Jeff Ridgeway

An Alabama Leader in Self-Advocacy

2014 People First of Alabama State Conference
Birmingham, Alabama - August 21-22, 2014
“Above all, what strikes me about Jeff and his advocacy is that he is a bulldog. Simply put: he will not quit. That is why he has succeeded in life, and that is why he has succeeded in his advocacy. He is an example to us all of what we can do if we work hard, and keep working hard.”
James Tucker
ADAP - Executive Director

“I first met Jeff around 10 years ago as I became involved as an advisor to a new chapter of a People First and also as the parent of a young self advocate. Jeff’s never wavering selfless pursuit for justice and equality for all Alabama citizens has been an example for all of us with the same values. His leadership for the Alabama Respectful Language Law in particular is a lasting tribute.”
Susan Ellis
State Coordinator - People First of Alabama

“Jeff is passionate about self advocacy and human and civil rights for people with disabilities. He is truly like the “Kudzu” plant we so love, persistent, ever growing and challenging all that it is in its way to cover the landscape with his message. This tenaciousness is the spirit of self advocacy.”
Vicki Turnage
Ability Alliance - Executive Director

“Jeff has used the power of his poetry to inspire people around our country to vote and to appreciate the freedom a we have!”
Chester Finn
Former President of SABE Self Advocates Becoming Empowered

“Jeff’s efforts on behalf of Alabamians with disabilities are the true definitions of advocacy and leadership. As an advocate, Jeff promotes policies and initiatives that benefit Alabamians with all types of disabilities. Jeff’s ability to remain proactive and involve others in the causes in which he believes also make Jeff an invaluable leader for the advancement of disability rights in Alabama.”
Patrick Hackney
ADAP Senior Attorney

“When I think of self advocacy, I think of Jeff Ridgeway. His name is synonymous with the self advocacy movement in Alabama. He is a great leader for individual rights of all people, for equality, justice, and dignity in the work place and for full participation in every segment of everyday life.”
Bill & Brenda Doss
Support Coordinator at TriCounty Agency on Developmental Disabilities

“Jeff is a champion in self-advocacy, his leadership is great.”
Chaqueta Stuckey
South Carolina SABE region 6
‘What is Leadership to you?’

What is a leader?
Is it someone who commands armies?
Is it a politician who writes laws?
Is it a sheriff in a small, country town?
Or is it a teacher helping a child learn how to read?
In the leadership development program we each have learned
We do not have to be a big shot, political, carry a badge or earn a degree
To be a leader in our community
We only need to work with and help people like you and me.

Participant Jeff Ridgeway wrote a poem about leadership that was printed on the Volunteers of America Southeast Leadership Development ceremony program on March 19, 2013.

“Jeff really speaks out for the rights of people with disability.
He has done a really good job in getting our message out about employment for people with disabilities.”
Elouise Woods
Former president SABE and Vice President of SABE

“Jeff is the most energetic and tenacious advocate I know. Who else would ride a bus all night many times to attend a meeting? Jeff is an example to all of us of the importance of this work.”
Ellen Gillespie
Former ADAP Executive Director

“You gotta keep going and keep talking. People with disabilities are the experts.”
Jayne Chase
Disability Rights Advocate
Jeff Ridgeway receives Ricky Wyatt Lifetime Advocacy Award

Jeff Ridgeway was awarded the Ricky Wyatt Lifetime Advocacy Award by the ADAP at a ceremony held in Madison, AL on July 17.

In presenting the award, James Tucker, ADAP’s Executive Director, praised Jeff’s self-advocacy efforts, noting that Jeff has been advocating for the rights of Alabamians with disabilities for decades. According to Tucker, Jeff’s tenacity and unwavering spirit greatly contribute to his ability to be a strong self-advocate.

Jeff spent several years advocating against the use of the “r-word.” His advocacy, along with others, led to a respectful language bill that was passed by the Alabama Legislature in 2009 and which changed the name of the Alabama Department of Mental Health and Mental Retardation to the Alabama Department of Mental Health. Jeff continues to support and promote Alabama’s Employment First bill.

Jeff, as usual, was humble when accepting the award. He emphasized that his self-advocacy was not about him, but about all persons with disabilities. As Jeff put it, “everyone should have the chance to live, work, and experience life.”

Several of Jeff’s friends attended the ceremony, including Ellen Gillespie, former ADAP Executive Director; Vicki Turnage of Ability Alliance; People First representatives; and State Representative Dan Williams.

Jeff is the second recipient of the Ricky Wyatt Lifetime Advocacy Award. The first was given to Nic Dupree of Mobile in 2006.

Reprint: ADAP Online News, July 21, 2014
MONTGOMERY, Ala. — It was the early 1990’s. Jeff Ridgeway, who was born with a mix of disabilities, had started going to a day program at a Mobile Goodwill. They timed how fast he could pack napkins into boxes. They told him he was unemployable in the outside world. It made his blood boil.

“Told me, ‘You watch me. You watch me. This ain’t acceptable,’” Ridgeway, now 49, recalled.

Ridgeway eventually got a job at Bruno’s Supermarkets and worked there for 15 years. Today he is one of the state’s best known advocates for people with disabilities. He has lobbied the state to put more resources into helping people with disabilities live independently and helped sway lawmakers to rename the once-called Department of Mental Health and Mental Retardation. Now it’s called the Department of Mental Health.

Ridgeway is now pressing for the Alabama Legislature to adopt a measure that would help more people with disabilities enter the workforce. The proposed Jeff Ridgeway Act would push the state to move away from sheltered workshops — where people with disabilities perform basic tasks often for less than minimum wage — and to put more money into job coaching and other services.

Courtney Tarver, Alabama’s Associate Commissioner for Developmental Disabilities, said the Department of Mental Health supports the bill because the department is moving in that direction. Tarver estimated last year that 4,500 Alabamians with intellectual disabilities were in some sort of day service, in either a workshop or school-like setting.

The bill has been stuck in a state House committee. Tarver said it faces opposition from some workshop operators and some families who fear the disappearance of day programs they’ve used.

Ridgeway said it is about choice. He said there has been confusion and
unwarranted fear about the legislation, and that no one will be forced to work if they feel they are unable. He added that supporters of the proposal will try again next year if the bill fails this session.

Ridgeway was born in the north Alabama city of Athens in 1964. His mother had Rubella when she was pregnant, causing multiple birth defects. He was born with a hole in his heart, suffered strokes and was diagnosed with mild cognitive impairment. Ridgeway said at first people didn't really know what to do with him.

"Mama kept me tied to her apron strings," Ridgeway said.

After his mother died, he moved with his sister to Mobile. His sister searched for a place for him to go during the day, and he eventually ended up at Goodwill.

Ridgeway said part of his life's work has been to make people see people with disabilities simply as people.

"We walk different. We talk different. We use canes and wheelchairs. We use assisted devices, and that's all they see. They forget each one of them is a proud U.S. citizen and so am I," Ridgeway said. "Why are we so willing to discriminate against somebody who happens to be a little bit different instead of understanding and working with them?"

Ridgeway has become a familiar sight at the Alabama Statehouse when legislation affecting people with disabilities is up for debate.

"I don't think that there are many people in this state who would have demonstrated so consistently over so many years the willingness to say, get up, take a bus at 3 or 4 a.m. from Mobile to Montgomery to push for what they thought was right. And then get back on a bus and get home at 9 or 10 or 11 at night. To me that is what is extraordinary about Jeff," James Tucker, executive director of the Alabama Disabilities Advocacy Program.

Ridgeway has also lived with congestive heart failure since he was a child. Doctors tell him his heart is now functioning at only 10 percent. He said the doctors have cautioned he might not have much time left — but he laughs and says they have been telling him that since he was a child.

"The good Lord can call me home whenever he wants, but until then I've got work to do," Ridgeway said.
March 2014

Jeff Ridgeway's fight: Advocate for Alabamians with disabilities urges passage of work bill

By Kim Chandler, Associated Press
March 31, 2014

MONTGOMERY, Ala. — It was the early 1990's. Jeff Ridgeway, who was born with a mix of disabilities, had started going to a day program at a Mobile Goodwill. They timed how fast he could pack napkins into boxes. They told him he was unemployable in the outside world. It made his blood boil.

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March 2014

The Arc & Autism Now, The National Autism Resource & Information Center
Date: March 3, 2014

It’s 2014! Are Institutions Still Open in Your State?
Self Advocates Becoming Empowered (SABE)

Sample Letter to the Editor from People First of Alabama in Tuscaloosa.com

Published: Tuesday, March 29, 2011 at 3:30 a.m.

Dear Editor: People First of Alabama today called for the closure of the W.D. Partlow Developmental Center in Tuscaloosa. People First is the largest self-advocacy organization representing people with developmental disabilities in Alabama, including many people who once lived in institutions. People First has been working for years to free people with disabilities from imprisonment in institutions.

To live, work and play in a community with others is a basic right that most people take for granted. People with disabilities however, have been pushed aside, shut out, and ignore for years. They have been locked away in institutions for their own good. This must end now.

As more and more people all over this country, including Alabama, have moved out of institutions, we have seen that even people who the ‘experts’ said could never leave the institutions, are living full, rich, rewarding lives as contributing members of their communities.

Alabama has closed four of five institutions. There are now over 6,000 people with developmental disabilities who live, work and play in communities all over Alabama. It is time we set the last 150 people free.

People First calls on all who support civil rights for all people, to contact their legislators and the governor and express support for closing Partlow.

Jeff Ridgeway,
President of People First Mobile

ADAP attorney James Tucker saidAlabama set a standard in becoming the first state in the Southeast to close institutions like Partlow.

"In closing its last state-run institution that segregated persons with developmental disabilities, Alabama continues to improve the quality of services provided to persons with disabilities," he said. "Our experience has been consistently that once family members see improvements for their loved ones in the quality of life in the community, their objections dissipate."

James Tucker, chief legal counsel for ADAP, said care in a state-run facility costs $278,000 per resident per year while community care at group homes costs $75,000 per resident. He said community care is the preferred form of care nationwide.

Partlow Center Closes After 89 Years
Published: Thursday, December 26, 2013
http://www.tuscaloosanews.com/article/20131229/News/131229873/p1&mode=full

In 2008, ADAP, the Protection and Advocacy organization in Alabama wrote a report identifying the many reasons why the W.D. Partlow Developmental Center must be closed. Alabama had already closed 3 other institutions. In the one remaining institution costs have soared to more than $278,000 per person each year. Despite the huge budget, people lived in filthy conditions. Their lives were filled with time-wasting activities intended to keep them quiet and compliant. They were subject to abuse and neglect, most cruelly, to being ignored day after day. Partlow had repeatedly failed to meet basic health and safety standards by external funding agencies.
People First of Alabama

- People First of Alabama called for Partlow to close. Their reasons included the need to spend more on effective community programs, deteriorating Partlow structures and safety issues.
- In Alabama we accomplished our goal of getting institutions closed. We knew it was an uphill battle but we fought for it together and got it done. If we come together as a group we can get a lot of things done.
- We are very happy that all the institutions are closed in Alabama. And now we are pushing for people with disabilities to be out in community life, working and making their own choices. We have a right to out there too.
- There is no such thing as an impossible dream because every dream can come true if you put your mind and heart into it. It takes the community coming together and educating people who are afraid.

On the day Partlow closed, Jeff Ridgway from People First of Alabama said, “This is a great day for people with intellectual disabilities because it makes the statement loud and clear that we are people with abilities and we want to be integrated into society rather than segregated into an institution.”
March 2014

Real jobs sought for Alabamians with disabilities

The News Courier in Athens, Alabama
Associated Press
March 31, 2014

— MONTGOMERY, Ala. (AP) — A long-time advocate is urging lawmakers to pass legislation to help the people with disabilities move into the workforce.

Jeff Ridgeway was in the workforce for more than 15 years after initially being told his disabilities were too severe for him to work. Legislation named for Ridgeway directs the state to put more money into job coaching and other services that help people with disabilities find work. The state would transition away from funding sheltered workshops where people with disabilities perform basic tasks and are sometimes paid less than minimum wage.

Courtney Tarver, the state's associate commissioner for developmental disabilities, said the department supports the bill because the state is already moving in that direction.

Ridgeway has become one of the state's best known advocates for people with disabilities.

Jeff Ridgeway My Vote Poem - part 1 - YouTube
www.youtube.com/watch?v=G6RU-WPizsQ
Jun 2, 2009 - Uploaded by Self Advocates Becoming Empowered
Jeff Ridgeway My Vote Poem - part 1. Self Advocates Becoming Empowered... Is Voting Information Easy to ...

MY VOTE

by Jeff Ridgeway

They say I can’t vote,
They say the decision is not mine,
They say I don’t understand,
I guess they think they’re being kind.
I wonder what they would say or think if they only knew...
That when they call the President “Our President”,
I want to Call him mine too.

If I never get the chance to Vote –
Pulling the lever, punching the card, or writing the name down.
I stay the same – dumb, misinformed, unchanged, unempowered.
That is what this world expects me to be.
But I want so much more...
I want to be the most educated – the most informed – the most totally changed – the most totally empowered person that I can be when I vote.

I can make a difference and then I can say with pride,
“Not Yours, not theirs, but My President because I helped put him there.”
March 2014

Advocacy Group Pushes Bill To Fight Supported Employment

Written by Ryan Phillips

March 30, 2014
Link: http://openarms.ua.edu/2014/03/advocacy-group-pushes-bill-to-fight-supported-employment/

Entering a new employment atmosphere can be difficult for anyone. Despite being the first day on the job for Angela Edmonds, it was not her first day at work.

Edmonds, whose disability qualifies her for this particular position, is supervised through the Palk Enterprises Supported Employment program (PESE), and began the workday promptly at 9 a.m. in the Lambda Chi Alpha fraternity house on the campus of the University of Alabama. PESE, which functions through The Arc of Tuscaloosa County, aids in finding and facilitating employment for adults with disabilities.

“I’ve loaded the paper towel holders on the table and did the dishes,” she said. “I sprayed the dishes off and put them through the steamer. I stocked their closet where they keep all their cookies and snacks, and I wiped down the tables in the dining room. It’s fun, but first days on the job are always kind of jittery.”

The American workforce would appear to have come a long way in its short, often turbulent, lifetime. From the days of exploited child labor in textile mills and coal mines, to discrimination against women and races in the workplace, labor laws have evolved in an attempt to protect groups once pushed to the fringes of society.

With all chronicled social progress aside, one University of Alabama-housed advocacy program believes that there remains a demographic left out of consideration.

Patrick Hackney, staff attorney for the Alabama Disabilities Advocacy Program (ADAP), said that individuals with disabilities are a forgotten portion of the workforce and are often left with no other alternative than to work in a sheltered workshop. This is where ADAP’s support of one particular piece of impactful legislation comes in to play.

The Alabama Disabilities Advocacy Group supports legislation to combat supported employment in Alabama, such as the PESE program.

“There is currently a bill in the state legislature called the Jeff Ridgeway Employment First Initiative Act,” he said. “Essentially what that bill would do, would be to direct state agencies to look at employment as the first option for people with disabilities. Typically, folks with developmental and intellectual disabilities can go to school until they are 21. That is, if they are lucky enough to get services when they graduate.”
Employment can serve as both therapy, and a means of social interaction for individuals with disabilities. However, according to U.S. Department of Labor Statistics, only 17% of people with disabilities maintained some kind of employment. Although many are simply not capable of performing on the job, the Employment First Act seeks to help the ones that can work by restructuring the way employment is provided.

Rep. Laura Hall (D), and a host of other representatives from both sides of the aisle in Montgomery, sponsored the Employment First Act, or HB-285. This bill was read to the house on January 16, 2014, and currently awaits a vote. One local legislator, Rep. Alan Harper (D), whose district covers Tuscaloosa and Pickens County, is also a co-sponsor of Employment First, and declined to comment on his involvement with the bill, as did Rep. Hall.

The synopsis of HB-285 reads: “This bill would require state programs and services to promote the employment of youth and adults with disabilities by coordinating and collaborating to ensure that state programs, policies, procedures, and funding support competitive, integrated employment. This bill would authorize state agencies to adopt rules to implement the act. This bill would not require any employer to give preference to hiring individuals with disabilities.”

Hackney then said that Employment First would combat “Day-Habilitation” centers that he pointed to as places of exploitation. According to ADAP's stance on the issue, this would provide Tuscaloosa, and the state of Alabama, with a proactive route to avoid being impacted by the withdrawal of federal funding for these types of programs in 2015.

“To be frank, you don’t do a whole lot in those programs,” he said. “You are suppose to teach daily living skills, but a lot of the programs are essentially babysitting. What we want to see is, instead of making that jump to day-habilitation, let’s see if you can work part time through various state agencies that can assist these folks as opposed to going somewhere and sitting for five or six days a week.”

Jerry Pike, co-owner of Eagles’ Wings, provides both employment opportunities and on-site medical care for disabled participants in a new location off of Highway 82. According to Pike, the state of Alabama continues to struggle with fostering effective outlets for citizens with disabilities, which was the goal behind founding the Northport-based establishment. The new complex is able to facilitate 40 individuals, Pike said, but the number of those waiting for a spot is difficult to ignore.

“We are creating slots that were not available in the community, but we have 35 on the wait list to get those 20 spots,” he said. “I recently was checking the numbers, and around 3,000 people are wait-listed for programs like ours around the state. When those people aren’t involved in the community or doing something, they will sit at home and regress.”

Hackney stated that Eagles’ Wings is fairly new, and has not provided a reason for scrutiny, but one program that is deeply rooted in Tuscaloosa has been in the cross-hairs of ADAP for some time.

“PALK Enterprises [through The Arc of Tuscaloosa County] is probably the best example of a sheltered workshop in Tuscaloosa,” he said. “It’s just a large room, and you have anywhere from a dozen to 100 folks with disabilities doing a variety of work, depending on what contract they have, but it is all piece-rate kind of work. The only folks they interact with that do not have disabilities are staff.”

Ryan Deflin, executive director of The Arc of Tuscaloosa, defended Palk Enterprises, by citing the misconceptions often made by those who do not understand the operational procedure.

“Palk Enterprises is a program that serves 50-individuals and offers much more than contract work,” he said. “This is not a program where people with disabilities just work on contracts. On the contrary, it offers training for various independent living and social skills, in addition to skills needed to help the people we serve find employment.”

In addition to employment training, Deflin said, Palk Enterprises also facilitates community involvement by pairing disabled individuals with employment opportunities aimed at promoting independence and fulfillment.

“The program also takes the people we serve into various community settings for recreational, training and volunteer activities,” he said. “It’s through these activities that the people we serve socialize with people who do not have disabilities and are not our staff. While Palk Enterprises offers contract work, it also offers small mobile crews that go to different places of business in the community and provide either janitorial or window washing services, where they receive an hourly rate of pay at minimum wage. Additionally, one of the contracts we have relates to Saban Sauce and all of that work is paid at full minimum wage on an hourly basis, regardless of piece production.”

On the second floor of the Lambda Chi Alpha house, another employee diligently cleaned the stains on the floor and walls from the night before. Oscar Johnson set down his broom and dustpan to talk about his past, and present employment through the PESE Program. Johnson, a valued worker, has not missed a day on the job in two years.

“I love sweeping, mopping and just cleaning up,” he said. “When I worked at Partlow [Hospital] before it closed down, I hauled supplies to Bryce and stuff—I worked out
there for more than ten years.”

Before closing at the hands of ADAP and the state, Partlow Hospital was a mainstay of mental healthcare in Alabama. When the doors shut for the final time, many of the patients found programs like PESE, were sent to family, or were simply left to wander the streets.

A scene from the closing of Partlow Hospital, which was due to ADAP involvement. Photo courtesy of ADAP.

A scene from the closing of Partlow Hospital, which was due to ADAP involvement. Photo courtesy of ADAP.

In the kitchen of the fraternity house, Edmonds loaded dirty dinner plates and cups into a large industrial washer as steam still emitted from the previous load. Her assigned employment specialist Cynthia Foster then explained the common attitudes that she sees in the program’s employees.

“All [the PESE participants] want is someone to talk to and treat them like everyone else,” she said. “They are so dependable and their attitudes are such a blessing to be around. To get people like Angela, it is just such a pleasure. Our workers always want to be on the job.”

Despite the community involvement seen with the PESE program at UA, Hackney and ADAP still view the sponsor, Palk Enterprises, as an example of exploitive day-habilitation.

“[Sheltered workshops] get permission from the federal government to pay below minimum wage,” he said. “They get paid on a piece rate, which means they get paid by each item you complete. If you go to a hotel, and see the little packets with the napkins and spoons in them, people with disabilities put those things together. They then turn around and pay the workers with disabilities for that work. We have seen folks that make anywhere from $0.50 to $2.00 per week.”

After asserting that employees are indeed paid at minimum wage, Deflin pointed to the fact that each individual case must be handled in a particular fashion to best meet the needs of the participant.

“While traditional community-based, competitive employment is a great fit for some, it is not the best fit for everyone with disabilities,” he said. “While some people with disabilities are able to work at traditional community settings, not all of them are, or want to. For those individuals, there needs to be other options, other than having to stay home throughout the day. Palk Enterprises offers those options.”

Administrators of these programs have also come under criticism from ADAP, due to the paychecks that ADAP believes they take home.

“We feel like it’s exploitive and it’s so condescending because the defense is ‘They are just so happy to get a paycheck,’ and if you go into a sheltered workshop and ask them if they want to make more money, 10 out of 10 will say yes,” he said. “So we like the people who run these sheltered workshops make good money. The supervisors make way more than minimum wage. They are living relatively comfortable, and we feel this is on the backs of the folks with disabilities.”

Hackney then said that Employment First, if passed, would serve more as a wake-up call than a malevolent political move.

“What’s the employment first statue is the first start,” he said. “It is largely symbolic. It doesn’t ask for any state funds, it doesn’t make any agencies do anything in particular, but what it does say is that you need to be looking at this. If this passes, then that is the first move towards more integrated employment. In my opinion, this statue helps the state of Alabama and the city of Tuscaloosa take a proactive approach when addressing this issue and figuring out a plan. The most important thing to me is equal opportunity. It is about giving folks a chance to be fully integrated in every aspect of their daily lives.”

As the workday ended at the Lambda Chi Alpha house, Foster reflected on the good things that she has witnessed working as an employment specialist for Palk Enterprises. With sincerity, Foster recalled a fond memory from her career.

“I had this one employee once who was just a great worker and person,” she said. “To show you how much he wanted to work, and cared about his job, he called me one morning and asked if he could have the day off for his sister’s wedding in November— he called me to ask off in January. He is no longer able to work, but he is still in contact with me to this day. We just want to support them and help them be as independent as possible.”
February 21, 2014

AL Disability Advocacy Network Rally in Montgomery

By Brandon Moseley
Feb 21. 2014
Alabama Political Reporter

Over 130 members of the Alabama Disability Advocacy Network (ALDAN), many of them in wheel chairs, rallied in front of the Alabama State Capital Building on Wednesday.

The members of ALDAN are asking that the Alabama Department of Rehabilitation Services receive their $49.6 million budget request from the Education Trust Fund. If the state provides their share of the money, then federal matching funds will give the Department $186.9 million in fiscal year 2015.

According to a written release by ALDAN, since 2010 the state has lost $27.5 million in federal funds for the Vocational Rehabilitation Program because the state has not adequately funded the program. Proposed level funding in 2015 would result in the loss of another $9.2 million in federal matching funds. The state can make $9.2 million simply by increasing state funding another $500,000.

ALDAN is asking the state to provide more resources for pre-school developmental services for infants and toddlers with disabilities and developmental delays. 5,893 children age 3 and under and their families received services in 2013. The cost of these treatments is increasing and more of the costs are falling on the families. The average cost of these services is $5,034 per child. The state and federal government only provided 72% of that money ($3,636), the balance being paid for by the families.

ALDAN is also asking for more funding for Children’s Rehabilitation Services. According to ALDAN, the state has cut the Education Trust Fund (ETF) funding for these services by 21% since 2008.

Another budget issue is the Alabama Homebound Program. The program allows persons with “significant disabilities” to attend school, work, and live in their homes and college dorms rather than be institutionalized in a nursing home setting.

The program has seen a 5% reduction in state funding since 2008.

ALDAN also has endorsed several pieces of legislation. The group has endorsed HB 9, sponsored by Representative Steve McMillan (R) from Gulf Shores, and SB 62, sponsored by Sen. Trip Pittman (R). These two bills would implement the Alabama Informed Voter Act creating a 15 member Fair Ballot Commission so that amendments which appear on ballots would be
The group also endorses HB 204, sponsored by Representative Johnny Mack Morrow (D). This legislation makes it a crime to intentionally kill a service animal and prohibits interfering with the animal performing its duties. Since trained service animals can cost thousands of dollars, this bill would make the slayer of a service animal pay full restitution.

ALDAN endorses HB 265, sponsored by Rep. Jeff Ridgeway. The bill would require that state programs and services promote competitive employment of individuals with disabilities in an integrated setting.

ALDAN is also supporting HB 378, sponsored by Rep. Phil Williams (R) from Huntsville. The bill gives purchasing preferences by state entities to services provided by the Institute for the Deaf and Blind.

ALDAN supports SB 13, sponsored by Senator Cam Ward (R) from Alabaster. SB 123 creates the Alabama Behavior Analyst Licensing Board. This bill would provide government oversight to the behavioral analysts working in this state.

The group is also advocating for the passage of SB 100, sponsored by Senator Paul Bussman (R) from Cullman. It would require that anyone selling home medical equipment in the state of Alabama have at least one licensed actual physical location in the state of Alabama.

They also endorse SB 104, which is also sponsored by Sen. Bussman. It creates a Home Medical Equipment Board, to regulate the sale home medical equipment sold in the state of Alabama.

The group supports SB 196, which is sponsored by Sen. Arthur Orr (R) from Decatur, which allows persons with Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD) to have “ASD” displayed on their driver’s licenses.

ALDAN is backing SB 286, which is sponsored by Senator Jimmy Holley (R) from Elba. SB 286 requires that persons applying for a disability parking placard present identification. ALDAN hopes that this will decrease the fraud and abuse of the program by people who use the placards but are not disabled.

The President of the Alabama Disability Advocacy Network, Chris Tidwell said, “We can all do something. We may not all be able to reach something in the top shelf, but we can all do something. “We want to aim our arrows high. We need help from our legislators to reach our goals.” Tidwell is a career nurse who was forced to make a career change following paralysis in 1991.

State Representative John Robinson (D) from Scottsboro said, “Two years ago I was diagnosed with Parkinsons and I have worked real hard to overcome that disease. I have worked and worked and exercised to improve and my doctor says that I am better now than I was two years ago. Never ever give up because there is always something for you to do.” “One of our greatest Presidents we have ever had was Franklin Roosevelt and he was in a wheelchair. You can overcome most of these weaknesses that you have.”

People with disabilities advocate Darren Moore said,

“A closed mouth doesn’t do anything...I want to see something changed...African Americans didn’t have the right to do the things we wanted to do. That changed. It is still not perfect, but it is a lot better than it was.”

Moore said that he hopes that when they talked to legislators that Alabamians with disabilities will be able to do more of the things that they want to do.

Danielle Elliot is profoundly deaf. She did not learn sign language until she was 18, but has earned a degree from the University of South Alabama and works as a deaf services coordinator. “I had to talk to myself from birth to early adulthood.”

Danielle was bullied in middle school over the way she spoke. Danielle went to speech therapy throughout school and is still receiving therapy since being deaf she doesn’t actually hear what she is saying.

“Danielle credited her family for their support and Vocational Rehabilitation Services for their support. What is really important is being involved with your family and being involved with the deaf community. I hope things will get better going forward.”
The group also endorses HB 204, sponsored by Representative Johnny Mack Morrow (D). This legislation makes it a crime to intentionally kill a service animal and prohibits interfering with the animal performing its duties. Since trained service animals can cost thousands of dollars, this bill would make the slayer of a service animal pay full restitution.

ALDAN endorses HB 265, sponsored by Rep. Jeff Ridgeway. The bill would require that state programs and services promote competitive employment of individuals with disabilities in an integrated setting.

ALDAN is also supporting HB 378, sponsored by Rep. Phil Williams (R) from Huntsville. The bill gives purchasing preferences by state entities to services provided by the Institute for the Deaf and Blind.

ALDAN supports SB 13, sponsored by Senator Cam Ward (R) from Alabaster. SB 123 creates the Alabama Behavior Analyst Licensing Board. This bill would provide government oversight to the behavioral analysts working in this state.

The group is also advocating for the passage of SB 100, sponsored by Senator Paul Bussman (R) from Cullman. It would require that anyone selling home medical equipment in the state of Alabama have at least one licensed actual physical location in the state of Alabama.

They also endorse SB 104, which is also sponsored by Sen. Bussman. It creates a Home Medical Equipment Board, to regulate the sale home medical equipment sold in the state of Alabama.

The group supports SB 196, which is sponsored by Sen. Arthur Orr (R) from Decatur, which allows persons with Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD) to have “ASD” displayed on their driver’s licenses.

ALDAN is backing SB 286, which is sponsored by Senator Jimmy Holley (R) from Elba. SB 286 requires that persons applying for a disability parking placard present identification. ALDAN hopes that this will decrease the fraud and abuse of the program by people who use the placards but are not disabled.

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January 16, 2014

Current Text for HB285

Link: http://openbama.org/bill/9619/text
151537-3:n:12/30/2013:LLR/tan LRS2013-1828R2

Description
Individuals with disabilities, promotion of employment by state programs and services, Jeff Ridgeway Alabama Employment First Initiative Act

- See more at: http://openbama.org/bill/9619#sthash.rtODkQQA.dpuf

HB285
By Representatives Hall, Tuggle, Patterson, Johnson (W), Wood, Harper, McClurkin, Fincher, Scott, Moore (M), Laird, Bridges, Melton, Givan, Boyd, Millican, Johnson (R), Robinson (J), Black, Robinson (O), Coleman-Evans, Newton, Boothe, Hammon, Bracy, Shiver, Jackson, Grimsley, Baker, Forte, Clarke, Burdine, Ford and Morrow
RFD State Government
Rd 1 16-JAN-14

SYNOPSIS: This bill would require state programs and services to promote the employment of youth and adults with disabilities by coordinating and collaborating to ensure that state programs, policies, procedures, and funding support competitive, integrated employment.

This bill would authorize state agencies to adopt rules to implement the act.

This bill would not require any employer to give preference to hiring individuals with disabilities.

A BILL

TO BE ENTITLED AN ACT
Establishing the Jeff Ridgeway Alabama Employment First Initiative Act to require state programs and services to promote competitive employment of individuals with disabilities in an integrated setting.

BE IT ENACTED BY THE LEGISLATURE OF ALABAMA:

Section 1. This act shall be known and cited as the Jeff Ridgeway Alabama Employment First Initiative Act.

Section 2. For purposes of this act, the following terms shall having the following meanings:

(1) COMPETITIVE EMPLOYMENT. Employment by an individual with a disability in the competitive labor market that is performed on a full-time or part-time basis in an integrated setting, and for which the individual is compensated at or above the minimum wage, but not less than the customary wage and level of benefits paid by the employer for the same or similar work performed by individuals who are not disabled.
(2) INTEGRATED SETTING. With respect to an employment outcome, a setting typically found in the community in which applicants with disabilities or eligible individuals with disabilities interact with individuals without disabilities, other than individuals without disabilities who are providing services to those applicants or eligible individuals to the same extent that individuals without disabilities in comparable positions interact with other persons.

Section 3. It is hereby declared to be the policy of the State of Alabama that competitive and integrated employment shall be considered a first option when serving persons with disabilities of working age who seek to obtain employment. This policy applies to programs and services that provide services and support to help obtain employment for persons with disabilities. All state agencies shall follow this policy and ensure that it is effectively implemented in their programs and services. Nothing in this act shall require, or be construed to require, any employer to give preference to hiring people with disabilities.

Section 4. (a) All state agencies shall coordinate efforts and shall collaborate within and among such agencies to ensure that state programs, policies, procedures, and funding support competitive and integrated employment of individuals with disabilities. All state agencies shall, whenever feasible, share data and information across systems in order to track progress toward full implementation of the act.

(b) State agencies are authorized to adopt rules to implement this act.

Section 5. The Alabama Department of Mental Health is designated as the lead agency for coordinating this initiative among the various state agencies.

Section 6. This act shall become effective on the first day of the third month following its passage and approval by the Governor, or its otherwise becoming law.

- See more at: http://openbama.org/bill/9619/text#sthash.1313Mj6k.dpuf
Jeff, a well-known advocate in our state, was born in Athens, Alabama, in 1964. Though he was born with a heart defect and other disabilities and “people didn’t know what to do with him,” he graduated from West Limestone High School (“Home of the Wildcats”) in 1983. Even so, his family did not view work as an option and he lived at home for eight years after he graduated.

Jeff and his sister, a teacher, moved to Mobile a year after his mother died. After an unsuccessful search for an adequate day program, Jeff began work at Goodwill. At first, he was identified as a person who “could not succeed in competitive employment.” That just made him mad and within two years Goodwill staff determined Jeff was “employable.”

Jeff applied for a job and was hired at the Azalea Road Bruno’s in Mobile in 1995. He ended up working in two Bruno’s locations for 15 years, starting at $4.45 per hour and ending at $10.65 per hour. Jeff performed every job task except working the register. He bagged groceries, cleaned, stocked shelves, loaded and unloaded trucks, and handled special events such as Thanksgiving and Christmas.

He especially enjoyed his working relationship with his good bosses and loved helping Thanksgiving shoppers find what they needed because it reminded him of home. He hated cleaning bathrooms.

While working at Bruno’s Jeff was an especially dependable employee, often being called in to substitute for workers who did not show. He began as a part-time worker and increased his hours to full-time before having to reduce his hours to part-time again for health and other reasons.

Eventually, and reluctantly, Jeff had to leave his job when his physician advised he could not continue his manual labor because of his increasingly frail heart.

After a long bus ride to and from Montgomery recently to advocate for increased work opportunities for persons with disabilities, Jeff settled in his apartment for the evening to catch-up on his favorite NCIS characters. Jeff concluded: “Everybody deserves a shot at a real job. I don’t care if it’s three hours a day, 40 hours a week, or some rich guy in New York working 90 hours a week.”

“Everybody deserves a shot!”

Amen to that, Jeff.

“A person with a disability is one of the most loyal employees that an employer will ever hire,” he said. “He will work for you as much as you will let him. I’ve known people like that all my life. Don’t get me wrong. People both with and without disabilities can be rotten apples, but for the most part a person with a disability will give you an honest day’s work for an honest dollar, and be proud and happy just to have that opportunity.”
Self-advocacy leaders from across the nation congregated in St. Paul, Minnesota on August 30th to September 2nd, 2012 to partake in the 22nd bi-annual conference hosted by Self-Advocates Becoming Empowered (SABE) and Advocating Change Together (ACT). With 49 disability rights workshops to choose from, NAM did its best to cover as many pertinent topics as possible. Luckily, NAM was accompanied by other CAU staff/advocates as a means to obtain maximum information and share resources. As Thursday, August 30th was filled with relaxation, recreational activities and prepping our gimmick to conference goers at NAM’s exhibit table, August 31st signified NAM’s opportunity to expand its repertoire. The first workshop, attended by one of NAM’s advisor, Gillian Speiser, was “Strategies for Working with Advisors to Self-Advocacy Groups”, presented by Tia Nelis and Sheila Collins. This presentation sought to examine the challenges that self-advocacy groups face when retaining or searching for an advisor. In order to maintain a focus, the presentation was broken up into four components which discussed the role of an advisor, applicable training, barriers to support, and ways in which self-advocates can be better supported through their advisors. Many of the subtopics discussed in this presentation can be found through the National Gateway to Self-Determination’s informational guide for advisors, entitled, “Advising through Self-Determination”.

Essentially, an advisor is there to meet the needs of the group by developing leadership skills, assisting with transportation and budgeting, and facilitating discussion amongst group members. Furthermore, effectiveness greatly depends on whether or not an advisor can handle the aforementioned responsibilities while focusing on empowerment and self-determination rather than control. Even though all of those abilities may be present in an advisor, there is a high turnover rate due to the fact that this work is typically treated as volunteer work due to a lack of funding. Since there is no formal training available for self-advocacy advisors, the following qualifications should be recognized when seeking an advisor. Foremost, the advisor must abide by the belief of the group/mission, possess exceptional listening skills, show respect, communicate as equals, and be able to adapt to change. Barriers to support can arise when tension ensues due to different opinions of group members and/or advisors, which is why it is important to educate one another and provide strategies for working through obstacles. Through their research, the presenters have also found that self-advocacy groups want funding to properly train their advisors regardless of the fact that many advisors learn on the job. If there was proper funding implemented for this endeavor, it is likely that advisors would stick with self-advocacy groups. Being that NAM’s advisors are relatively new to the self-advocacy movement, this training was very useful moving forward.

Conversely, Sidney and Gary split up to obtain additional information regarding advocacy and closing institutions. Sidney attended, “Community Advocacy: Let’s Work Together”, presented by Johnny Crescendo. Although the workshop was geared towards team building, as participants engaged in an arm wrestling exercise, Sidney wanted to hear more about how to work effectively with other self-advocacy groups. At times, Sidney felt the workshop veered away from its purpose. Gary was pleased with his assigned workshop as he attended, “We Set Our Brothers and Sisters Free and So Can You!” presented by Jeff Ridgeway, Elouise Woods, and James Tucker. This workshop delved into Alabama’s method for closing all of its state institutions. Gary shared his experiences living in an institution in New Jersey and expressed his discontent for the large number of institutions still operating. Although New Jersey is beginning to make strides, as Gary puts it, “New Jersey needs to catch up”.
July 2012

Mobile's Jeff Ridgeway continues fight for disabled in Alabama

By Casandra Andrews, Press-Register
on July 16, 2012 at 10:18 AM, updated July 16, 2012 at 10:35 AM

MOBILE, Alabama -- Jeff Ridgeway is transitioning from his role as president of People First of Alabama to a new position within the advocacy group, but he said he's not letting down his fight to champion the rights of those with physical and intellectual disabilities.

After three years, he recently stepped down from the elected post to accept a paid position as a state coordinator within the 700-member group.

Later this summer, Ridgeway, 48, will be among a group from Alabama traveling to a national People First of America conference in St. Paul, Minn., where he plans to make presentations and join focus groups to talk about his work on behalf of others.

Last fall, Ridgeway spent weeks gathering grassroots support statewide to defeat a zoning effort in Northport that he feared would push disabled people out of the city. The ordinance -- which came as the state began closing the W.D. Partlow Developmental Center in neighboring Tuscaloosa -- sought to limit the number of group homes within Northport.

Ridgeway’s efforts put a statewide spotlight on the ordinance, which the eventually was abandoned.

Ridgeway, who can’t drive because of a health condition, typically rises long before dawn to board buses when he travels to Montgomery and elsewhere for his advocacy work. He was born with a hole in his heart and other birth defects that affected his sight and hearing.

Undaunted by obstacles, he has spent years lobbying for help, care and compassion for those with physical and intellectual disabilities.

A highlight came on the last night of the 2008 Legislature, when Ridgeway won approval of a bill requiring that new state laws refer to people with disabilities as people first. For example, a blanket reference to "the disabled" would become to "individuals with disabilities" and "mentally ill" could be "individuals with mental illness."

His newest project, an initiative with the Alabama Department of Mental Health known as Employment First, aims to put more people with disabilities into the workforce.

"There are people in the state that prefer people with disabilities to be in day programs and workshops," he said. "People First wants people to have the opportunity to have real jobs with real pay. We hope it works."

Before his advocacy work consumed most of his time, Ridgeway spent 15
years employed at a Bruno’s grocery store in Mobile, where he did everything from stocking shelves to sweeping the aisles to unloading trucks. "We all know there are going to be some people who are never going to work on their own," he said. "But the ones who can should not be penalized for someone else’s medical condition. We are advocating that Employment First be given a real chance and a real look by everyone in the disability community."

As the mental health landscape in Alabama continues to change -- such as the Partlow closing and a new focus on community-based care -- Ridgeway said he is also looking to keep an open dialogue with state leaders.

Some of the work he’s been most proud of, though, is showing others how they can "come out of their shell" and stand up for themselves.

Ridgeway often gets questions about how he and People First could accomplish so much.

"A lot of people wonder, ‘How can a little group like People First make it?’" he said. "It’s all about membership and not being steamrolled into something unfair and unjust."

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http://specialedpost.org/2012/07/17/a-life-of-advocacy-for-people-with-disabilities/
TUSCALOOSA, AL (WBRC) -
After 88 years of serving people with intellectual disabilities, the W.D. Partlow Development Center in Tuscaloosa has officially closed, announced the Alabama Department of Mental Health on Wednesday, Dec. 28.

Since March of this year, approximately 150 residents were relocated from Partlow to other facilities. The last resident was relocated to another home today.

The closing of Partlow is part of Alabama's goal to close all residential institutions for people with intellectual disabilities. The ADMH is encouraging residents to utilize community services instead.

"We have been working for years to encourage the state to close its institutions," Jeff Ridgeway, president of advocacy organization People First of Alabama, said in a release.

"This is a great day for people with intellectual disabilities because it makes the statement loud and clear that we are people with abilities and we want to be integrated into society rather than segregated into an institution," Ridgeway said.

George Neal, one of the directors for the ADMH Division of Developmental Disabilities, has visited more than 50 percent of former Partlow residents in their new homes and says they are happy.

"My peers have been so excited to have their own room, their own TV and their own bathroom. Some cannot communicate with words but I have seen their smiles when I asked them how they liked their new home," Neal said.

An ADMH closure team will attend to the final administrative and physical plant closing procurees at Partlow over the next few weeks.
Alabama advocates want last institution for people with intellectual disabilities closed

Wednesday, March 23, 2011
From WBRC-TV:

MONTGOMERY, Ala. -- Dozens of people turned out in Montgomery March 22, supporting the effort to close the state’s only remaining institution for the developmentally disabled.

The Partlow Development Center in Tuscaloosa will shut its doors in September—a move that has created a divide among the public.

There are lawmakers who want to keep the facility open and soon they will propose legislation that would call for such action. But members of the group “People First” say that Partlow needs to close in an effort to give its residents a better way of life.

“People with disabilities should have a right and a choice in their lives, not being spoon fed. Do this. Do that at 9. Medication at 10,” Jeff Ridgeway who supports Partlow’s closing said. “In the community you have choice. You get to make your own friends. You get to live more independently.”

People’s First of Alabama is a group of individuals with developmental disabilities already living in communities throughout the state. Soon, the 150 people currently living at Partlow will be placed in community based homes.

Ridgeway actually compared being in a facility like Partlow to prison. He and others say this is the best thing that could happen for the residents.

Officials with the state’s Department of Mental Health say for the amount of money it costs to house one person at Partlow, they can house three people for the same amount in the community.
Welcome to the first edition of the AIDAN newsletter. It is my pleasure to serve as President, and I am honored that my fellow AIDAN Advisory Board members elected me to this position. I want to see AIDAN continue to grow into a viable, non-profit, consumer-driven, advocacy organization. We have many goals to accomplish in these areas of transportation, healthcare, education and housing. To be successful, we need all citizens with disabilities and organizations serving them to join AIDAN as members. To paraphrase President Kennedy, "ask not what AIDAN can do for you, but what you can do for AIDAN and other Alabamians with disabilities."

The next two weeks are critical. In the next two weeks, AIDAN will launch a membership appeal and become actively involved with AL DAN by joining one of their subcommittees. (education, healthcare, transportation/housing).

Our project director, Beth Biddle, has done a good job in moving AIDAN forward. In January 2011, we had a three day strategic planning session with Carol Westlake, Director of the Tennessee Disability Coalition. She was fantastic in helping the AIDAN Advisory Board set strategic goals. During the three day session, AIDAN Board members who also had the opportunity to meet with key legislators. Can Ward and Dick Berkheiser, to become more involved in the legislative process. AIDAN member will have an opportunity on April 26 to attend the first Legislative Day.

Danny Grant
Alex Hardy
Bryan Gist
Jeff Ridgeway
Beth Biddle, Project Director

Upcoming Events:
Saturday, April 2
Celebrity Wheelchair Basketball and
Iron Rod
Huntingdon College
Montgomery ILC (334) 245-2300
Celebrity Game and UA vs AU

Special Invitation:
April 24, 2011 ..... AIDAN Legislative Day in
Montgomery
Chris Tidwell, AIDAN Vice President Shares Her Vision for the Day.
It is my profound honor to serve as the first Vice President of the Alabama Disability Advocacy Network (AIDAN). As an individual with a physical disability, I know the importance of advocating for the rights of people with disabilities. We all have the right to live without unnecessary barriers to living a productive and enjoyable life. As the AIDAN Mission Statement says, we need to be able to advocate for systems change in Alabama for ourselves (people with disabilities) and our families. Being a member of AIDAN allows us to be self advocates as well as advocates for everyone else with a disability and I am proud to be an integral part of the network that will make things happen (AIDAN).

Our first legislative event, "AIDAN Legislative Day" will be held on April 26, 2011 in Montgomery, AL. The goals of this event are to train our members on the legislative process and to be the effective advocates for legislation that will affect people with disabilities.
March 2011

Rally to close Partlow draws about 250 advocates

(Michelle Lepianka Carter / Tuscaloosa News)
Signs hang in front of Partlow Thursday. The mental health department wants to close Partlow because of its expense and because current practices stress community living.

Patients' rights and lower costs balanced against loss of 484 jobs

By Dana Beyerle
Montgomery Bureau Chief
Published: Tuesday, March 22, 2011 at 7:32 p.m.


(Michelle Lepianka Carter / Tuscaloosa News)
Signs hang in front of Partlow Thursday. The mental health department wants to close Partlow because of its expense and because current practices stress community living.

MONTGOMERY | Advocates for people with intellectually disabilities and the state Department of Mental Health are on the same page in backing a plan to close the W.D. Partlow Developmental Center in Tuscaloosa and enroll clients in small community homes.

About 250 advocates for Partlow residents rallied Tuesday at the State House in favor of a plan to close Partlow by Sept. 30. The advocates said that most Partlow clients can live successfully in small group homes.

‘Close Partlow now,’ advocates chanted.

The mental health department wants to close Partlow because of its expense and because current practices stress community living. ‘They are in the community, they’re safe, more economically viable and community homes provide better care,’ said Jeff Ridgeway, president of People First of Alabama.

Department of Mental Health spokesman John Ziegler said it costs about $42 million a year to operate the 88-year-old Partlow.

The average cost is $280,000 per person. People First said community care costs about $110,000 per client annually.

‘We call on Gov. (Robert) Bentley and the Legislature to find a way to transfer the Partlow money to the community,’ Ridgeway said.

Closing state facilities has been in the works for years but declining revenues is helping speed up consolidation.

Advocates are at odds with Tuscaloosa County legislators who have introduced resolutions urging the state to keep Partlow open because of fears of the loss of about 484 state jobs.

‘We all share the same concerns that we want to make sure that the care network is first of all well financed and well resourced and individuals who leave Partlow are adequately taken care of,’ said Rep. Chris England, D-Tuscaloosa. ‘Fundamentally I'm still against closing it but at the same time I'm not for institutionalizing people. ‘We need to figure out a way to make sure people who work there have employment and benefits and we don't lose good state workers through downsizing a state facility,’ England said.

The department vows to help state employees who will lose their jobs to find other jobs with private care businesses or other mental health agencies.

Vicki Hicks Turnage, an adviser to People First and executive director of Ability Alliance of Alabama, said she believes Partlow employees will be able to find jobs or even start their own small businesses to provide the services they're now providing under state employment.

Mike Marion of Fayette, the state coordinator for People
of the remaining 151 residents at Partlow, more than 50 family members or guardians have made application for appropriate transfers to community services, the mental health department said. Currently more than 6,000 people with intellectual disabilities live in communities.

October 2011
Disability advocates to protest Northport zoning laws limiting group homes

Published: Monday, October 17, 2011, 9:15 AM
By Hannah Wolfson -- The Birmingham News

NORTHPORT, Alabama -- Disability advocates are planning to turn out today to protest a change in Northport’s zoning laws that would limit group homes to one per mile.

City officials say the new rule is necessary to stem what they believe is a rising flood of applications for the group homes in anticipation of the closure of the state’s Tuscaloosa center for the mentally disabled in November. But the mental health community says the ordinance is discriminatory and may violate federal housing laws.

"If they pass this, about 20 or 35 of the group homes will have nowhere to go, and the people who live there -- where are they going?" said Jeff Ridgeway of the advocacy group People First of Alabama. "This is their way of getting rid of their people with disabilities."

The Northport City Council plans to take up the ordinance, which was recommended by the city’s planning commission, at its 6 p.m. council meeting today. It says that, among other requirements, no more than three unrelated people can live in a group home, that there must be enough off-street parking for all residents and employees, and that no group home may be set up within a one-mile radius of any other. According to the U.S. Census Bureau, the city is just less than 15 miles square.

Director of Planning and Inspection Katherine Ennis said city officials were about to start revamping the zoning laws when they realized they were receiving more business permit applications for group homes.

"We’ve just been getting a ton of them," Ennis said, along with expressions of neighborhood concerns. She said Northport’s business license office estimates there’s the potential for more than 30 new applications this year, and officials also discovered many more are operating without the required license.

The city believes group home requests will only increase with the shuttering of the W.D. Partlow Developmental Center in nearby Tuscaloosa, which is operated by the Alabama Department of Mental Health. It is set to close Nov. 30 -- although there is a lawsuit in the works to block the closure -- and has shrunk from 151 to about 58 residents.

Disability advocates to protest Northport zoning laws limiting group homes | al.com Page 1 of 2 http://blog.al.com/spotnews/print.html 10/18/2011

"The ADMH view is that people, with or without disabilities, should have the right to live wherever they want," said department spokesman John Ziegler. Ennis said the city believes its law is fair and similar to others around the state in setting certain requirements for a business license.

But the Alabama Disabilities Advocacy Program has filed an administrative complaint with the federal government saying the amended ordinance discriminates against people with disabilities, said James Tucker, director of litigation for ADAP, who compared it to historical restrictions denying housing based on race.

We are encouraged that the state department of mental health is encouraging people to leave Partlow and live far more satisfying lives in the community," Tucker said. "And then you get an action like that in the city of Northport, and frankly I think it's based on discriminatory animus."

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Advocates for closure of Partlow center in Tuscaloosa send message to Alabama Legislature

The Huntsville Times
By Bob Lowry, The Huntsville Times
March 22, 2011

MONTGOMERY - Even though Gov. Robert Bentley has endorsed a plan to close Partlow Developmental Center in Tuscaloosa, advocates for closure of the facility Tuesday sent a loud message to the Legislature: "Close Partlow Now!"

About 200 people, many of them with intellectual disabilities, attended a rally on the steps of the Statehouse, then went inside to lobby lawmakers. The rally was organized by The Arc of Alabama and People First of Alabama.

Jeff Ridgeway of Mobile, president of People First, told the crowd that Partlow is an antiquated and outdated facility that has no place in modern mental health care. Cheering advocates at the rally hoisted signs reading: "Fight Segregation in 2011", "How About Our Civil Rights" and "Would 'You' Like to Live at Partlow?"

Ridgeway said Partlow is often compared to prison. "There is no freedom," he said. "There are only medicated schedules to keep, behavioral therapy for those who act up and no social interaction outside the boundaries of Partlow as well as little or very limited family contact."

But Ridgeway said those who make it out of Partlow are often able to "lead full, rich, productive lives with jobs, homes, friends and still with family."

Jeff and Dana Sutton of Oxford said their 26-year-old daughter, who has Rett syndrome, has flourished since her move back home from Partlow, where she stayed for four years.

Ridgeway called on Bentley and the Legislature to allow the $42 million annual budget that previously went to Partlow to follow residents into community-based support facilities.

Mike Marion, a former Partlow employee who is now statewide coordinator of People First, said he quit his job over the issue of trying to keep people in Partlow. "We're going to lock people up to keep my job?" he said. "I wanted to keep my job, but that's wrong. It was a hard decision, but I can't justify mistreating one group of people just to keep my job."

Murray Townsend of Florence, president of The Arc, said people shouldn't be institutionalized. "We all have the right to live and work where we please," he said. "We all have the right to seek happiness in the way we want to, live in the community and have friends."

Rep. Chris England, D-Tuscaloosa, has introduced a resolution urging the state Department of Mental Health not to close Partlow. A similar resolution is expected to be sponsored in the Senate by Sen. Gerald Allen, R-Tuscaloosa.

The resolution cites a 1975 law that declares Partlow "an essential function of state government."

George Neal, director of the Department of Mental Health's Office of Consumer Empowerment, said he favors the closure of Partlow.

Neal said people who have left Partlow "are making their own decisions, they're going out to dinner, going on dates, they're living their lives the way they want to."

Lauren Kimbrell, 28, who works at a hotel in Birmingham, said she took off work to come to the rally, to support closure of Partlow even though she has no connection to the facility and only knows what she's read about it. "Partlow is not a good place," she said. "They don't treat you right. You do what they say on their time schedule. You have no privacy."

Zelia Baugh, the new commissioner of the Department of Mental Health, informed Partlow officials on March 3 the center would close Sept. 30.

Partlow, which opened in 1923, has 484 employees who care for 151 patients.

According to center Director Rebecca Baugh, there have been no new admissions to Partlow in two years.

Ten patients who have severe disabilities will remain on the campus after Partlow closes, and they will be cared for by about 42 current staffers.

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The W.D. Partlow Developmental Center closed Wednesday.

Partlow, opened in 1923, was the state’s only remaining facility for the intellectually disabled.
centers eventually to close.

“Each of the five closures had unique obstacles and opposition, but only positive reactions from the people who had been institutionalized,” Gillespie said. “People with disabilities have shown us how happy they are to be close to their families, to have privacy, to enjoy the same things we enjoy in our communities.”

Gillespie said some Partlow residents who have been moved since the closure was announced in March had lived there for 60 years.

“This day is an important day for Alabama, for disability rights, and for civil rights,” she said.

It wasn’t always smooth going. At least two lawsuits were filed by relatives of Partlow residents claiming the state had no legal right to close Partlow and claiming their loved ones wouldn’t be in a better environment if moved. The lawsuits were unsuccessful.

Earlier this year the Centers for Medicaid and Medicare Services threatened to cut federal funding for Partlow residents after a “known pedophile” was accused of sexually abusing a then-16-year-old boy in 2010.

The alleged perpetrator had been sent to the Department of Mental Health under a court order for past sexual abuse and was around the 16-year-old despite a warning to keep him away from young people.

The situation was corrected to he Centers for Medicaid and Medicare Services’ satisfaction and the department continued its closure plans. A civil lawsuit was filed in that alleged incident.

Mental Health spokeswoman Kristi Gates said the department was able to arrange with courts for “specialized community placements” for forensic residents. She did not elaborate.

Tuscaloosa Mayor Walt Maddox and local legislators opposed Partlow’s closing because of the perceived impact on the economy, jobs, residents and the financial impact on local, non-state government services.

Hundreds of employees were to lose their jobs, but many were offered positions at other mental health facilities or with private employers. Some retired and some ultimately weren’t able to get comparable jobs.

“I believe their decision was driven by funding,” Maddox said. “Every piece of evidence I’ve seen, every conversation I’ve had with parents and guardians of consumers, leads me to believe this decision was based on downsizing instead. I hope everyone comes together and provides what is best for mental health consumers and not the bottom line.”

Gates said a final employee tally was not immediately available.

Although the center is closed to residents, a skeleton crew will remain for several weeks to finalize administrative and physical plant closure, Gates said.

ADAP attorney James Tucker said Alabama set a standard in becoming the first state in the Southeast to close institutions like Partlow.

“In closing its last state-run institution that segregated persons with developmental disabilities, Alabama continues to improve the quality of services provided to persons with disabilities,” he said. “Our experience has been consistently that once family members see improvements for their loved ones in the quality of life in the community, their objections dissipate.”

Tucker warned about state funding that has been cut over several years, endangering community services to ADAP clients who face more harm than just violation of their civil rights.

“Because the DMH budget already has been slashed, and will likely be slashed again in FY13, there is a significant risk that services to persons in community placements will not have their needs met,” he said. “I am gravely concerned about the ability of DMH to provide needed services to my clients in fiscal year 2013 if DMH is not level funded, or better.”

Curtis James is vice-chairman of the advisory board of trustees to the Department of Mental Health. At the last board meeting members approved a letter to Bentley asking him to at least provide level funding to the department next year.

“We also request that you deem the Department of Mental Health an essential function of state government,” the letter said.

In a telephone interview, James said he supports Baugh’s decision to close Partlow and advises that more cuts will endanger services to consumers.

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“A person with a disability is one of the most loyal employees that an employer will ever hire,” he said. “He will work for you as much as you will let him. I’ve known people like that all my life. Don’t get me wrong. People both with and without disabilities can be rotten apples, but for the most part a person with a disability will give you an honest day’s work for an honest dollar, and be proud and happy just to have that opportunity.”

“For starters, let me just say that People First is one of the most useful and best advocacy organizations in the state of Alabama,” he said. “We help people with developmental disabilities not only to stand up for themselves, but also to find their place in this world. That might include helping a person find housing, employment or transportation. We work closely with the Department of Mental Health and other organizations to ensure that this comes about in a way that is beneficial and productive for people with disabilities.”

Ridgeway is especially passionate about helping people with disabilities move from institutional settings into community settings.

“For most people who live in an institution, they don’t have many friends,” he said. “They probably don’t have much money, or anything that really belongs to them. They are usually pretty isolated. But if that person is in the community he can have his own apartment, his own job, his own money, and have the same freedoms as anyone else. You can live the way you want to live and not the way they want you to live.”
Ridgeway focuses on that point and advocates for people to be able to make their own decisions based on their life experiences.

"Many if not most of the doctors and the people with the big letters behind their name, they have never lived with discrimination," Ridgeway proclaimed. "They haven’t had to endure the name-calling. And when you talk to an employer and they find out you have a disability, they look at you with those eyes that say, ‘this employee can’t give me what I need or fulfill a task.’ The doctors who try to tell us what to do haven’t had to live with that."

Employers, according to Ridgeway, are starting to see the light but there is still a long way to go.

“A person with a disability is one of the most loyal employees that an employer will ever hire,” he said. “He will work for you as much as you will let him. I’ve known people like that all my life. Don’t get me wrong. People both with and without disabilities can be rotten apples, but for the most part a person with a disability will give you an honest day’s work for an honest dollar, and be proud and happy just to have that opportunity.”

Ridgeway said discrimination also goes well beyond housing and employment. “Have you ever talked to a doctor to see where they stand on relationships and sexual activity for people with a developmental disability? If you did, you would find out that people with disabilities have been denied the most basic of civil liberties in terms of a relationship. They are way too overprotective. In a way I can understand that, but in a way I cannot. I feel like if we are going to have freedoms, why not have all of them. Every right comes with responsibilities, and it is all part of the journey. You’ve got a job, you’ve got to go to work. You have a house, you have to keep it nice so people will come see you. If you want a relationship, you have to conduct it well. Some do a good job with these things and some don’t, whether they have a disability or not. What it all comes down to is that we’re just like everybody else.”

“Romance is something everyone wants, from Joe the Plumber to the biggest executive to everyone in between,” Ridgeway concluded. “People with disabilities want love and tenderness and someone to be there with them. People First has a national leader now who is married and has two children, and other People First leaders have families. But mostly, that is one thing that has eluded most people with a developmental disability. Doctors and parents and legalities have mostly prevented it, but romance and love is one thing that people will never stop trying to find, no matter who you are.”

Legislative stalwart

Last year, Ridgeway spearheaded a drive to change the language in Alabama’s code of law to “People First” language. He worked on that task for five years.

Me and a lot of other people spent a lot of time on that one,” he said. “We kept on calling and telling the Legislature that we need this law changed. On the day it passed I wound up staying at the Legislature till well after midnight and was there when it passed unanimously. It’s one of best feelings in the world I’ve ever had. The only thing that is going to top that will be the birth of my son. That hasn’t happened yet, and right now I’m still looking for the woman who will be his mama!”

Ridgeway said it was just a burning desire in him to see the “R” word stricken from the legal codes of our state.

“Imagine, every day, the law looks at you and calls you retard and retarded and imbecile and all these names that have come down to us from the last century. That was all still in the code of law that legally refers to people with disabilities. That is the equivalent of using the ‘N Word’ to refer to an African-American. It is simply unacceptable in our day and age and in this place to call a black man a nigger. So why would you call a man a retard who was born with that capacity which he never could help it to start with? You can’t! You just can’t do that! But we are closer to equality now that we are known as people first in our state’ code of law. We now use people first language. We’ve just got to get rid of these old antiquated names and words that no one should ever use. They only use them when they’re making fun of you for something you can’t help, that you were born with and never could help.”

“For this world to be more equal and have people on an even scale, that wording had to be changed to give everyone an even-steven chance at being just people.”