

4-year-old just wants to be like others

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Cathy Humphrey isn't asking for a lot. She wouldn't ask at all but, you see, it's for her daughter.

She wants Maria to have a chance to walk. For that to even be a possibility, she needs \$5,000 in equipment, but the state has turned her down. The reasons seem to change with every denial.

Basically, it comes down to this:

State and insurance officials don't think Maria Humphrey will ever walk. So why bother?

Maria is the only child of Cathy and her husband, Manny. She was born four years ago with hydrocephalus. Since then, the hits have just kept coming: cerebral palsy, scoliosis, seizures, severe delays in every aspect of her life. Doctors have told them that their daughter will be deaf and blind, that she will never be able to feed herself or walk.

With every blow, the ceiling on Maria's life drops lower. Yet her parents don't easily accept such limits, as parents never should. They believe their daughter can do more, if given a chance.

In fact, she already has.

"We've been told she's going to be blind her whole life, she's going to be deaf her whole life, she'll never drink from a bottle and she'll never walk," said Andy Humphrey, who works with his niece two days a week. "So far she's disproved three of those and she's working real hard on disproving the walking one."

For that, though, she will need help. Last year, the family requested a walker and a stander through Care1st Health Plan Arizona, an insurance company that contracts with the state Division of Developmental Disabilities. Cathy sent in letters from Maria's physical therapist and several doctors explaining that having the ability to stand could prevent further deterioration of her body, explaining the importance of taking steps and how she will need this equipment if she is ever to walk, explaining that the sooner she is upright, the better.

Care1st turned her down in January, saying among other things that it needs proof the equipment is medically necessary, that there are cheaper alternatives and that "basic care should be tried first."

This to a family that has spent virtually every waking moment working with Maria, fighting for her, trying to stretch the possibilities for her life.

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Cathy appealed but in May, DDD upheld the denial. "Medical necessity . . .," it said, "has not been established."

A DDD spokeswoman couldn't comment on the case, citing privacy. Liz Barker Alvarez said any review would have been done by doctors and that the agency is focused on helping people to live as independently as possible. "They don't take lightly requests for equipment or services or supports or whatever the individual needs to achieve their maximum potential."

DDD, in its denial letter, did agree to coordinate an evaluation "to determine if Maria has the potential to walk." In other words, if it appears she'll never walk, why bother?

You bother because sometimes kids like Maria amaze us and do more than they should ever be able to do. And because this 4-year-old has had enough limits put on her from the day she was born. Do we really want to add more?

Cathy has appealed DDD's decision. She has a hearing on Monday. She can't afford an attorney so it'll be up to her to go up against the state and its attorney to explain to a hearing officer what this equipment could mean to her daughter.

"I took a video of her walking with the PT

(physical therapist) and she had just the biggest grin on her face," Cathy said. "You can tell she wants to move and she wants to get around. She wants to be like the other kids."

Really, is that asking so much?

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