

Partisan Politics and the Forgotten Population

By Alan B. Cobo-Lewis

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A BDN editorial recently celebrated “[a welcome return to normalcy](#)” in the state budget process. But people who had been a bipartisan priority have been forgotten — and the state has failed to meet its basic obligations.

[During the LePage administration, the governor blocked MaineCare expansion](#), and the [GOP promised to keep blocking it](#) until Maine addressed waitlists where people with disabilities were stranded.



Even though waitlists were a political football, at least there was bipartisan agreement to address them — as in this [OpEd by Democrat Erin Herbig and Republican Richard Malaby](#), who sponsored bills in the 128th Legislature to help people with disabilities.

Yet 1,580 adults with intellectual disabilities or autism now wait for “comprehensive waiver” services, under MaineCare Section 21. [DHHS has deemed about one-third of them \(576 people\) “Priority 2,”](#) meaning at risk for abuse, neglect or exploitation without needed services under MaineCare rules.

Last year, [the legislature committed to funding 300 people](#) — roughly half the “at risk” group — but the money ran out after only 133. So this year, the Mills administration asked the legislature to [fund the balance of 167 remaining at-risk adults](#). But the administration requested nothing for the other 90 percent of the people on the waitlist.

The more modest MaineCare Section 29 “supports waiver” is a safety net for people spending years on the Section 21 waitlist. [Section 29 also had a waitlist from 2009 to 2015.](#)

But late last year, the [Section 29 waitlist re-emerged, and has 183 people as of this May](#). Yet the administration has not requested any money to address it, and the Legislature has not appropriated any.

[People with brain injury \(Section 18\) and other conditions \(Section 20\) are also waiting](#) for services.

On being told by the House chair of the Legislature’s appropriations committee that the state cannot have a Section 29 waitlist as long as there is a Section 21 waitlist, [DHHS Commissioner Jeanne Lambrew incorrectly reassured the committee that, “There is no waitlist for Section 29 services.”](#)

[DHHS later admitted in a memo](#) that there is a Section 29 waitlist because they ran out of funding. This was a good first step. But the administration must also repair the damage — yet they requested no money to address the emergency, and the Legislature did not appropriate any. How can DHHS address a funding problem without more money? Will they cut other adults with disabilities?

Legislative Democrats spent the session supporting their governor. And with Democrats in charge throughout Augusta, the Republicans seemingly washed their hands of the issue. Perhaps Republicans would have voted for a Democratic proposal to address Section 29, but they made no proposal of their own.

Meanwhile, the Section 29 waitlist is a raging fire.

What does this mean? Parents of adults with significant disabilities having to quit their jobs. People with disabilities are unable to access and be part of their community. Many do not have the support they need to get their own jobs, so they do not have the dignity of earning a wage. Money invested by local school districts is wasted when people age out of school and get shoved off the funding cliff.

This is a failure of the executive and legislative branches to meet basic obligations.

The [BDN report](#) from last week indicated that the last-minute budget negotiations dealt with issues like workers compensation — there was nothing about waitlists.

If this is a “welcome return to normalcy,” then who needs normal?

Gov. Mills should call the legislature into special session to eliminate the Section 29 waitlist immediately. She should then address the Section 21, 18, and 20 waitlists in next year’s supplemental budget, and eliminate them within two years. And all legislators should help.

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