

Self advocates in Olympia: democracy in action

The day began, as it always does, with a gathering of self-advocates, parents, care providers and community members in a church basement, two blocks from the capitol building in Olympia.

People from all over the state came to find out the very latest information about the funding of services for people with developmental disabilities.

Many bills are before the House and Senate concerned with issues from employment to respite care to institutions. Our legislators worked around the clock deciding which bills to fund, they knew deep cuts had to be made everywhere.

It is more important now than ever, he said, to let our legislators know what we are thinking and how the funding cuts will affect us.

Other speakers, like Emily Rogers, from Self Advocates in Leadership, repeated Holen's message. She said, make sure you tell your legislators what issues are important to you.

She reminded the audience to be polite and kind when talking to legislative assistants. The assistants are powerful people who carry our important messages right to the lawmakers. They also keep careful track of who comes to see them and why.

After lunch in the almost empty cafeteria facing the capitol building, our small but determined group set out to deliver their message.

We claimed one floor of the Senate Building, and went, office by office, to talk to legislative aides. One of the issues that most concerned our five self-advocates was the possible elimination of vision and hearing

services being considered by our legislators. They had filled out slips of paper at lunch stating "Please don't cut funding for (these) services" and talked about exactly how these cuts would affect them as well as other people they know and care about.

"If I don't have glasses, I can't go out to work or visit my friends or read a book," Kim Wing told one aide. "That's right," agreed Doug Severe, "People can't keep jobs, or have a normal life like everyone else if they can't see right or they can't hear everything okay."

Our advocates also talked to the aides about not cutting funding for Medicaid personal care hours for people who are living at home.

Several of our self-advocates would be directly affected by this and were quite outspoken about what that would mean for them personally.

"I would not like it at all," said Nina Wilson, "That would make me very sad."

Observing these highly opinionated, passionate self-advocates in action was, as always, a powerful experience. With each office stop they became more articulate, better able to get their message across using fewer words – articulate, and charming.

"Is that your baby?" Doug asked pointing to a picture on one aide's desk. "Yes." "She's real cute, your baby, real cute." He meant it, and she knew it.

Our original plan, that they take turns, two at a time going into each office, fell apart very quickly when it became apparent that all five of the self-advocates in our group were on fire. They simply had to be heard each time. There were no egos involved, though, only the sincere desire to get the same message across.

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