



## VOR Legislative Initiative 2021

VOR's 2021 Legislative Initiative was held virtually this year, via Zoom, with participants following up with pre-scheduled "Hill Visits" to member of congress and their staff via conference calls or Zoom meetings. Overall, the initiative was a success, both for exceeding expectations for our first virtual event and also for having chosen the right topics to present to legislators at just the right moment.

The materials we submitted appear on our website, at:

<https://www.vor.net/news-and-events/item/vor-2021-virtual-legislative-initiative>

They include our positions on the HCBS Access Act of 2021, the American Jobs Plan, and several bills that would close vocational centers for people with I/DD and eliminate 14(c) wage certificates, effectively closing one option for people with intellectual disabilities who are unlikely to transition to competitive, integrated employment sought by advocates who refuse to acknowledge more severe forms of ID.

After the original briefing on May 16<sup>th</sup>, we held two debriefing sessions on consecutive evenings, and one a week later, to get feedback from participants and offer answers to any questions that may have arisen during their meetings.

After the debriefings, we emailed our conference materials to staff contacts in every office on Capitol Hill, personalizing each email with the names of the staff and the senator or representative for whom they work, in some cases with personal notes to persons we had met with in years past.

This was incredibly timely. Our initiative and follow-up came after the announcement of the intention to introduce the HCBS Access Act of 2021 and some form of President Biden's American Jobs Plan in Congress and the actual introduction of the policies held therein in the Better Care Better Jobs Act that was introduced in Congress last Thursday, June 24<sup>th</sup>.

The Better Care Better Jobs Act has been in the headlines this week because President Biden announced, then rescinded, his intention to not pass the Infrastructure Bill agreed to by a coalition of moderate Republicans and moderate Democrats unless his Jobs Bill was passed as well.

The Better Care Better Jobs Act contains the language we objected to, in the form of providing \$400 Billion in additional funding for people with I/DD, but only to those in HCBS settings. Currently, ICFs and for HCBS services receive funds from CMS through two different funding streams. This bill only provides funds through one of those two streams.

What this will do, most likely, is starve the ICF system financially. By giving an increase in federal funds to HCBS only, state legislators and governors will have incentive to move people with I/DD out of ICFs and into group homes, where the federal government will pay a higher share of the costs. Using Money Follows the Person funds, the states won't even have to pay the costs of transitioning people from ICF to HCBS. The federal government will pick up the tab for that. The Better Care Better Jobs Act also includes a provision to permanently re-authorize Money Follows the Person.

Another matter of concern involves the workforce that serves the I/DD community. There has long been a problem, now an obvious crisis in the lack of Direct Support Professionals (DSPs) and the high turnover rates of staff in non-union private ICFs and HCBS facilities. The system has been built to rely on a dedicated but an underpaid, and often undertrained, work force. The Better Care Better Jobs Act intends to address this issue only in part, by increasing wages for DSPs in HCBS settings only. Since private ICFs and HCBS facilities both rely on the same pool of workers, this will cause strain on the ICFs. Why would anyone want to work at one type of facility for low wages, often less than a living wage, when they can do the same job at another facility for a considerably higher salary?

We intend to continue our campaign against the inequities in these bills. Gayle Gerdes and I have been scheduling meetings with influential members of congress and staff, aiming at those on key committees, in order to bring our message to lawmakers and to try to change these bills before they get through committee. We have been partnering with Together for Choice the National Council for Severe Autism and others to raise our voices.

If Congress intends to make a once-in-a-lifetime change to the DDS system, they had better make it right. They had better make it right for *all* people. Lives depend on it.