



# Windows Into The Budget

Senator Andy Hill

## #4: *The Vulnerable Individuals Priority Act*

*A proposal to eliminate the backlog of individuals with developmental disabilities in need of state services – [SB 6387](#)*

***“A system of haves and have-nots is not okay.”***

*-- A parent on the inequities in state-funded care for people with developmental disabilities.*

*2013 State Performance Audit report<sup>1</sup>*

### ***1. A good system, with one major flaw: a sizable waitlist***

An individual with developmental disabilities in Washington is defined as a person with an intellectual disability, or conditions such as cerebral palsy, autism, or epilepsy that results in substantial limitations to an individual's intellectual or adaptive functioning.<sup>2</sup>

In 2013, State Auditor Troy Kelley released a performance audit on services for people with developmental disabilities in Washington. The report outlined a number of positives:

- Washington provides care in home and in community settings, which is considered the 'gold standard' of delivery;
- Clients receiving care report high satisfaction with both the quantity and quality of services;
- Washington is a national leader in employment results for individuals with developmental disabilities.<sup>3</sup>

**However, there is one significant flaw in the system.**

*"Many eligible people and their families do not receive services from Washington's Developmental Disabilities Program, effectively creating a system of 'haves' and 'have-nots.'" (State Performance Audit, p. 10)*

This is a longstanding problem, going back years and even decades. Currently, there are more than 20,000 individuals who receive care in Washington, but DSHS estimates a backlog of about 5,300 individuals who have requested service, met the criteria, and are waiting for an available funded slot.<sup>4</sup> A sizable number of those on the waitlist are children.<sup>5</sup>

As one parent who did receive state services for their child aptly put it, "People say we are lucky. Services should not be a matter of luck."<sup>6</sup>

## ***2. The Vulnerable Individuals Priority Act: eliminating the backlog***

The Vulnerable Individuals Priority Act, [Senate Bill 6387](#), is simple but profound.<sup>7</sup>

Simple, because the policy changes are straightforward. The legislation proposes expanding available funding for:

- **4,000 families in need of respite care.**

Respite care provides families with regular, periodic relief from caregiving. For families whose central day-in and day-out focus is caring for their child with developmental disabilities (whether youth or adult), respite care is vital to their physical and emotional well-being. It is a crucial community support function that allows families to continue caring for their child in the home, rather than placing them in an institutional setting.

Aside from being good moral policy, respite care funding is sound fiscal policy. Parent or family home care is five times less expensive, on average, than caring for someone in an institutional setting.<sup>8</sup> By providing these services up-front, we avoid incurring more expensive costs.

- **1,000 individuals in need of employment or employment support services.**

Washington has an "Employment First" policy, which states that working age people with developmental disabilities shall be provided with support to allow them to work in the community. The opportunity to work provides intrinsic value to the individual, along with connecting them to the community.

Unfortunately, there are those who want to work, but for which there is inadequate state funding. The Vulnerable Individuals Priority Act addresses that known backlog, ensuring that the state provides support services for those individual with developmental disabilities who want to be employed in their community.

This is a sizable expansion of services, and to ensure it is done properly, it is phased in over three years. By June 2017, it is projected that the waitlist for eligible individuals that have requested a service would be eliminated.

But what about the cost? **The VIP Act is revenue neutral in the current budget, and in fact, is projected to have no net cost to the state budget in future years.**<sup>9</sup>

This is accomplished largely via a new federal option that Oregon recently utilized, called the "Community First Choice Option." In it, the federal government allows states to receive a 6% higher federal match for certain Medicaid services provided in a community setting.

Essentially, as Oregon has done, the Vulnerable Individuals Priority Act proposes to refinance much of the social services care (both long-term and developmental disability) in our state from the current 50% federal match to the Community First Choice Option of 56% match.

The savings to the state budget are then redirected toward eliminating the waitlist for people with developmental disabilities.

### ***3. Profoundly impact lives of the most vulnerable and their families***

Earlier, I mentioned the Vulnerable Individuals Priority Act was simple but profound.

- Profound describes the ability to keep families together, rather than being forced to move a family member into an institutional setting due to lack of community support.
- Profound describes the sense of self-worth that comes from gainful employment.
- Profound, simply put, describes the impact that this proposal would have on the thousands of individuals with developmental disabilities and families that would finally receive needed services.

In this short session, with a budget in balance, I believe the Legislature must be thoughtful and measured in what it pursues. That said, the Vulnerable Individuals Priority Act represents an opportunity to address a longstanding infirmity – a system of "haves" and "have-nots" amongst our most vulnerable – in a fiscally prudent manner. It is an opportunity that would be tragic to pass up.

This is also an example of smart budgeting – improving the system and those served while not requiring additional revenue or taxes. This reforms government while still living within our means.

### ***The Window's Reflection***

*The Vulnerable Individuals Priority Act provides a way to profoundly benefit the lives and families of thousands of our state's most vulnerable individuals, all without adversely impacting the state budget.*

## Footnotes

The VIP Act is Senate Bill 6387, which can be viewed by clicking [here](#).

1. "Developmental Disabilities in Washington: Increasing Access and Equality," State Auditor's Office (July 31, 2013), p. 3
2. RCW 71A.10.020
3. *Id.*, pp. 14, 27, 30.
4. You'll note that the audit cites a 15,000 person backlog. However, this includes people who have not requested a service as well as people who received a service at one time but were deemed no longer financially eligible. The 5,300 figure is DSHS's estimate of eligible individuals who have actually requested a service from the state.
5. The state audit indicated as much as 70% of the unserved are children. See page 10.
6. *Id.*, p. 3
7. <http://aor/billsummary/default.aspx?Bill=6387&year=2013>
8. State Audit, p. 4.
9. Senate Ways & Means fiscal estimate. At full implementation, projected additional biennial costs from reducing the waitlist by 5,000 individuals is \$41 million a biennium in state funds. Savings from the Community First Option, at full implementation, is projected at \$76 million in state funds.