

Wm. Bennett Ratliff

Testimony to the Sunset Advisory Commission

June 25, 2014

Good afternoon Chairman Nelson and the members of the Commission, my name is Bennett Ratliff and I am here today representing myself and my son, Thomas, to provide input on the Sunset Advisory Commission Report regarding the Department of Aging and Disability Services.

I have read the report and while I am sure that you will hear, and have heard, compelling testimony on the merits of each proposal contained in the report, I came here today to tell you a story about the potential impact of your decisions. My son is with me here today and much of this testimony is on his behalf because of his limited ability to speak for himself, and it's his story that is very similar to many we hear from families across Texas.

Thomas was diagnosed at birth with a designation of "failure to thrive" and we were unable to learn much else about his medical diagnosis until much later in his life. While in elementary school, he played soccer on a special team and my wife and I founded a baseball league for him and his friends that is much like the Miracle League you see in many communities today. He grew up with friends of all abilities, played in the band in middle school and high school, and thanks to many very gifted and loving teachers, he graduated from high school with the skills to get a job at Walmart as a stock clerk.

Thomas now works part-time at Walmart and will be celebrating his 10th year of employment with them in October. He is active in Special Olympics in our community, he attends a weekly bible study at our church, and he goes to a day habilitation center, his "school", on days he doesn't work and he pays for it with his Walmart paycheck. His sister and brother-in-law live nearby and come stay with him sometimes on weekends so we can take trips for a few days once or twice a year, often referred to as respite care. The rest of his pay he saves to pay his share of an annual trip to Disneyworld.

When Thomas was 16, we started personal futures planning for him and with the school district we worked on his plan for life after public school. One part of that planning was to get him on the waiting lists for residential living so that he could live on his own if he wanted. Another part of the planning was to evaluate our options for his living arrangements as part of our estate planning, should my wife and I be unable to care for him. We evaluated all his options and he has chosen for now to live at home with us, but the need is the same for many families.

When he became eligible for the waiting list for a community-based placement at age 18, we were told that at the current rate he should be eligible in about 5 years. Thomas just celebrated his 28th birthday this month and as is usual we received his annual update from the case manager who reports to us on his status. As of this year, there are now approximately 100,000 Texans on the waiting list for a community-based placement. Thomas is currently number 7,833 on the list and they are now placing people who were put

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on the list 3 years before Thomas. At the current rate, we are told that we could expect him to be eligible in, you guessed it, about 5 more years.

While we are blessed in many regards, we are blessed in a position to not need public assistance to provide for Thomas' needs on a daily basis or for the foreseeable future. His potential eligibility is purely part of his, and our, futures planning should the need arise. But his story is not unique, as I said, there are 100,000 other Texans with similar stories, many who desperately need services.

Why do I tell you this story, because I wanted you to put a name and a face on the waiting list. I want you to understand that the decision before you is not just about the 3,650 people living in the State Supporting Living Centers and their families. The decision impacts 100,000 other families in Texas.

I have had the opportunity to visit the Denton SSLC twice in my life, and I recognize the need for many families for this facility. I also appreciate that many of them may not have the options of our family and I respect the decisions that they have made, decisions that are best for them. I do not advocate nor support the involuntary placement of SSLC residents in community-based programs, but I do believe that it is time to at least consider the most efficient way to deliver these services.

So I ask you, if we as a State are not willing to have a discussion about the re-alignment of services now, then when? If the SSLC's are now at roughly 25% of their capacity and we don't address it now, will we consider it when they are at 20%, or 15% or at 10%?

With the growing need and demand for community based services, if we are not willing to have the discussion now, then when? The waiting list has 100,000 names and at current rates may take 15 or more years. Are we willing to let it grow to 110,000, 120,000 or 150,000? Are we prepared to tell 100,000 families to wait 15, 20 or 25 years?

Texas has a proud track record of recognizing inefficiency and working to address it, to provide more services with the same or less funding, and to serve the citizens with the programs that they need. This is one of those times – let's find a solution that recognizes the needs of all families who have a loved one with disabilities and make the hard decisions necessary to address the problem now, Texans deserve it.

Thank you for your time, I know you have a long day ahead of you and I appreciate your service to the State of Texas.