

From the Desk of Ross O'Banion

July 1 marked the start of the new fiscal year for the state of Florida. This is an economy and a job market that is less than hoped for and, in fact, dismal at best. For Angels Unaware, Inc. and other providers of services for the Developmentally Disabled, July 1 marked yet another reduction in funding. This time, at the 4% level. There has been so many of these reductions in the past few years that most providers have lost count of the total percentage.

July marked the announcement schedule for the new I-Budget. Oct 1, 2011 will start the rollout in the Northwestern part of the state. On Dec. 1, 2011 it will be parts of Central Florida, and then on Feb.1, 2012, the southern part of the state will see this new budget put in place. On April 1, 2012, all those remaining counties in the Northeast and those scattered across the state that were left out, will now join in. Simultaneously with the I-Budget, APD is rolling out its customer central record online system throughout the state. I wonder if April 1, 2012 will be anything like April 1, 2011 – the day APD announced a 10% reduction in funding. Later the legislature promised to find the money to cancel this action, which is why we have the 4% cut.

The question on everyone's mind at this point is really very simple. The I-Budget is supposed to give consumers and families the ability to control where their funding is spent. At the present time they still are required to have Support Coordination. A great question is "why?", as families and consumers will be making the decisions and tracking the budget. Once the money is gone in a consumer's budget they will get no more until the next budget year, unless it can be proved that the consumer's needs and challenges have increase to justify the increase (good luck). The I-Budget promises to be consistent so that everyone with similar challenges gets the same money across the state to spend. The question on everyone's mind is will it meet the needs? Will it be at a funding level to keep providers of services from going bankrupt? Having power to decide is long overdue, but having power to decide over consistent inadequate funding is another tasteless April Fools joke. Is the I-Budget one of these? No one knows yet. Yes, APD will stay in budget but how about the quality and level of care the consumers need?

The challenge for families is to continue to voice concerns to the Legislators, watch, talk, and work with others to see how the I-Budget is, or is not working as it is implemented across the state. Continue to work with service providers as they continue to provide services needed. Continue to push for adequate funding streams for those currently receiving funding and those approx. 19,000 on the waiting list. I-Budget places the consumer and families in the "driver's seat" but lets make sure the "car" is safe, sound, and adequate for the journey, as there are many twists, turns, and hazards ahead.