

Protesters seek funding for mental health programs

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BOB JOHNSON, Associated Press Writer

MONTGOMERY, Ala. (AP) — Natasha Rumble is a delightful 24-year-old woman with a warm smile. She will represent Alabama at the national Special Olympics swimming competition in Nebraska this summer and according to her mother "never met a stranger."

Rumble, who has Downs Syndrome and lives in Florence, was among several hundred people who rallied Wednesday in front of the Alabama Statehouse to urge legislators to provide more funding for programs for the intellectually disabled.

Rumble has been on a waiting list for eight years to get into an ARC of Alabama day care program for people with intellectual disabilities. She says she believes the day care program will prepare her for a full-time job.

"I think I've been waiting my whole life on a waiting list," Rumble said.

The director of ARC of Alabama, Tom Holmes, said there are currently 2,200 people on the waiting list to get into programs run by the organization, which receive the bulk of their funding from the state.

Jeff Ridgeway, president of People First, an advocacy group for the intellectually disabled, said the day care programs are needed to help the disabled find jobs.

"People with disabilities need jobs big time," said the 45-year-old Ridgeway, who is intellectually disabled partly because of a stroke he suffered when he was 14-years-old.

State Rep. John Knight, D-Montgomery, chairman of the House committee that writes the General Fund budget, said finding extra money to trim the ARC waiting lists will be difficult this year because of the recession.

"There is a budget crunch, but we really do need to help Mental Health all we can," Knight said.

For Rumble and her family any help to get her in the day care program would be appreciated.

Her mother, Carlyne Rumble, said if her daughter doesn't get into a day care program at some point she might have to quit her job to stay home with her.

Carlyne Rumble said her daughter now spends many days home alone but really needs to be in a social setting.

"She's a very personable person and she needs to be out in the community," Carlyne Rumble said.

Natasha Rumble said she has no doubt she could handle a "full time" job — maybe something like working in a restaurant "showing people to their tables."

"I want to learn a bunch of things. I'm very smart," she said.

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