

The Texas Tsunami

A Message Clay Boatright, President of The Arc of Texas

With 2010 coming to a close with Christmas and New Year celebrations, we should take a moment and think about the year ahead. While we want the future to be even more joyous than today, 2011 will be uniquely challenging for people with intellectual and developmental disabilities in Texas. To overcome those challenges we need to prepare, engage, and more importantly, support one another. Here's why.

A tsunami will hit Texas on September 1, 2011. Early reports indicate that anywhere from 13,000 to over 50,000 people will have their lives destroyed immediately. In addition, up to another 100,000 people will lose their jobs, quit, or significantly reduce their work hours as a result of this devastation. Thousands of marriages will crumble as the financial, physical and psychological stress becomes unbearable. Child abuse will skyrocket and some of the tsunami victims may become institutionalized.

Leadership to deal with this disaster will be nonexistent. Elected officials will blame the state budget and federal government, while offering no solution. Though a few pastors may say a prayer for those harmed, most will act as though nothing has happened even as members of their flocks search desperately for help. The general public will be relieved that the storm did not hit them.

The tragedy described above is very real. Services for people with disabilities are on the chopping block as state agencies submit their budgets for the next legislative session. Currently there are over 100,000 Texans on decade-long waiting lists for services. Meanwhile, the state is developing plans to remove those services from many who had waited so long. Waiting years for someone to help their neighbor is wrong. Eliminating that help when a life depends on it is an abomination.

In rural Texas, a Native American was told for 35 years that there was no one, no service, and no money to help her. Only after her aging mother collapsed in their home did she receive emergency assistance. Today she enjoys the blessing of an independent life, a life which will be jeopardized when she loses her support. Expecting a now 75 year old mother to resume care for her adult daughter is beyond comprehension.

In Houston, a 7th generation Texan receives help from the state for her most basic needs, thus enabling her mother to hold a job and care for her own elderly parents. With no one else to help them, the loss of support will require the mother to quit her job in order to care for her daughter. In one fell swoop, this will reduce the quality of life for three generations.

A restaurant in Austin has a loyal employee with intellectual disabilities who lives in his own apartment nearby. Removing state support will cause him to lose his home and independence, and may force him to move to an institution away from his family and friends where his talents will go unheralded.

Near Dallas, a family of five receives help after school for their twins with severe autism. Each twin requires one-on-one attention at all times, as their disability can cause behaviors which are physically painful to others. Losing that assistance may force their father and sole provider to take a lower paying job in order to help his family during the day. This will greatly reduce their ability to pay taxes, support the economy, and contribute to their church. That family is mine.

The Texas legislature will meet in a few weeks and make decisions which will affect the lives of thousands of people who have no other place to turn. To our elected leaders the request is simple...please, do no harm. For the rest of us, we need to enjoy our holiday time, be thankful for our families, and engage 2011 with unbridled passion. Otherwise, the tsunami will strike.

Clay Boatright is President of The Arc of Texas, the state's oldest and largest nonprofit organization serving people with intellectual and developmental disabilities. He and his family live in Plano.