

MAINE VOICES

People with disabilities want to hear from LePage

Those who rely on the state are concerned about how spending cuts will affect them.

PORTLAND — Now that the election is over, it becomes incumbent upon Paul LePage to turn words into action and deal with the many problems facing our state.

While Gov.-elect LePage has indicated a strong desire to cut spending and continue Gov. John Baldacci's commitment not to raise taxes, those cuts do not come without consequences.

Many services in Maine are already underfunded — especially services for adults and children with disabilities. How Gov.-elect LePage will decide to handle programs already unable to adequately serve our most vulnerable citizens will say a lot about the type of person he is and the type of governor he will be.

People with disabilities

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Jeffrey Neill Young (e-mail: jyoung@mcteaguehigbee.com) is an attorney with McTeague Higbee who represents people with disabilities.

comprise a large segment of Maine's population. According to the 2008 American Community Survey completed by the U.S. Census Bureau, there are 205,000 people with disabilities in Maine, or 15.7 percent of our population. That number does not even include the family members of those individuals.

Not surprisingly, individuals with disabilities depend more than other Mainers on governmental programs and services.

At a time when the state has been reducing or eliminating services altogether due to our deepening budget deficit, people with disabilities and their families (indeed, all Mainers) deserve to hear how

Gov.-elect LePage will respond to their needs.

This fall, 14 organizations that serve children and adults with disabilities across Maine held a unique forum in Augusta for candidates for Maine governor.

These organizations — including parents of children with disabilities, seniors using wheelchairs, hearing-impaired adults, and people with mental illness and their families — shared the hope that our next governor would be able to address their very real needs.

Unfortunately, Paul LePage did not attend.

That failure is disconcerting; however, the fact that he has volunteered to work with disabled adults is an encouraging sign that personally, he is sympathetic and understands not just that the needs of individuals with disabilities are substantial, but also that disabled individuals can live rewarding lives.

So what are the issues? First, Maine has failed to provide

legally mandated services in some instances. By its own admission, for more than 20 years (you read that right), Maine has failed to evaluate a large group of adults with disabilities.

As a result, they have been compelled to live in nursing facilities even though they may be young adults with fully functioning minds.

These evaluations would identify the services necessary to allow individuals with disabilities to lead more independent lives and potentially live in the community.

Second, Maine has never fully funded educational services required by the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act.

Third, Mainers with disabilities today are faced with long waiting lists for many critical services, including: in-home supports for children with disabilities; home and community benefits; and vocational rehabilitation.

These services are needed to help people with disabilities to

become and remain productive members of society.

Finally, some Mainers with disabilities are forced to live at home with their aging parents because the state has refused to fully fund waiver programs that would allow them to live in group homes.

In these situations, parents are often unable to work or can work only reduced hours because they need to take care of their children.

Ironically, with little or no income, these families are forced to rely more on social services than they would if their children were in group homes.

This is not how we build a more self-reliant society. And this is certainly not how we should treat our most vulnerable citizens.

Gov.-elect LePage needs to let all Mainers know how he will ensure that adequate services are provided to people with disabilities while simultaneously seeking to reduce spending.

Will he continue to ignore

mandates and comply only when forced to by legal action? Will he just pay lip service to or ignore people with disabilities altogether?

Or will he find a way to provide necessary supports so people with disabilities can contribute as productive Maine citizens?

Individuals with disabilities perform all types of work, just like you and me. Some are greeters at Walmart, others work in restaurants, and still others, like Albert Einstein (Asperger's syndrome) and Stephen Hawking (ALS, or Lou Gehrig's disease), have become great scientists.

Some, like Franklin Delano Roosevelt (paralyzed by polio), have even become president.

To ignore them is not only to ignore a large segment of Mainers, but also to ignore a group that has the potential to make a substantial difference in our world.

— Special to the Press Herald.