reduce or eliminate supports and services that keep many of us alive. It will cut \$95 billion from Medicaid and Medicare, reduce other domestic spending by 23% and totally eliminate 143 programs, most of which provide health, education and other human services.

The president would use the savings from these cuts for two things: to fund the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan for \$147 billion more and to finance tax cuts for the very rich – the average millionaire would get an additional \$158,000 tax rebate

The cost of the wars and the tax cuts for the rich will be paid for by people who are poor and middle-class. The more those people depend on government services, the more it will cost them, either in higher taxes or lost services or both.

People with disabilities will be hurt the most by the cuts. We are poor. Our average income is less than \$18,000 a year. We use government services more than any other group. Because only 11% of us work full-time year-round and make less than \$12,000 when we do, we are likely to be on SSI or SSDI. Most of us use Medicaid or Medicare, if we can get either of them, because we can't get any kind of private health insurance.

We are not the only ones who will be hurt by the President's budget. Everyone else who is poor will lose out as well. Other poor people will also be hurt by the cuts in Medicaid and Medicare. In addition, 400,000 of them will lose food stamps and many more will become or remain homeless because of cuts in federal housing programs.

Middle-class people will also be hurt. As their incomes rise, but lag behind cost of living increases, more of them will have to pay a great deal more income taxes. That is because of the Alternative Minimum Tax (AMT). It was designed to make sure that rich people pay some income tax regardless of how many tax shelters and other deductions they came up with. However, the AMT was set so low that it is beginning to catch a lot of middle-class families. It is a hidden tax increase in a budget that Bush brags has no tax increases.

They will also be hurt by cuts in federal support for public schools and college student loan and grant programs. Other government programs from which they benefit are slated for cuts or elimination as well.

The Federal government has been providing states with money to fund many programs that support people with low or middle incomes. The Bush budget cuts or eliminates many of these programs and New Jersey has not replaced most of the lost federal money so it is cutting supports and services as well

#### Threats From The Courts

The federal courts, including the United States Supreme Courts, have consistently limited the protections of the ADA since it was passed. They have redefined disability to exclude many people with disabilities that the law was intended to cover. They have also ruled that state employees with disabilities are not protected by it.

Several bills have been introduced in Congress to strengthen the law but none have passed. They are not likely to because they are opposed by powerful businesses that don't want to hire people with disabilities or provide the accommodations the law required when it was first passed.

#### Threats From The Economic System:

The Bush budget cuts come at a time when the gap between the rich and poor in this country is bigger than ever and that gap continues to grow. It is now larger than the gap between rich and poor in any other country in the world.

Thirty years ago, heads of corporations made 36 times more than the average worker; today they make 369 times as much, more than ten times greater than before. In the last 20 years, the top 20% of rich people have increased their share of national income from 45% to 50%, another 5% more. At the same time, the bottom 60% saw their share of national income decrease from 29.9% to 26.6%, a loss of more than 3%.

As the rich become richer and the poor become poorer, many middle-class people are becoming poor, too. They are losing their jobs because those jobs have been automated or shipped overseas where people will do them for much less money. The people who lose their jobs in this country are forced to take ones that pay a lot less or become unemployed.

We live under an economic system called capitalism. Its first goal is to make money for people who have money. In the American capitalist system, the people who have a lot of money usually make more money and the people who have less money usually wind up with even less. It is a system that increases the inequality between the rich and poor.

In some countries, one of government's jobs is to limit the gap between the rich and poor. It does that in several ways, including taxing the rich and using the funds to provide

supports and services to the poor or by laws and regulations that limit how much money businesses can make and how they can make it.

Between the 1930s and the 1970s, the government in this country used to do that. It took some steps that limited the gap between the richest and the poorest people.

However, during the last thirty years, our government stopped doing that. Beginning with Ronald Reagan, it taxed the rich less and raised the taxes on the poor and middle-class, particularly payroll taxes. It also repealed laws and regulations that control businesses and how they make money. It has allowed them to pollute the air and water, make the places people work less safe and make it more difficult for people to join unions to bargain for decent pay and working conditions – all to help businesses make more money.

This has greatly increased the gap between the rich and the poor and middle-class. The Bush administration has accelerated this process, systematically favoring the rich and ignoring the needs of the poor and middle-class.

#### Health Care Threats:

Studies done all over the world prove that the quality of health care depends on how big the gap is between rich and poor, the bigger the gap, the worse the health care. The reason is simple. If you are rich, you can afford the best health care money can buy; if you are poor, you get poor health care, if you get any at all.

The proof is in the numbers. In the United States, on average, we spend more money on health care for each person than any other country in the world, about twice as much as anyone else. At the same time, we have the worst health of any of the 21 industrial nations.

Here, more mothers die in childbirth and more babies die before they are five years old than in any of those other countries. The numbers are just as bad for most other diseases and health conditions.

One reason for this is that health care is a right in 19 of those 21 countries. People in those countries all get government- paid health care regardless of whether they are rich or poor. That is not true in the United States and South Africa. Here, if you do not have health insurance, you have to pay for your health care or go without it.

More than forty million Americans don't have health insurance and can't afford to go to the doctor because they are poor. Many of them are people with disabilities.

As a result, hundreds of thousands of poor people die in this country each year who don't have to. Tens of thousands of them are people with disabilities.

They die from diseases that rich people don't get or are easily cured of. They die of diseases that would not kill them in the 19 countries which provide health care for everyone

### Threats From Other People's Attitudes And Behaviors

Here and in other countries, people with disabilities are still not valued as human beings. In fact, we are often treated worse than other people's pet animals. Here are just a few examples that happened in 2006 and 2007.

In the United States, a hospital approved procedures to stunt the growth of a nine year-old girl so her caregivers could pick her up more easily;

In New Orleans, hundreds of people with disabilities were drowned by Hurricane Katrina because their federal, state and local governments had no plans to save them. Dozens who lived in nursing homes were killed by their staff with lethal injections as the water rose.

The Switzerland Supreme Court approved the euthanasia (killing) of people with non-fatal 'severe' psychiatric disabilities;

A Dutch hospital recommended that doctors kill babies with 'severe' disabilities. A baby with Down's Syndrome was one of the first killed.

Most of these horrible things were legal in the countries where they were done. None of them were done in 'primitive' places with 'primitive' attitudes. They were all done in some of the richest and most 'civilized' countries in the world.

### It Is Time To Act

If you have a disability in this country and think you are safe, think again. I have one and I know I'm not. If you have a disability in this country and think your government will protect you, think again. I have one and I know it won't. If you have a disability in this country and think your government cares enough to take care of you, think again. I have one and I know it won't.

In the face of these threats, you and I and the other fifty million people with disabilities are on our own unless we act and act together ... unless we act together in a completely different way than we have in the past.

When we have faced these kinds of threats in the past, we followed others, letting them define the threats and doing what they told us to do about them.

They told us to fight the symptoms of those threats. We wrote letters to Senators and Congress-people protesting cuts in this or that program. We even marched and demonstrated in Washington and Trenton to protest those cuts or beg for a few extra dollars for those programs.

We didn't even examine whether these programs were really good for us. We just kept fighting for what we had, more institutions, more nursing homes, more group homes, more inadequate public health insurance, more job training without jobs.

Over the years, the cuts kept coming and we kept getting poorer and sicker. We got fewer and fewer jobs and less accessible, affordable housing. We kept winding up in segregated classrooms where we learned less than we needed to know to make it in a world that still didn't want us around.

What we did then didn't work and it won't work now.

We were looking for simple solutions to problems that we thought were simple and easy to fix. When we fixed a few, we thought we could fix them all if we just tried harder.

The threats we faced then and the ones we face now are not simple. They can't be fixed one at a time. They are complicated and linked together. They all have the same root causes.

Those root causes are governments at every level that care more about people who make money from our disabilities than they do about us as people. They include an economic system designed to make rich people richer and us poorer. They include popular attitudes that think we are less than human and want us out of sight even if it means killing us.

Today we have a choice. We can keep fighting symptoms and keep losing little by little. Or we can attack the root causes that keep us losing.

Let me be clear. Taking on the root causes is difficult and dangerous. It means changing the world we live in, turning it upside down.

That means taking on the powerful forces in government, business and society that like things the way they are now. Those forces will fight us tooth and nail to keep us down where we are now. They will show no mercy, no pity because of our disabilities.

The good news is that they are also keeping down one hundred and ninety other Americans who are poor and middle-class. Those one hundred and ninety Americans can be our allies when we learn how to work together with them. They are losing almost as much as we are. They have as much to gain by taking on the powers that oppress all of us.

I said we have a choice but is choosing between continuing to lose and the opportunity to win, to live the lives we want, really a choice? Not for me. How about you?