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## THE DISABLED AMERICAN FREEDOM RALLY

by Bruce Poyer

*Editor's Note: A cross-country caravan of disabled people, many in wheel chairs, will leave from San Francisco on August 15, to stop in major cities for educational and organizational rallies in support of human rights for disabled people. They will join with similar caravans from other cities for a public forum in Washington, D.C., on September 7-8-9. The Disabled American Freedom Rally is an ad hoc project organized by people with physical, sensory, or developmental disabilities, representing no specific disabled groups or organizations. It is a courageous response on behalf of all disabled Americans against the Reagan Administration's proposed 35 billion dollar cut in federal spending for health and social and educational services and assistance. Contributions are needed to support the cross-country meetings and rallies of the Bay Area caravan. If your union or labor organization can help, please contact Michael Pachovas at DAFR Headquarters, P.O. Box 4688, Berkeley, CA. 94704, or call him for further information at (415) 849-3098 or 549-2282.*

### Disability in America

36 million Americans are disabled - many from war, many from the workplace, many from birth. Thousands have physical or mental handicaps that are simply inconceivable to most of those who are more fortunate. And they have enormous social, educational and economic handicaps as well. The disabled are twice as likely as the average citizen to be unemployed or underemployed - and the disproportionately high percentage of minorities who are disabled face even tougher odds. Their access to full participation in social and community life is limited by all types of restraints. Far too many of the disabled are still forced to live in dependency. Their "equal rights" are continually abridged in our society.

Beginning with the New Deal in the 1930's, the nation at least made a start in recognizing the special problems of the disabled, and in trying to allocate the resources and develop the programs that would help them. Today, there are many specialized programs (which have come to be called "categorical"), dealing with income maintenance, health care, housing, food, transportation, education, rehabilitation, social services, employment, barrier removal, etc. The programs are often the only bridge the disabled have to try to cross over from dependency to a self-supporting life. Further, many disabled look to federal support of research as the best long term hope of curing a disease or dealing with a disabling condition.

While the programs which have developed over the past half century have indeed helped to build a bridge to connect the disabled back to community life, they have also come to depend more and more on federal budget appropriations.

### The Reagan-Stockman Cuts

The Reagan Administration's proposals to cut the federal budget call for a broad based reduction of support for most of the primary systems serving the disabled - including cuts in Social Security disability insurance, Medicaid, Medicare, vocational rehabilitation, developmental disability programs, crippled children's services, mental health services, and education for handicapped children. In addition, the Reagan-Stockman budget proposals severely cut all the secondary and back-up systems serving disabled people along with broader groups - including AFDC, food stamps, nutrition programs, student assistance and loans, legal services, vocational and adult education programs and other support programs for public education to mention only some of the cuts.

The reductions from prior budget estimates for the programs listed above, as proposed by Reagan/Stockman, would total more than \$35 billion initially, and more than \$55 billion annually by 1986.

### Impact of the Cuts on the Disabled

Neither the Reagan Administration nor the Congress has made a thorough assessment of the full impact on the disabled which would result from the adoption of all the proposed budget cuts. The Administration's motivation is primarily political, being based on the belief that the most vulnerable group in America is "too weak and disorganized" to do anything about the budget cuts.

The major proposal now before Congress would end the 50-year evolution of the "categorical" assistance concept, under which federal funds have been earmarked for specific groups of disabled Americans, and for specific services and assistance. It would substitute the block grant concept, and would return to the states only 75% of the current level of federal assistance.

The states would then determine both the types and the levels of funding required to assist the disabled. Unfortunately, the entire evolution of the categorical concept at the federal level occurred because the states were unable or unwilling to meet the service and assistance needs of the disabled. At every step in the 50 year development of the federal programs, the needs and our failure to meet them through state efforts were documented in hundreds of volumes of studies, commission reports, public and legislative hearings. Reagan and Stockman simply disregard the historical record.

The reduced level of federal funding proposed for state use in the form of block grants would open the field of disabled assistance to political infighting and would pit one program against another. The health care and rehabilitation needed by workers with asbestosis, for example, could become available only at the expense of the help needed for crippled children's health services.

The combined effect of reduced funding and block grant politics would result in returning more of the disabled to institutions, in increasing their employment and health and rehabilitation and access problems, and in forcing more of the semi-independent disabled into welfare status. The reductions in one kind of program, like health care service or rehabilitation, will increase costs in other programs like social service or income maintenance. Some of the

most effective services for the disabled, like home health care, would never reach about 50% of all U.S. counties which are not now covered. At least 600,000 people will never get any level of assistance if community mental health programs are reduced as proposed. Further reductions in the crippled children's program, which has already been drastically cut, will result in more severely disabled adults. Proposed cuts in genetic disease programs will lead to more birth defects. None of this has any relationship either to the needs of disabled Americans or to any kind of cost effectiveness.

The Independent Living Program funded by the federal Rehabilitation Act has been successful in establishing centers with comprehensive services, including counselling, housing, job placement, attendant care, and physical rehabilitation, to enhance the ability of handicapped people to live independently and function in the community. Funding of the centers would be reduced from 5 billion to 3.8 billion. No increase in funding would be possible for a three year period, but the states could further reduce funding for these centers, and would probably be forced to do so.

The educational block grant legislation proposed by Reagan would repeal the Education for All Handicapped Children Act, which served over 4 million children in the 1979-80 school year. School systems would not be required to maintain their current financial efforts to educate handicapped children - nor would they be able to do so in California.

The above are only a few examples of the impact of Reagan and Stockman on the nation's disabled. The actual impact of the cuts is so far reaching that even the blind who have established vending stand businesses in public buildings would lose their state vocational rehabilitation support. Is it our purpose to put them out of business? Will that help us in the long run?

#### Who Cares?

In their budget proposals, Reagan and Stockman rely on the theory and the hope that long run economic recovery in the private sector will compensate Americans for services and assistance to be eliminated from government programs. Perhaps the theory will actually work in practice for those who are able bodied and readily employable. But it holds out no possibilities or hope for disabled Vietnam veterans, or crippled children, or black lung victims or blind stand vendors, or indeed for the majority of disabled Americans who need a bridge to help them back to the mainstream of social life, and work life, and community life.

The American people are either badly misinformed about the nature of the Reagan/Stockman budget cuts and the impact they will have on disabled Americans or they have simply become heartless and careless about our treatment of those who most need a helping hand. Perhaps there is no political constituency for the disabled, even Vietnam veterans, and perhaps nothing counts but political clout.

The caravans of handicapped participants in the Disabled American Freedom Rally, including the Bay Area caravan which will start cross-country August 15, will try to inform the people. We salute their courage, and wish them every success. We need to show them that many still care, and want to help.

--Bruce Poyer

*This article does not necessarily represent the opinion of the Center for Labor Research and Education, the Institute of Industrial Relations, or the University of California. The author is solely responsible for its contents. Labor organizations and their press associates are encouraged to reproduce for further distribution any materials in these reports.*