

Caring for Adults with Severe Developmental Disabilities

On June 28, 2012, Eva Cameron left her 19-year-old daughter Lynn outside a bar in Tennessee and drove back to her own home in Illinois. Lynn has severe intellectual and developmental disabilities. She has a spoken vocabulary of 30-40 words and is unable to say her own name. Eva explained her actions by saying that she brought Lynn to Tennessee because she understood services for disabled adults are better in Tennessee than in Illinois, where Eva lives.

A Tennessee grand jury decided not to press charges against Eva because she broke no law. Since Lynn is over 18, Eva is no longer Lynn's legal guardian. Parents are not legally responsible for the care of their children once they turn 18, regardless of whether their children have intellectual or developmental disabilities. "There is no disagreement that the actions of the mother, Eva Cameron, in this case were inexcusable." Lori Phillips-Jones, district attorney general for Campbell County Tennessee, stated in a news release. "However, Tennessee law has not anticipated such behavior and thus the Grand Jury was faced with conduct which was not necessarily indictable."¹

"As terrible as it is, unfortunately there is nothing we can do," Assistant Police Chief Stephanie Smith of Caryville, Tennessee said. "There is no doubt we need a law for mental health rights, but pending this investigation, we just don't know what else to do."

Parents (or other family members) are often the primary caregivers of adults with intellectual or developmental disabilities. Caregivers are more likely to suffer from anxiety, depression, health problems, and challenges maintaining their careers. Eva, for instance, has stated that she lost her nursing job, that her husband's career suffered and that her family accumulated over \$12,000 in debt as a result of having to care for Lynn.² She denied that she had failed in her responsibilities to her daughter.

Study questions:

1. What are the responsibilities of parents of adults with intellectual and developmental disabilities? Do parents ever have the right to decide to sever a relationship with an adult child, even if the adult child needs care?
2. What, if any, government assistance should be available to parents who are caregivers to adults with intellectual and developmental disabilities?
3. If a parent fails to care for a child under 18 (or make adequate arrangements for another caregiver), that parent is subject to criminal punishment for neglecting his or her child. Should Eva's refusal to care for her adult daughter be subject to criminal punishment on similar grounds?

¹http://articles.chicagotribune.com/2012-12-10/news/chi-alogonquin-woman-disabled-daughter-20121210_1_eva-cameron-tennessee-bar-disabled-daughter

²http://articles.chicagotribune.com/2012-07-23/news/ct-met-tennessee-abandoned-daughter-20120723_1_disabled-daughter-eva-cameron-young-woman