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Editorial: Why do the developmentally disabled wait so long for care? Debt and dysfunction steal services from Illinois families.

By [The Editorial Board](#)

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Charlene Synoga wakes up her son, Jason, who is nonverbal and has autism. She said she has been rejected by 12 programs in the last year. (Zbigniew Bzdak / Chicago Tribune)

Illinois families seeking care for developmentally disabled young adults face unacceptably long waits to be eligible for community-based services, from daytime programs to job training, that are essential to supporting some of the state's most vulnerable residents. Once families finally reach the top of that list, often after years of patience, [they can run smack into a new problem](#): no available services that match their needs.

The state has been under a federal court order to improve care for the developmentally disabled, including trimming the lengthy waiting list, since 2011, reports Marie Fazio in the Tribune. Court monitor Ronnie Cohn notes that shortening the list alone "is not that meaningful if you have nowhere to go" once your time comes. A study on the quality and availability of services is under way.

Stories like this show the human cost of one-fourth of state government's budget being vacuumed up by pension costs — taxpayer money that isn't available to improve life for disadvantaged citizens. As a result, many Illinois families are suffering.

Nearly 20,000 people with disabilities in Illinois are on the waiting list to receive state aid [after they age out of public education](#). The damaging delays may not end there. Charlene Synoga has a 23-year-old son with severe autism who needs constant aid and supervision. He made it off the waitlist only to be rejected by 12 programs and encounter another that his mother said was woefully understaffed. Jason has nowhere to go and nothing to do. After school ended, Synoga said, "his whole life has changed so much, he's miserable. ... He could still be learning things." Behavioral support, life skills and for some, job training, can transform lives like Jason's. Those options also can free caregivers to seek or keep their own jobs.

Illinois spends at least \$400 million a year on this type of services and aid, according to Allison Stark, director of the Human Services Department's developmental disabilities division. That ranges from small group housing to larger facilities and includes community day programs and adaptive equipment. Stark estimates Illinois would have to double its spending to eliminate the wait for services.

We encounter lawmakers who offer the default Illinois answer: *Just raise taxes!* Hence their demand to amend Illinois' constitution and move to a scheme of graduated tax rates — first on

That's exactly the wrong answer — a surefire way to aggravate six straight years of population decline, with taxpayers fleeing and a shrinking number of residents left to pay government's rising costs. Again: [Illinois politicians won't reinvent and reform government](#) until voters force them to reinvent and reform. That should start with legislators putting on the November ballot a second amendment: ["Let the people vote," in Gov. J.B. Pritzker's memorable refrain](#), to permit reduction of public pension benefits earned in future years.

Too many families, those with developmentally disabled members included, are giving up on Illinois. The plight of these families in particular is one more urgent reason to streamline the spending side of state government's ledger — rather than constantly trying to collect more tax dollars. Reducing that one-quarter of the budget that now goes to pension costs would solve a lot of \$400 million problems for the people of Illinois.

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