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Testimony:

I have watched this legislative body go through 11 sessions deliberating on the extent to which it was willing to help meet the minimum needs of people with disabilities. Let me briefly recount your history:

A recession in 1981 caused you to cut services to the mentally ill and mentally retarded. You were, at that time, doing little for people with physical disabilities, so there was nothing much to cut there.

In 1985, the 1981 cuts had worked such damage on the disabled that there was a scandalous set of disruptive hearings (AB400) which produced revelations of the misery of children and adolescents with mental health and mental retardation. Legislators were shocked. This body funded two subsequent sessions of interim studies. These studies produced informed legislators and dramatically positive results. In the 1987 and 1989 sessions, these newly informed legislators took their own initiative--mental health and mental retardation got a total of almost 50% increases in overall funding. This aggressive action, after a long delay, courageously brought services back up to the level at which they were in 1980, prior to the 1981 cuts.

In 1991 there was another recession. Governor Miller decided that the mental health and mental retardation increases in the previous two sessions had been too large, and besides they weren't his idea. He cut mental health services back to pre-1981 levels.

All rate increases combined since 1992 have merely brought the Division of MHDS up to 1991 funding levels. Population growth has doubled our population in the mean time.

You paid for an \$800,000 study of the rates paid to the non-profit providers of services to this disabled population--services which are highly subsidized by the non-profits themselves. The rate study showed that the current rates for the purchase of care are too low by 34% right this minute. This is precisely the figure I gave you two years earlier for free in a Nevada Public Affairs article on the mental health system.

Governor Guinn knows Nevada's disability community needs serious help. Our funded level of care for the disabled is a scandal to the nation. Governor Guinn courageously built a budget based on doing the right thing for poor, frail disabled and elderly people living in misery in Nevada.

We are now in another recession, despite what Rush Limbaugh says. Certainly, we all know it.

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Still, there is no rational reason why there is not enough money to fund desperately needed minimal services, except for those unwilling to share Nevada's bounty and pay their fair share of Nevada's burden of care for people who need help.

During recessions I just mentioned, Nevada businesses have remained largely untaxed. The income tax rates of the most wealthy 2% have dropped by 63% since the mid-1960's. In the past 18 years a trillion dollars of wealth has been allowed to pass directly into the hands of the wealthiest 1% of our population, coincident with their new lower tax rates.

This is criminal, out of proportion, outrageous and shameful.

There must be a balance found, or we must admit that our economic, political and social systems are a significant failure. Every other major industrial nation, those we consider on a par with our own, do a better job of taking care of their frail, elderly and disabled. Why can't we do so? It isn't lack of intelligence. It isn't lack of caring as individuals. I suspect it is simply the case that the untaxed business owners and wealthy, who pay for political campaigns, will punish any legislator voting for even a fair and equitable tax package. So, in this session, doing the right thing will be an act of courage. It always is.

Does Walmart lower its prices to Nevadan's as a "thank you" for not having to pay the taxes imposed by 40+ other states. No! Does Wells Fargo Bank lower its service charges to Nevadan's as thanks for beneficial tax exemptions? No! Does the mining industry pay taxes sufficient to mitigate the misery-causing cycle of boom and bust, or to clean up its horrifying toxic wastes or compensate future generations for its permanent depletion of our precious ground water? No! It takes the money and runs. Why do the powerful get a free ride in this state while the poor and defenseless get ground up under their wheels? Is this what America is stands for? Is this the system we're defending with all our might against the world? No wonder people in other countries are looking askance the American way of life.

This session we have the rare opportunity when a Governor and a legislature can line up together and set something sad and tawdry aright. We can find the political will to take care of our disabled. We might consider, while we're doing it, that each one of us, regardless of socio-economic status, will eventually become disabled ourselves. If we are not rich, and we haven't built a decent publicly funded care system, we will get what we deserve—nothing but misery and heartache.

I ask you, to search your heart, match it with courage, and do the right thing this session. Then walk out "sine die" with your head held high. If the cold-hearted money-grubbers don't like you, 375,000 disabled Nevadans will love you!