

To the Members of the Appropriation Committee

2/18/10

My name is Jill Cohen and I reside at 161 Ellsworth Street, Bridgeport, CT. My son Steven Homa is a client of Ability Beyond Disability.

I'm sure you may have gotten a glimpse of Olympic athlete Lindsey Vonn in her winning downhill race for the Gold. When she reached the bottom of the run she knew she won. She knew that all her efforts had come together in that one moment of achieving her life long dream. She cried from deep down in her soul: tears of joy, but also tears that released all the pent up pain and fear of the possibility of never achieving her dream. I understood her tears, even though I never donned a pair of skis.

Being the mother of a child with intellectual disabilities, I also have spent a life time holding the hopes and dreams that my son would have the quality of life he deserves, enduring all the challenges, pain and fear of the possibility of an unfulfilled life. Even worse, the recurrent nightmare of my son being lost and alone in a world that does not understand him, when I am no longer able to be his protector and defender.

During a critical time in Steven's life, I had to face the heart wrenching reality that my son needed more help than I could provide. I thought myself capable of many things as I had navigated educational and medical systems rather successfully, but not without some scars.

Steven needed a group home placement at the tender age of 16. Our DDS worker was lovely and empathetic but could not help us. She said " I'm sorry but it is a 15 year wait list to get into a group home." Let me tell you she might as well have said " I know you need this life saving surgery, but you will have to wait 15 years to get it."

I thank God every day that I had the tenacity to overcome that reality. That was UNACCEPTABLE. In reality, our survival as a family depended on a group home placement. Steven needed 24hour care, I had to work, plus I had another child who needed me. There were far more questions than answers. I kept pushing back until I was able to secure a safe place for Steven with Ability Beyond Disability. That was 17 years ago in 1993. My nightmares were over. No matter what happens to me, he will be safe and cared for. Steven made friends, he graduated from Brookfield High School, he even realized his dream of 10 years of running with the torch for Special Olympics just last year in the regional games.

I felt as though I won the GOLD, and for the next 15 years I healed myself and my family. Then in August of 2008 I got the news that Steven's placement was in jeopardy. It seems that the agency has been underfunded for a very long time and Steven's level of care was straining the

resources. This news rocked my world like an earthquake! The old fears came flooding back. There are again lots of questions and no answers. That is what brings me here. I need to understand how the State thinks it can tempt fate by cutting funding for the care of my son and all others like him. What will you as legislators do if these services collapse? Where will our kids go? Who will care for them? Do you think it can't happen? Are you in denial of the risks of your proposed cuts? Have you been listening to the pleas, to the evidence before you?

I have just told you that my son's placement is at risk. Do you believe what I say?

After 17 years of being served by this agency, I have to face this frightening reality. Like the seasoned athlete, I don't give up or give in. I am a veteran at advocating for my son's right to a quality life. I accept no less. You should accept no less.

I echo the sentiments of many family members who are counting on you to do the right thing.