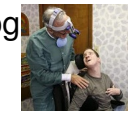
http://newiprogressive.com/images/stories/S5/disability-old-s5.jpg 

Sen. Kathleen Vinehout writes about the governor's proposed changes to the Family Care and IRIS programs, the fighting spirit that saved them from privatization, and the lives many from being so ill-advisedly disrupted.

MADISON - "No one had any inkling this was happening," Michael Blumenfeld told the Milwaukee Journal Sentinel. "We are just scratching our heads. Why would you do this?" Mr. Blumenfeld spoke for the Wisconsin Family Care Association in early spring of 2015.

The frail elderly, disabled, and their families learned the governor sought to privatize the successful Family Care and IRIS programs, handing them over to a few large insurance companies.

The birth of this idea happened in secret.

The Department of Health Services (DHS) Secretary – charged with shepherding the plan through the legislative process – acknowledged to the Milwaukee Journal Sentinel that "she learned of the proposal only when the governor's budget was released." Evidently her staff also knew nothing of the plan.

"None of them knew anything about this," said Barbara Beckert of Disability Rights Wisconsin. "They are in a state of shock."

In December 2014, the governor's office invited advocacy groups to a meeting to discuss what they would like to see happen with the programs. Jason Endres and his spouse Julie of Eau Claire attended that meeting.

“We were never listened to,” Jason said. “The governor did a complete 180 when the budget came out.”

Later an email circulated around the Capitol revealing that the governor’s office directed the nonpartisan Legislative Reference Bureau to write budget language dismantling Family Care and IRIS programs. Governor Walker sidestepped the public agency budget process entirely. He ignored the advocacy/agency councils set up to design changes to long-term care programs.

His proposal would upend a critical safety net for almost 60,000 of our state’s most vulnerable citizens without their consultation.

According to an analysis done by the nonpartisan Legislative Fiscal Bureau, “The administration did not solicit the recommendations of the Long-Term Care Advisory Council before or during the development of the Family Care/IRIS 2.0 proposal.”

The Council had requested meetings, but was not granted input.

Days after the budget came out, Jason, Julie along with other IRIS recipients and their families started the Save IRIS citizen advocacy effort to inform people about the proposed changes to their critical programs. Thousands of people from around the state participated in two disability awareness days and a SAVE IRIS rally at the Capitol.

During the spring of 2015, hundreds came to testify during the public budget process. More than 200 statewide and local organizations jointly passed a resolution against the governor’s plan.

Then the Joint Finance Committee met to vote. Jason related what he saw: “During the Executive Session they all talked about it. Talk [for the governor’s proposal] didn’t go all that great as far as getting rid of it. All of a sudden [Assembly Speaker] Robin Vos walked in the room. And the mood changed. The Republicans went into a little meeting room within the Joint Finance Committee room. Then they all came back out and everything had changed. Now they were going to get rid of IRIS. Not five minutes later they voted to get rid of IRIS…I was infuriated.”

For Jason, Julie, and thousands like them, IRIS means a sense of pride about determining for themselves how and whom assists them with daily care most of us can do ourselves. The programs help people stay and function in the community like everybody else.

After the final budget vote, the DHS Secretary scheduled meetings essentially to tell advocates to get on-board. Jason told me about an IRIS recipient who was “ousted from the table” and “read the riot act” because she refused to support the administration’s plan.

Jason then learned of a mysterious meeting in the governor’s office between representatives of big insurance companies expected to benefit from the governor’s plan, DHS officials, and Republican budget committee members. Thursday night DHS Secretary Rhodes withdrew the plan.

“This gave us a huge uplift,” said Jason. Julie added, “This is a major victory!”

For over a year our disabled and elderly struggled with the stress of uncertainty. Home care workers were also affected. Many left for other jobs, which created a huge shortage of workers for the disabled who need help for basic functions.

The unconscionable actions by the governor and his legislative allies caused chaos in so many lives. However, a fighting spirit brought about the death of their very ill-conceived idea.