

Done right, Medicaid program can lift up vulnerable Kentuckians

By Sharon Darling

As Kentucky stands to become the first state in the nation to require many of its Medicaid recipients to work or volunteer in order to receive benefits, we must ensure the program is as meaningful as possible for those impacted.

Simply put, we need to do it right!

The Commonwealth needs substantive programming around its 80-hour per month requirement for able-bodied people to either work, or perform community service. If done correctly, doors could be opened and we could see Kentucky citizens' lives and communities transformed. Volunteering and community engagement can lead to participants learning workforce skills, which lead to attaining jobs.

This isn't just "pie in the sky" wishful thinking. The National Center for Families Learning (NCFL), a national non-profit founded and headquartered in Kentucky, has seen transformation of individuals and communities across the country when people are able to contribute, to volunteer, to work and see the benefits of their actions. NCFL works to eradicate poverty through education solutions for families.

By tying volunteerism to the ultimate goal of getting people job skills and into the workforce, this can be a win-win situation for both the participants and the communities where they live.

Over the past 30 years, and with the help and partnership with Toyota, we have impacted the lives of over 2 million families in 150 cities and 39 states (including Kentucky). Much of what we have done can be duplicated under the umbrella of the new Kentucky Medicaid requirements:

- Volunteerism through the creation of a Family Service Learning program. Participants decide what issues are important in their community – such as safety and security, environmental stewardship, financial literacy, effective education systems, transportation, and health. They then investigate how to address these issues and execute their projects.
- Families are strengthened through two-generation literacy programs, such as NCFL Family Learning, that include Parent and Child Together (PACT) Time®, Parent Time, and family-to-family mentoring. Bonds are strengthened and whole families are lifted to attain their true potential.
- Adults learn/gain computer skills, academic skills and skills for teamwork, problem solving, and communication (all crucial for employment). Research shows NCFL Family Learning participants learn 40 of 42 federal workforce skills and half of 2017 participants got a job, got a better job, or earned more money.
- Access to high school equivalency or GED® certificate programs. Research shows more than half of participants in NCFL Family Learning programs in 2017 earned one or the other.

By helping vulnerable adults reach the first rung of the ladder, they are able to begin contributing to their community and that gives them pride, a sense of accomplishment and dignity. This allows people

to have a say in their community as to what needs to be fixed and then do something about it. One result is they will be viewed as part of the solution — not as part of the problem.

These positive results could be further amplified by pulling together several programs, including Medicaid, Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP), and Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF), and creating a comprehensive system to improve the human condition and move people to self-sufficiency.

Take for example, NCFL's work in Mississippi. In the participants' words, they said "our social service agencies saw that clients were becoming dependent on the system rather than gaining independence." NCFL, in partnership with the Mississippi Department of Human Services and two social service agencies, are implementing the approach through the Families First for Mississippi program. Called Gen+, the focus is on more than just an individual, rather on the family as a whole participates in Family Service Learning projects, Parent and Child Together (PACT) Time[®], and family-to-family mentoring.

In addition, participants have access to free classes for literacy, parenting, life skills, workforce development and education services. This results in whole families being lifted to meet their true potential, and that will lead to generational cycles of poverty being broken.

In Kentucky, reports show there are 350,000 citizens, able and willing to work, who don't have the skills or clear steps to change their situation. Studies show this lack of skills prevents full participation in an increasingly competitive work environment. Additionally, people with poor literacy skills are more likely to report bad health, trust other people less and be less involved in their local communities.

Volunteering is certainly laudable and is beneficial for both the volunteer and the recipient of the service. However, volunteering can also be much more substantive for those who need basic job skills and a path to employment if they follow a skill-building process instead of random acts of giving. Why not take those meaningful skills to the next beneficial level and use them to secure a job? Perhaps that job begins to truly put a family on a path to self-sufficiency.

Yes, the Medicaid waiver is controversial. But, if it does go into effect, Kentucky needs to put forth the framework and programming to provide vulnerable people meaningful community engagement opportunities that will benefit them in the long-term.

A first-in-the-nation comprehensive system would make Kentucky an example to the rest of the country. Let's set the standard for raising up families so they may begin to break the intergenerational cycles of poverty through community engagement and work-skills training.

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