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FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

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TABOR: Bad News for People with Disabilities

By JorJan Borlin

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Would you vote for a constitutional amendment to rip holes in the safety net that protects disadvantaged citizens?

That's what Wisconsin will get if we approve TABOR, the so-called Taxpayers Bill of Rights.

Our legislators are elected to decide which programs we need, and how to raise funds to pay for them. TABOR supporters, however, want to bypass the legislature by writing a formula into the state constitution to cap taxing and spending. The cap could not be exceeded unless a majority of Wisconsin voters authorize it in a referendum.

But what will we do when the unforeseen happens? How do we respond when the economy takes a tumble? The state will be locked into inflexible limits we can't override until the next election. If the formula proves faulty, it will take at least four years for the legislature and voters to remove it from the constitution.

What does all this mean for people with disabilities?

In Colorado, where TABOR has been in effect since 1992, Medicaid has been slashed. The state has eliminated health care coverage for 15,600 children in low-income families. It has reduced coverage for private duty nursing and durable medical equipment. Medicaid's transportation budget was significantly reduced, making it difficult for people who need to travel to medical appointments.

Cuts in other programs were just as severe. The legislature was forced to cancel the homestead property tax exemption for 100,000 senior citizens. Because of TABOR, Colorado now has the lowest rates in the nation for immunizations and adequate prenatal care.

In Wisconsin, we can expect deep cuts in state-funded services. That means greater hardship for children and adults with disabilities who rely on special education and other services that already are under-funded. Medicaid will not be able to keep pace with medical and pharmaceutical costs, as well as the growing number of people needing services.

Did Colorado's constitutional amendment create the TABOR-topia its proponents promised? A poll taken last November by the AARP found that 55 percent of likely voters in that state now support repealing TABOR outright. The same poll showed 89 percent of voters would restore funding for services that allow elders and people with disabilities to live independently in their own homes.

TABOR supporters in Wisconsin claim their proposed amendment is better than Colorado's. But why risk another drastic, inflexible and untried approach? Instead, let's insist that our legislators follow through on their elected responsibilities.

That includes protecting the services upon which many people with disabilities rely.

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