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Special Session bill package negatively impacts people with disabilities and caregivers

MADISON, WI -- The Wisconsin Board for People with Developmental Disabilities (BPDD) has concerns that the Special Session welfare package passed yesterday in the State Assembly will impact people with disabilities, despite efforts to exempt the disability population. While some of the bills intend to exempt individuals identified as elderly, blind, and disabled, or people who are not able-bodied from work and other requirements, the exemptions are not clear or broad enough to include all people with disabilities, and the exemption language is not consistent across the bills and programs.

BPDD is concerned that creating exemptions and bureaucratic processes to prove exempt status will mean that some people with disabilities will fall through the cracks, especially those without a robust support system.

There is also no exemption for caregivers. This is a serious omission because many people with disabilities—especially in the context of Wisconsin’s growing caregiver crisis—rely on family members to provide some or a large proportion of the caregiving needed. When caregivers work fewer hours or leave their jobs to provide care, their reduced income may mean that they too rely on public assistance programs like FoodShare, Medicaid, and Public Housing. Wisconsin absolutely needs these caregivers to keep older adults and people with disabilities in their homes and out of expensive Medicaid-funded institutional settings.

The Public Housing bill—which requires a Public Housing Authority to assess whether an individual is able-bodied, their employment capacity and status, conduct drug abuse screenings—is of particular concern. This bill would require Public Housing Authorities to determine whether someone is able-bodied (i.e. does not have a disability). Federal anti-discrimination laws protect residents in Public Housing from being required to disclose any disability.

BPDD is concerned that people with mental health conditions, epilepsy, autism, mild intellectual and developmental disabilities, people with intermittent or degenerative health conditions, and other disabilities that are not visible or immediately recognizable could be assessed as able-bodied and subjected to additional scrutiny regarding employment and substance abuse.

Many people with disabilities are dependent on more than one public benefit program (SSI/SSDI, Public Housing, Medicaid, FoodShare, etc.) for a network of supports that provides stability, and a way to live successfully in the community. Changes to requirements or administrative process will cause participant confusion—and potentially the loss of food, housing, or medical care should individuals not be able to gather documentation and complete paperwork. People with disabilities face many barriers on a daily basis—including transportation, timely access to medical or other appointments that might be necessary to prove exempt status—that can slow down their ability to meet time-sensitive deadlines.