

Community accessibility: a continuing challenge

Developing open and accessible communities remains a large and daunting task. Some communities are further along in this process than others. However, until all communities are open and accessible, the full spirit and intention of the Americans with Disabilities Act will remain unfulfilled.

Knowledge of disability rights

A knowledge of disability rights is essential to accessing the community. It is empowering to know that federal laws require our communities to meet certain accessibility requirements. However, without specific knowledge about these laws and subsequent violations change can not occur. The old adage of "knowledge is power" is particularly important when the goal is to create positive and effective change.

It is hard to believe, but the fact is that many people with disabilities have never heard of the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA). The powerful titles of the ADA give us the right to employment, the right to access local government services, and the right to understand and be understood. These rights are all relatively new concepts to people living in institutional care facilities or in isolated situations with family members. A vivid reminder of this lack of information occurs repeatedly during the self-advocacy training seminars conducted at the Virginia Commonwealth University Rehabilitation Research and Training Center on Supported Employment (VCU-RRTC), a training developed by people with disabilities for people with disabilities. During each seminar participants are asked if they have heard of the ADA and in the majority of the cases individuals respond with a negative reply. These experiences are constant reminders that there are still many people with disabilities who have never heard about the monumental piece of legislation which gives them the right to be a part of the community. The good news of what the ADA can mean to all community members must continue to be announced and explained.

Putting the customer in charge of services

Large residential care facilities are the recipients of the majority of federal funds, rather than community-based services that are customer controlled. For example, funding for personal assistance services can easily still go to home health agencies who give consumers little or no control over the very intimate services that a personal assistant provides. This situation continues to thrive despite the growing body of evidence that documents lower operating cost and higher customer satisfaction ratings for community-based services. As a result there is a struggle developing between small service organizations and the larger facilities. Customers are voicing their desire for change, however, there appears to be to a strong interest in maintaining the current system. This struggle is most evident in the state of California where there is a controversy over Personal Assistance Services. One major issue that California is attempting to resolve is if home health agencies should be in charge of personal assistants or should the consumers of this service. If the state finds that the customer should be in charge, individuals will have the right to hire, supervise, train, and if necessary, release professionals under their supervision. Many states are watching to see how California will resolve this controversy. In addition, procedures and guidelines that are developed by the state of California will impact the design of a national Personal Assistance Services program.

Being determined

Accessing the community takes more than having knowledge about disability rights and legislation, or being able to obtain and direct services. It requires knowing what services are available in the community and having the tools and determination to obtain what is needed. People with disabilities and other community

members must truly recognize that diversity builds a strong and effective community and nothing short of that goal is acceptable.

Support and encouragement

People who have experienced living in isolated situations, closed communities made up of family members, or in a residential-care facility, will need support to obtain important community access goals. Isolation has made many individuals fear the community and as a result they may need support and encouragement to take the important first steps to community involvement. Sometimes fear of the unknown can be a barrier to an individual when attempting to gain access to new environments.

Finding the right Assistive Technology

Assistive Technology (AT) is an important issue for people with disabilities accessing the community. From simple devices such as pencil grips to sophisticated driving equipment, AT has revolutionized the lives of individuals with disabilities. The right AT can and will make almost anything possible in every facet of a person's life. AT can increase the employment possibilities of the person with disabilities, as well as making living independently a realistic goal.

For people with disabilities to benefit from AT, they must have legislative information and know how to access the best information and services. Most states have AT systems change projects created by funding provided through the 1988 Technology Act. These projects are charged with informing people with disabilities about AT options and how to obtain funding.

Having the right information

Over the past three years during numerous self-advocacy training seminars participants have cited the lack of information about goods and services. People with disabilities continue to believe that this represents a major barrier to employment. It stands to reason that when someone does not know where or how to access critical information regarding vital community services the result will be a delay in obtaining employment and other independent living goals. Sometimes the delay is so long that apathy begins to set in on the part of people

with disabilities and contributes to a loss of desire to become an active part of the community.

Centers for Independent Living (CIL) have recognized that having accessible and reliable information is necessary for participants to reach their goals. This is why information and referral is a mandated core service of all CILs. Most Centers have staffed their agency with an information and referral specialist with responsibility to maintain information files on local providers who specialize in goods and services for people with disabilities. These goods and services cover a broad range of items and include wheelchair repair services to vendors that sell medical supplies or hearing aids. In addition, information is available on a variety of community services ranging from accessible housing to vehicle modifications. These specialists are responsible for maintaining information for people with disabilities that will ultimately enable them to fully participate in their community.

Being an effective self-advocate

Knowledge of disability laws and rights is not enough to become an active participant in the community. Once a strong knowledge base has been built then proficiency must be established at using self-advocacy skills to effect change. It has been true in all civil rights movements that social and attitudinal changes do not occur with the mere passage of legislation. Those of us who have worked in the disability-rights field over the past quarter century have discovered the same is true in the struggle for equality for people with disabilities. Despite the many enlightened disability-rights laws, there are paternalistic attitudes and prejudices which still persist that block people with a disability from becoming active members of their community. These attitudes and prejudices can be overcome by self-determined persons with a knowledge of self-advocacy skills and the assertiveness to use them.

Ed Turner
Virginia Commonwealth University
Rehabilitation Research and
Training Center on Workplace Supports
1314 West Main St.
Richmond, VA 23284-2011, USA
Tel.: +1 804 828 1851
Fax: +1 804 828 2193
E-mail: eturner@saturn.vcu.edu