

PEOPLE AS PRECIOUS COMMODITIES

COMMODITY: AN ARTICLE OF COMMERCE; SOMETHING USEFUL OR VALUED.

Revolutionary Common Sense by Kathie Snow, www.disabilityisnatural.com

They're not listed on any stock exchange, but people with disabilities represent a precious commodity. This might sound like a compliment, but it's not! It reflects the sad state that people with disabilities are the raw material of the gargantuan human services.

Every name on the rolls of special education, vocational-rehabilitation and other employment services, habilitation services, therapy centers, and any other public or private agency that provides services represents cold, hard cash: funds that keeps the agencies in business. Historically, people with disabilities have been seen as "needy" and "dependent." But the reality is something else: human service providers—in whatever form—and the people who are employed by them, *are dependent on people with disabilities*. Without them, these agencies would go belly up and thousands of providers, teachers, and others would be in the unemployment line or would need to move into a different career path. And when we open our eyes really wide, this situation explains a great deal.

It explains why so many students are referred for special ed services. It explains why few children are ever "released" from therapy (they are said to never reach their "goals"). It explains why so many adults receiving vocational/employment services remain jobless. It explains why so many children and adults continue to be classified as "needy" and "dependent." Few workers, unfortunately, are willing to work themselves out of a job—and keeping people dependent on you is a surefire guarantee of job security.

Worse, the most restrictive settings frequently generate the most money! Institutional or congregate care costs more than care in one own's home; sheltered workshops require more staff than supported or competitive employment. The placement of students with disabilities into the most restrictive settings once generated more dollars, but revisions to federal special ed law in 1997 overturned this "benefit" to schools.

But there's a flip side as well. One of the purposes of early intervention (EI-birth to three) services, as stated in the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA), is: "To reduce the educational costs to our society, including our Nation's schools, by minimizing the need for special education and related services after infants and toddlers with disabilities reach school age." Whoa! Here the government is saying, "If we get 'em while they're young enough, they won't cost us so much when they're older." So even the youngest children with disabilities are perceived as commodities—burdensome ones—by our Federal government. Of course, this goal of EI is seldom realized. The number of children who are deemed to no longer need special services by ages three or five is very small. The majority of babies and toddlers receiving EI services are the youngest fodder for the service industry, as they're propelled from one service to the next during their lifetimes!

**The human being as a commodity
is the disease of our age.**

Max Lerner

I don't believe most people employed in the service system lick their lips in lascivious glee when reviewing the number of people with disabilities they're required to

serve. Most probably feel overworked and underpaid. But somewhere in the bureaucratic maze, a financial wizard tallies the entries, sees dollar signs, and wonders how to ensure the dollars continue flowing in.

Like other consumer-driven businesses, service providers (public and private) do whatever it takes to stay in business. And this means keeping people with disabilities dependent on their services *and* recruiting new clients.

So, if and when you wonder why a child is seldom deemed "successful" and no longer in need of special ed services, therapies, and other interventions, or if you wonder why an adult waits for years for a job placement or supported living, just smack yourself on the forehead (this works best while facing a mirror) and say, "*Duh!*"