



**Joni Eareckson
Tada**

*Founder and CEO, Joni and Friends
International Disability Center*

Elections 2012: Who is Really 'Pro-Life?'

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As the 2012 presidential campaign gets into full swing, we often hear the candidates questioned about their views on abortion or embryonic stem cell research, as if one or two issues determine whether they are "pro-life."

Although these are important issues, I want to encourage voters to look at the bigger picture. If you truly believe in the value of life, you care about all of the weakest and most vulnerable members of society.

In these days of economic turmoil, it's easy to look at programs for the elderly, disabled and others with special needs as line items in a budget. But the effects of cutting them can be far-reaching and sometimes just shift the expense from one column on a spreadsheet to another.

Virtually every state is cutting services for special-needs families and with regulations currently being written for the new health care law, the federal government is headed in the same direction. The Super Committee Senators and Congressmen also are looking at cutting funds for Medicaid as a way of reducing the federal debt.

Unless society holds accountable those who are defining "waste-reduction measures," the disabled and elderly will lose services and in-home support that are critical to their basic needs.

I applaud the stricter measures being taken to ensure that fraudulent claims aren't being paid -- this is saving hundreds of millions of dollars. However, I am concerned that some of those who are working on the language for the health care law will decide that waste-reduction measures include doing away with life-sustaining programs for individuals with profound disabilities. No one but God can determine whether or not keeping someone alive is "worth it."

This will definitely come into play over the next decade, as advances in medical technology will enable more people to survive injuries and illnesses and the senior population will continue to grow in number and age. Because more and more people will need Medicaid, we should be investing in cost-saving services like home and community-based supports and not just engage in slash-and-burn cuts that will cost more in the long run.

Most states have already made significant cuts to Medicaid, reducing or eliminating vital home-care services and forcing seniors and people with disabilities into nursing facilities. Unfortunately, we have seen time and time again that these facilities become a much larger drain on Medicaid with average daily care costs much higher than in-home care.

The 2010 MetLife Market Survey of Nursing Home, Assisted Living, Adult Day Services and Home Care Costs showed that Nursing Home and Assisted Living rates continue to rise and cost many times more than Home Care or Adult Day Services, where costs have remained steady.

Doesn't it make more sense to continue funding the more economical option, rather than slash that budget and require those with special needs to turn to the more expensive facilities? Especially when Medicaid has to pick up the tab?

Like all good citizens, the elderly and people with disabilities want to eradicate waste and fraud from government, but helping people with special needs meet their basic needs doesn't fit this description. The hallmark of a healthy society has always been measured by how it cares for the disadvantaged.

As people investigate the candidates on all issues, they should remember that being pro-life also means protecting the elderly and medically fragile people - it's not a litmus test issue. If candidates believe that savings can be secured through undercutting basic services for the elderly and disabled, it can't help but tarnish their stand as pro-life candidates.