

Ten Ways People with Disabilities Can Empower Themselves

Learning disabilities present challenging problems for thousands of children and their families as well as a growing number of adults. In this issue, the first one the *Journal of Vocational Rehabilitation* has devoted to learning disabilities, Dr. Noel Gregg has done an excellent job of assembling an important cross-section of articles. These articles will be useful to rehabilitation counselors, teachers, advocates, administrators, and families. Vocational rehabilitation specialists need increased continuing education in the area of learning disabilities. There is little doubt in my mind that there will be greater and greater advocacy for educational and rehabilitative services for consumers with learning disabilities. How to achieve this advocacy is the subject of this issue's editorial.

Recently, I asked a colleague to go to a hearing that our local Congressman was sponsoring on health care reform. This colleague attempted to go to this forum but was unable to do so. Why? Because he uses a wheelchair and the facilities were not physically accessible. He subsequently wrote to the Congressman asking for accessible facilities in a future hearing.

This story, coupled with those of the thousands of families who try to get quality education services for children with learning disabilities, raises the importance of consumers taking control of their own destiny. The best-intentioned and most well-meaning professionals can rarely influence the lives of people with disabilities as well as consumers can themselves, provided that they have the necessary knowledge and are willing to advocate for themselves.

In the history of service delivery to people with disabilities, educators, counselors, psychologists,

and other specialists have presumed to tell or show consumers what to do. This mode of operation is acceptable at one level because professionals, one hopes, are trained experts and should be skilled resources. On another all too frequent level, however, professionals have made decisions for consumers such as where they should go to school, where they should live, if they should work, where, and for how long. The Americans with Disabilities Act is an important start toward promoting civil rights for all people with disabilities, but I doubt this is *the* answer. Clearly, the law did not allow my friend to get into the health care reform hearing.

Consumers must get control over their lives by exercising their moral rights to freedom and choice and by taking advantage of statutes and court decisions designed to empower them. What are the ways that consumers can win the struggle for equal opportunity and a chance at a better standard of living and quality of life? Here are 10 quick ideas to think about:

1. Write an editorial page article(s) for the local newspaper about cutting-edge issues affecting consumers. Focus on competence, not on charity.
2. Participate fully and as actively as possible in volunteer community activities as a regular community participant, not as a receiver of help, but as a giver of assistance.
3. Develop an ongoing positive relationship with your elected officials, not always as a lobbyist exclusively on disability issues, but more informally as a citizen.
4. Don't be shy about using any and all family,

friends, or other contacts you have to advance issues or causes you see as necessary.

5. Become as informed as you possibly can on whatever issues are of key interest. Know the company well that you are interviewing for a job with, know the pet issues of an elected official, etc.
6. Take time to understand as thoroughly as possible the opposition's position to your views. If you want increased accessibility, or personal assistance help, or better transportation options, know *why* these things are not available. This will allow you to argue your case better.
7. When arguing for a case or a particular position, have a fall-back plan that you are willing to accept, at least for a while. Always look for a way to work out a problem so that you can return to the table for more later. Give the other side a reasonable option to take as a compromise.
8. Know your rights, not just on specific issues,

but to what you are and are not entitled. It is sad but true: the squeaky wheel often does get the grease.

9. Identify key leaders in the disability field within your community. Get to know these people and build relationships that may ultimately be beneficial.
10. Identify other consumers who have succeeded at an issue. Talk to them and see what they did or know that you do not. Use their strategies to help you do what you want.

In many ways we live in a golden age of rights, freedom, and choice. Yes, it does seem at times that some people are more equal than others—who would argue with that? On the other hand, opportunities are at hand for these consumers or their advocates who want to get help. Consumer empowerment starts with the consumer. It is time for consumers to take back control over their destiny.

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