

The judge's message was clear: Protracted, expensive litigation is no way to resolve an issue like the one at hand. I could not agree more, and thank Judge Folan for exercising such wisdom.

Children and adults with autism and other developmental disorders exist in all neighborhoods in the Bay Area, and there's no question they can exhibit behaviors that conflict with societal norms. If you see a brown-haired nonverbal 16-year-old boy picking bark off a tree or jumping wildly at the supermarket, that may be my beloved son. If you see a sandy-haired nonverbal 9-year-old girl attempting to remove a lawn ornament, that may be my beloved daughter.

Am I a negligent parent? Hardly. I do my best every day to help my very disabled children, who are both afflicted with significant forms of autism, a disorder that somehow mis-wired their brains. I supervise constantly (autism moms always joke we have eyes on the back of our heads and everywhere else, too) and stay close but cannot leash them.

Santa Clara County now counts more than 3,200 cases of the more severe forms of autism, up from 147 just 25 years ago. These numbers are consistent with skyrocketing rates across our state, whose high-barrier-to-entry Developmental Services system has seen a 28-fold increase in autism since 1987.

Contrary to misinformation now trending in the media about "better awareness," repeated state analyses of data have shown this increase is alarmingly real, not the result of shifting diagnostics. Indeed, over many years the system has been raising the bar for eligibility, not lowering it.

Given the ubiquity of this developmental disorder, heavy-handed, expensive and protracted lawsuits such as the one filed by the Sunnyvale neighbors cannot possibly provide a civil, constructive and useful answer to community conflict. We simply can't sue disabilities out of our neighborhoods.

On the other hand, there's no question that for our neighborhoods and our developmentally disabled, solutions are needed to ensure everyone's peace and safety -- no individual or parent can do it alone.

In the case of Arlington Court, the answer may have been a simple front yard fence, or an additional layer of therapies or supervision; I cannot say for certain. But clearly solutions could have been found and put in place short of forcing a family from the neighborhood with an oppressive, out-of-all-proportion lawsuit.

Here's the rub: Our Developmental Services system, created to fund support and assistance to families, is in a state of collapse, so woefully underfunded and overwhelmed by caseload that regional centers for the developmentally disabled cannot keep up with demand for services, programs and housing. Valiant attempts to boost the budget, which has stagnated for years, have failed. Even a special legislative session called by Gov. Jerry Brown to find ways to fund our system has so far completely bombed.

Judge Folan's words touched a nerve -- not just for Arlington Court but for our society. Are we about finding solutions? With 280,000 individuals with developmental disabilities in our communities, a crumbling support system and no funding increase in sight, that question has never been more urgent.

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