



## *LIFT* Perspective

June 30, 2006

### **Aged and Disabled Doesn't Mean Decrepit and Dependent**

Stereotyping for political gain is nothing new, but exploitation of a stereotype by an organization posing as a defender of the weak and defenseless is particularly odious.

The Center for Public Policy Priorities (CPPP), a liberal, Austin-based think tank, perpetuates a gross caricature that flows from the group's paternalistic ideology.

The June 26<sup>th</sup> Policy Page report from CPPP regards the impending federal mandate that will require proof of citizenship in order to access Medicaid. The author writes, "...initial federal guidance could ... create a paperwork nightmare for the aged and disabled..."

Implicit in the statement is a stereotype that is supposed to wrench pity from lawmakers: it is deliberately manipulative of those it is designed to impact and demeaning to those it characterizes.

Not every one who is "aged" and "disabled" is mentally incompetent or physically incapable. The Attorney General of Texas and a long-serving State Representative are both disabled (Greg Abbott and Paul Moreno are wheel-chair bound) and one of the state's leading corporate executives is aged (T. Boone Pickens is now 78 years old and going strong as head of BP Capital Management).

The American Association of People with Disabilities (AAPD) argues that its members are capable of "full inclusion in American society" and that "people with disabilities do not want a handout. They want to help themselves." The Coalition of Texans with Disabilities aims to ensure "that persons with disabilities may work, live, learn, play and participate fully in the community of their choice." Note that chief among the objectives is to ensure that disabled Texans may *work, live, and learn*.

The US Census Bureau compiles statistics on people with disabilities. According to the Bureau, 42% of working-age men (21 to 64) with disabilities are employed. For women, the rate is 34%. Also, 847,000 people ages 18 to 34 who have disabilities are enrolled in school, or 5% of all students in this age group.

The American Association of Retired Persons (AARP) is one the most powerful special interests in the nation, led by people who are senior citizens. Membership is open to all persons over 50 years of age.

The aged, judging by the AARP report titled *The State of 50+ America 2006*, are independent and mobile. The percentage of 50 to 64 year olds with no functional limitations requiring assistance from another person is 96.2%. For 65 to 74 year olds, 93.9% live independently. For those over 75, 80.5% are independent. The percent of elderly citizens who rarely or never miss something away from their home due to lack of transportation is 87% or higher for all three age groups. Notably, 44% of AARP members work either full- or part-time. The AARP study refutes the CPPP portrait of decrepit, absent-minded elderly people unable to meet the new Medicaid requirements.

With certainty, there are seniors and people with disabilities who are impeded mentally or physically from being able to perform even the most menial tasks. To them, society owes its full support, especially from private charitable organizations. However, most aged and disabled are capable and competent.

And what exactly constitutes the “paperwork nightmare” to which the aged and disabled might be subjected? The Health and Human Services Department reports that, as of October 2005, 2.7 million people are enrolled in the Medicaid program. Presumably, all of them have already filled out the necessary paperwork to qualify for coverage.

Specifically, the existing application for assistance for the aged and disabled is simple. The first page asks identification questions: name, address, social security number, etc. The second page asks for a list of resources owned by the applicant or the applicant’s spouse. The third and final page asks the applicant to list income. The aged and disabled already receive Medicaid services from the state, meaning that the existing form is not a barrier to assistance. The new requirement, the “paperwork nightmare” of which CPPP warns, could be as simple as mailing a certified copy of a birth certificate to the agency. For some Medicaid recipients, including those qualifying for SSI, the HHSC already has the necessary information on file.

Perpetuating and manipulating a grotesque stereotype is much easier than making a sound argument. The bottom line is that the new Medicaid requirement can be met even by the so-called “aged” and “disabled.”