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John Williams' Column: Lex Frieden Calls for Action on Disability Issues

John M. Williams

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Lex Frieden, Chairman of the [National Council on Disability](#), is one of the most eloquent and distinguished advocates for people with disabilities in this country. When he talks people listen; since he speaks from experience, he knows what he's talking about.

In a message that the President, Congress and states should respond to, Frieden, speaking before a group of disability advocates March 5 at the National Press Club in Washington, DC, called for immediate action on issues affecting community-based services programs and the implications of health care reform for people with disabilities.

He also called for rehabilitation services to receive additional state funds so people with disabilities can achieve independence and become taxpayers instead of tax recipients. He pointed out that institutionalized people do not pay taxes.

Frieden says the country has a lack of an infrastructure designed to support personal assistant services for people living in the community. The centers for Medicare and Medicaid state that 73% of the money being spent for long-term care is spent to support people in nursing homes as opposed to living in the community.

Frieden advocates that this 73% be reduced, and that the money to provide assistance to institutionalized people with disabilities can be better spent to provide assistance in their homes where they can be part of their families.

There are more than 400 centers for independent living in the U.S. helping to organize personal assistance services to people with disabilities so they can live in their homes.

Frieden suggests that if we do not develop this infrastructure before 2011 the country will be frustrated by the lack of resources to create independence for people with disabilities. "We need to plan today to provide community based programs to ensure services in their homes," he said.

How acute is the need to address this problem now? In January 2011 approximately 10,000 people per day will turn 65 and be eligible for retirement. And everyday there after 10,000 more people will turn 65 so by 2020 the U.S. will have 80 million people over retirement age. Frieden argues we cannot afford to pay for that many people to be cared for in institutions.

He added that today, as a result of barriers in the environment, barriers in the economy, and barriers in attitudes, there are people with disabilities who are traumatized by the reality that they have a disability. He urges these individuals to seek independent living counseling and training to deal with the trauma of disability.

The reality is, the longer we live the more likely we are to experience a disability as a function of natural aging. According to Frieden, many people in society, as they age, are concerned about developing a disability. They have vision loss, sensation loss, mobility loss, memory loss and other kinds of cognitive challenges. Frieden advocates the greater usage of assistive technology among people with disabilities to help them achieve independence personally and financially.

Another area of concern to Frieden is the dwindling supply of resources for providing rehabilitation services to people with disabilities. Frieden says that it is important to the nation that we find opportunities for people with disabilities in our society.

Speaking of his rehabilitation experiences after a car accident in the 1960s, he says he was fortunate because he had a choice to go to Chicago, Houston, New York City or Los Angeles.

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He laments, "The opportunity to choose today is quite limited because the resources do not exist in the system to ensure that level of choice." He says that because of the lack of resources professionals working in rehabilitation, facilities struggle to ensure that people receive quality care.

Frieden lauds some of today's policies in providing health care that has focused on prevention, efficiency, and minimizing the costs to taxpayers. However, he believes the quality of care needed in the rehabilitation field is sacrificed, due to insufficient resources. He adds, "Therefore we need to look at policy changes as we reform health care in Medicaid and Medicare to ensure the highest quality of services are available to the people needing them most."

Speaking from personal experience to drive home his points, he pointed out that without rehabilitation services he, a quadriplegic, would be living a life of dependency, probably in a hospital with 24 hour care. Instead, he is fully employed and a leader with a long record of accomplishment.

He believes America has the will and resources to deal with these problems. He believes America can give people with disabilities the opportunity to work and to be productive in their homes, to be educated and to be involved in their communities.

He states, "We can set an example worldwide for this effort. We have a moral and social commitment to ensure that all Americans live life to their fullest," and stresses that "nobody should be left without hope of living a better life."

A strong supporter of the Americans with Disabilities Act, he suggests that the principles and integrity of the law must be kept intact, and by doing so, we increase opportunities for people with disabilities and strengthen the financial health of the country.

The opinions expressed in this article are those of the author, and not necessarily those of the National Organization on Disability.

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John Williams, an award-winning columnist, has been writing about disability issues for 22 years. He has written a weekly column for Business Week Online magazine and is knowledgeable about assistive technology products. If you have any comments or questions, or would like more information on this week's article, please contact John Williams at JMMAW@aol.com.

National Organization on Disability

910 Sixteenth Street, N.W., Suite 600 \ Washington, DC 20006
Phone: (202) 293-5960 \ Fax: (202) 293-7999 \ TTY: (202) 293-5968 \ Email: mailto:ability@nod.org



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