

Access Denied: Inland Regional Center Says NO to Request by Single Mother of Developmentally Disabled Child for Legally Mandated Services

Employer intimidates its OWN EMPLOYEE when she tries to secure access to care her child must receive

By Edit Ruano, Full Court Press Communications

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Riverside, CA – Approximately 27,000 developmentally disabled individuals depend on the quasi-governmental Inland Regional Center (IRC) for their social services and care coordination. The IRC, responsible for distributing nearly a quarter-billion dollars in legally mandated health and human services to local residents, has been under fire for recent audits uncovering misconduct and waste.

But one recent story defies logic.

For nearly 2 years, Social Worker Liliana Ibarra has been denied access to the care that her developmentally disabled child needs by IRC leadership, despite the fact that she is an employee of the Center and knows exactly which services her son can and should receive.

Today, the IRC was served with a complaint for damages on behalf of Ms. Ibarra. The complaint outlines a pattern of illegal conduct and employee retaliation conducted by the Center as reprisal for Ms. Ibarra's requests for legally mandated services. Shannon Meehan, a former IRC employee, is also part of the claim and reports a similar pattern of intimidation and retaliation by the Center.

Ms. Ibarra lives in San Bernardino County with her 3 children and works as a counselor to families with disabled children at IRC. Her job is to serve as an advisor and advocate for the developmentally disabled and the families that support them. So when it came time to request services for her own developmentally disabled child, she knew the exact steps she would have to take to ensure her son received proper care. However, accessing the services to which Ms. Ibarra's child had a legal right proved more difficult than she ever anticipated.

"My problems began in 2010 when my child's Early Start program services were reduced and I tried to appeal the decision. The Center tried to deny my son the services while the appeal was being processed, but I knew that was against the law," said Ms. Ibarra.

When Ms. Ibarra again tried to claim services for her child, she was told that the request was going through the system. When she investigated the claim's status, however, she discovered that her request had not even been processed.

“IRC lied to me about my son’s care; they tried to scare me and intimidate me. They made it clear that I should not be asking for the services that my son not only has a right to receive, but also needs to have a good quality of life,” said Ms. Ibarra. “These services also allow me to continue to work to support my three children.”

When Ms. Ibarra objected to the actions of regional management and tried to assert her rights, management disciplined her for allegedly violating their Conflict of Interest Policy. This started a pattern of direct intimidation that continues to this day. IRC even intimidated Ms. Ibarra when she went to the school district to secure an Individualized Education Plan (IEP) for her son. Over the past year, IRC has continued to retaliate against Ms. Ibarra and assert that her attempts to secure care for her child are a conflict of interest.

Elsa Espinoza, who also works at the Inland Regional Center, is a close friend of Ms. Ibarra’s and worries that this case is not an isolated incident.

“It’s wrong to deny care to a young child, and it’s wrong to lie to families about the status of a request. It’s also wrong that they continue targeting my friend simply because she is trying to help her son,” states Ms. Espinoza, “I’m afraid about what might happen to us, but Liliana and I have to stand up when we hear that something is not right at the Center. Our job is to help the developmentally disabled, and one way to do that is by saying something when IRC is not putting the needs of our consumers first.”

The Inland Regional Center is one of 21 nonprofit, private community-based agencies in the state that are contracted to coordinate government services for developmentally disabled individuals. With a contract of over \$280,000,000 with California’s government, IRC is the largest of all these centers.

This is not the first time that the Inland Regional Center has been in the news for inappropriate action and for inappropriate treatment of its employees. In 2011, IRC was placed on probation by the Department of Developmental Services for a number of violations of the law, including bad fiscal management, bad stewardship of public dollars, and establishing a negative and retaliatory work environment against employees.