



Mobilian fights for the disabled, says zoning effort could spread discrimination

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By **Casandra Andrews, Press-Register**

By



Jeff Ridgeway

MOBILE, Alabama -- Mobile's Jeff Ridgeway has spent weeks gathering support statewide to defeat a zoning effort in Northport that he fears will push disabled people to the fringe or keep them out altogether.

The zoning ordinance in question — coming as the state begins to close the W.D. Partlow Developmental Center in neighboring Tuscaloosa — would limit the number of group homes within the city.

Ridgeway is president of People First of Alabama, an advocacy group that's become increasingly vocal in pressing the rights of those who are intellectually disabled.

"It's illegal to discriminate against people because of race, creed or disability," Ridgeway said. "This is a statewide issue. Somebody is going to take Northport's issue and apply it to their municipality, so people with disabilities won't have anywhere to turn."

The Northport City Council is expected to take up the matter again tonight.

Northport leaders have said they expect group home requests to rise as Partlow, operated by the state Department of Mental Health, shuts its doors.

Partlow is set to close Nov. 30, although there is a lawsuit pending to block that action.

The Alabama Disabilities Advocacy Program filed an administrative complaint with the federal government, asserting that the Northport ordinance is discriminatory.

Ridgeway, who can't drive because of a health condition, planned to board a bus in Mobile before dawn Monday to make it to Northport in time to speak at the council meeting. He said he hoped that a strong contingent would join him in voicing opposition to limiting the places that disabled people can call home.

The ordinance has been changed as least three times, Ridgeway said, from one group home per two miles, to one per mile, to one per 1,000 feet or quarter-mile. "Which is still bad," he said, "because they are saying people with disabilities can't live where they want to. It's leaving people without a choice."

Ridgeway, 46, was born with a hole in his heart and birth defects that affected his sight and hearing. Undaunted by obstacles, he spent years lobbying for changes to how those with intellectual disabilities were labeled by agencies in Alabama and beyond.

His late-night push during a filibuster at the Alabama State House in 2008 remains a highlight. His successful bill required that any new state laws refer to people with disabilities as people first. For example, "disabled" would be changed to "individuals with disabilities" and "mentally ill" would become "individuals with mental illness."

Besides his duties with People First, Ridgeway serves on the board of the Alabama Disabilities Advocacy Program, recently completed a term on the Alabama Rehabilitation Advisory Council, and is a member of the human rights committee for Volunteers of America.

He also offers input for the Alabama Department of Mental Health while participating on two subcommittees: one focusing on developmental disability and another that provides management steering input.

He has labored, too, to ensure that those with intellectual disabilities know where they vote and know how to change polling places if they move.

"One of my favorite things to do is working on voting issues," Ridgeway said.

"Alabama has about 5 million people," he said, "and we have roughly 1 million with some type of disability. We have roughly about 400,000 that are of voting age. If we could get a block voting, we could say who is going to be governor, who we send to Congress."

People First of Alabama, with some 700 members, recently launched a Facebook page to raise more awareness about issues facing those with intellectual disabilities. The local group gathers monthly and will hold its next meeting at 5 p.m. Thursday at the Enrichment Center, 6500 Zeigler Blvd. in Mobile.

Ridgeway said that he's determined to rid the world of a word — the "R word" — that was hurled against him as a child.

"We have a campaign going on nationwide to stop the 'R word,'" Ridgeway said. "It's ongoing because everybody doesn't seem to know the 'R word' is hurtful.

"The old saying, 'Sticks and stones may break my bones, but words will never hurt me,' is not true. Sometimes words cut like a knife and make you bleed as bad as a blade."

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