

A New Handicap: Black and Disable in America

by Congressman Major R. Owens

The scant amount of available information on disabled Blacks presents a shocking portrait. It is a shadowy picture of individuals least able to help themselves who have become almost invisible to the federal government. The scandal is even more appalling considering that this population hardly registers in the realms of data on the handicapped gathered by the Reagan Administration.

A letter sent to me by a Black woman in Alabama is an example of the problems Black disabled people face. She wrote that she does not have enough money to effectively attend to the needs of her 15-year-old underweight son, who has a serious nutritional deficiency. Her son's doctor said he needs a special kind of milk; but it costs \$55 to \$60, which is more than her food stamp allotment will cover. She cannot afford health insurance for her son, and she is unable to work because she suffers from a debilitating lung disease, and she has no one else to take care of her son.

I have directed my Select Education Subcommittee staff to investigate this sad and troubling case. It may be that this woman could be helped through the provision of better information regarding program availability. However, cases like hers may be indicative of a broader problem which needs to be addressed legislatively. Dr. Sylvia Walker, director of Howard University's Center for Handicapped Children and Youth in Washington, D.C., has stated that Black teenaged mothers and poor Black

women generally who have no knowledge of, or access to, prenatal health care, often give birth to underweight babies, who later develop a physical or mental handicap, such as mental retardation, or cerebral palsy caused by insufficient oxygen.

The problem of the lack of prenatal care for Black women is just one aspect of the crisis of the Black disabled, a crisis which must be addressed through a national policy. In order to set the parameters for such a policy, we first need up-to-date statistics on the numbers of disabled Blacks in America. The current available data is derived from two-year-old census information, which indicates that there are 2,175,000 Blacks in the U.S. between the ages of 16 and 64 who are disabled. They represent 18% of all working-age persons with disabilities, although Blacks are only 11.5% of the general population. We still don't have an exact count of the number of disabled Black children in this country.

Dr. Frank Bowe, an expert on the Black disabled who was concerned about the lack of data about this group, compiled one of the few recent reports on its problems. His study reveals that of all working-age Black people, 14.1% have one or more disabilities as compared to 8.4% of working age whites with disabilities. More than half of working-age Black disabled are women, just as there are more Black women in the labor force overall than Black men.

Dr. Bowe's statistical compilation allows us to comprehend the profile

of a typical working-age Black adult as 42-years-old, unmarried, unemployed, having only a tenth grade education, with an income in 1980 of only \$3,000 a year.

According to the report, there are more disabled Blacks than whites because Blacks are more likely than whites to perform physically demanding work that may lead to on-the-job injury and disability. This in turn is due to the fact that masses of Blacks are locked out of the necessary education and technical training for less physically strenuous white collar and service sector jobs.

Specifically, in the areas of education and job training there needs to be a more concerted effort to reach the Black disabled in America. In order to address these manifold problems, it is necessary to remind the federal government of its responsibilities in relative to their needs by informing Congress about the daily barriers they face in attempting to secure employment, training, rehabilitation and education. They should be aware of a measure currently pending before Congress, the Americans with Disabilities Act, which, if passed, would extend civil rights protections to disabled Americans by prohibiting discrimination on the basis of disability. Its enforcement procedures include administrative remedies, a private right of action in Federal court, monetary damages, injunctive relief, attorney's fees, and cutoffs of Federal funds. I am a senior sponsor of the bill in the U.S. House of Representatives.

In 1989, the Subcommittee on

Select Education will explore several legislative initiatives. Meanwhile, Black disabled people can play a critical role in helping shape federal policy the area of data gathering regarding Blacks with disabilities. It is my intention to conduct a series of oversight hearings to ensure that these duties are met.

Time-honored Black institutions such as the Black church must become strong advocates for disabled Blacks, and provide support programs which would assist them in their struggle to achieve success and recognition in the societal mainstream. Federal programs which only endorse the right of disabled people to have equal access to those things that the non-disabled majority enjoy are simply not good enough. And an Administration that merely gives lip-service rather than real service to Black disabled people, just as it gives superficial attention to minority rights generally, is abdicating its responsibility to lead the public away from prejudiced attitudes towards those among us who are disabled.

I am in strong agreement with New York Governor Mario Cuomo, who has said, "Persistent attitudinal biases about the capabilities of persons who are disabled or otherwise disadvantaged serve as barriers to productivity and independence. Those often unconscious biases serve as self-fulfilling prophecies and undermine our efforts to permit the majority of persons with disabilities to become productive, independent, contributing members of society."

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Senator McCoy Introduces Legislation To Change Medicaid System

SALEM--State Senator Bill McCoy introduced legislation today urging Congress to change the Medicaid system so that the developmentally disabled are no longer discriminated against.

McCoy is introducing his bill the same day U.S. Senator John Chafee, R-Rhode Island, introduces federal legislation calling for a broader definition of Title XIX (Medicaid) fiscal responsibility in the treatment of developmentally disabled Americans.

Oregon U.S. Senator Mark Hatfield and 35 other Senators co-sponsored the Chafee bill.

McCoy said Medicaid only recognizes treatment provided to institutionalized developmentally disabled patients, not those treated in smaller community programs.

"Life in the community is much better for our disabled than life in an institution. What's more, it costs a lot more to run an institution than a community based program. We should provide humane plus cost effective services at the state and local level," McCoy said.

Social Security Increase Reduces Some Food Stamp Benefits

SALEM--A January cost-of-living increase for Social Security will reduce the February food stamp benefits of some Oregonians. The Food Stamp Program requires that income be considered in establishing the amount of food stamps a person may receive. The reductions affect monthly food stamp benefits starting in February.

Food stamps are federally funded by the U.S. Department of Agriculture, and administered by the Oregon Adult and Family Services Division.

Each month the Food Stamp Program helps approximately 90,000 Oregon households with the purchase of food items. These 90,000 households encompass 205,000 individuals. The four percent cost-of-living increase from Social Security will affect fewer than 27,000 households. This decrease in food stamp benefits will affect households receiving Social Security benefits, Supplemental Security Income, Railroad benefits, and Veteran's benefits.

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