

SNG-Social services under fire-1-2-17

Illinois social services under fire, again

By Jim Nowlan

A recent Chicago Tribune series reveals more than a thousand possible cases of abuse and neglect at certain group homes in Illinois since 2011, some resulting in deaths of those served.

What's new? I have been reading of exposés about poor care of our infirm populations by the state of Illinois rather regularly over the half-century that I have been observing Illinois public life.

It will probably always be thus—because of the constant tension between cost and care, the complexities of serving folks like the developmentally disabled, and the inability of policymakers to shape up our fragmented, dysfunctional state management of social services.

I recounted earlier to readers a startling experience when I was first elected to the Illinois House as a naïve 26-year-old way back in 1968.

Superintendent Dave Edelson of the Dixon State School (for the severely and profoundly retarded, as we said then), on the edge of my district, invited me to tour his facility.

Far off the highway, behind manicured lawns and down a lane canopied by magnificent oaks, stood the red-brick cottages of the school.

How attractive, I thought.

Then Dave took me inside a cottage. As the door opened, the smell of feces burned my nostrils. As my eyes adjusted to the dim, gray light, I made out maybe 150 poorly clad youngsters wandering aimlessly among mattresses lining the cottage walls, side by side. The

children's screams and guttural sounds created a repulsive din. One tyke came up and hugged my leg, tightly, longing for love, I thought.

In comparison, Dante's Inferno is a resort, I must have thought at the time.

"Welcome to Illinois social services, Jim," Edelson said.

At about that time, progressive governors like Nelson Rockefeller in New York and Dick Ogilvie in Illinois were leading efforts to close these big people warehouses and place the vulnerable populations with community-based providers, close to families.

The populations were dispersed, but the money necessary to serve the populations well never followed.

Today hundreds of non-profit and some for-profit agencies provide services to scores of thousands of unfortunates, whom I fear most of us prefer be kept in the shadows of life.

There are, for example, 11,400 developmentally disabled persons in state care, from early childhood to the elderly. They live in small group homes across Illinois, generally eight or fewer per facility, which might look like a ranch-style home.

Thousands more are on waiting lists.

The state, with federal government help, reimburses the care-giving agencies about \$65,000 per resident per year for round-the-clock care.

Many agencies, such as Abilities Plus in Kewanee in my territory, do exemplary jobs, and provide loving care.

Yet across the state, it is tough to find and keep good, caring help who will bathe, feed and dress their residents, especially on the second and third shifts—for as little as \$9 an hour.

Fragmented oversight of our tax dollars by numerous agencies that operate in “silos” is another problem. The state units cannot talk to one another electronically because of decades-old software, so the left hand doesn’t know what the right hand is doing.

There have also been significant cutbacks in state employee numbers. The Illinois comptroller’s office reports state health care and social service worker numbers are down from 29,000 in 2002 (admittedly a high-water mark) to 21,000 in 2015.

I am confident some of those whose jobs were eliminated had filled oversight and investigative roles vis-à-vis the private agencies providing the care.

One local social service agency head I respect says we need a single local, not state, case manager for every person being supported by the state, rather than a different contact person at each of several agencies.

And, of course, the providers want more money, which isn’t available.

Maybe some of the thousands of our unemployed who receive multiple state program benefits could be required to “volunteer” to assist caregivers, in return for state tax support.

There will undoubtedly be stories in the future of inadequate care and abuse at some facilities. It’s a tough business. And caregivers aren’t perfect.

We have come a long way since the Dixon State School, yet we have miles to go.