

MAILBAG: Northwoods faces potential issues

21 HOURS AGO 10/4/13

There is a federal proposal currently that could have some major negative consequences locally for Northwoods Inc., their consumers (clients), affected family members, and the community if it goes unchecked.

Secretary Kathleen Sebelius of Health and Human Services could let Social Security Act 1915© defund the Medicaid Home and Community Based Services (HCBS) program for individuals with chronic and severe disabilities. In the mid-1970s, institutions and "county farms" were de-institutionalized and patients were released into the community largely without living, social or employable job skills. Soon after, facilities for training disabled persons developed to help individuals live and work in the least restrictive manner possible.

Northwoods and several agencies like it offer prevocational skills and social skills to assist the disabled in reaching their potential. Some individuals may develop and be employable in a competitive work force, while others need supports with a sheltered workshop, and living arrangements, often for the rest of their lives.

There are some in the federal government who believe all disabled deserve to be employed in the competitive work market and that it is discriminatory to have them work in a protective environment with supports at less than minimum wage. The reality is that many disabled are at a work productivity level that is far below 100 percent competitive work standards. If programs such as Northwoods are abolished, the result will be that disabled individuals will not be hired in the competitive market, and they will have no place to go. It is not an exaggeration that suicides, crime, increased police contact, homelessness and requests for social services on an already overburdened system will result.

Sebelius can continue a waiver to fund this programming to develop the potential in individuals that are very vulnerable in our society. Please take a moment and write to your senator and representative about continuing this waiver. Turning vulnerable citizens out on the streets is not the answer, nor is institutionalizing this population. To expect employers to pay 100 percent wages for far less than 100 percent work productivity is an unrealistic goal. Please contact:

Sen. Ron Johnson, U.S. Senate, 517 E. Wisconsin Ave., Suite 408, Milwaukee, WI 53202.

Sen. Tammy Baldwin, U.S. Senate, 30 W. Mifflin St., Suite 700, Madison, WI 53703.

Rep. Tom Petri, U.S. House of Representatives, 490 W. Rolling Meadows Drive, Suite B, Fond du Lac, WI 54937.

Rep. Mark Pocan, U.S. House of Representatives, 10 E. Doty St., Suite 405, Madison, WI 53703.

Please ask them to contact Sebelius and let her know that turning our back on vulnerable citizens robs them of their potential, and creates community risk. Thank you.

Barry Erath, director, Aspen Family Counseling, Portage