



Editorial

This is the first issue of the *Journal of Vocational Rehabilitation* which is authored primarily by persons with disabilities. Each of these authors is a highly successful person who has overcome life's challenges to be outstanding in their own career. This issue is about disability empowerment, self-determination, and the importance of choice and control in one's life.

Choice is a highly valued prerogative that reflects the autonomy, identity, and independence of an individual. Choice can be defined as the opportunity to make an uncoerced selection from two or more alternative events, consequences, or responses; therefore, in order to make a choice, not only is it important to have knowledge of the various alternatives, but also to have the chance to express or follow through with the chosen alternative. The opportunity for an individual to make choices and participate in life decisions improves his or her quality of life and the outcomes achieved, while also positively influencing his or her dignity, self-worth, and independence.

If individuals are to experience personal satisfaction and quality of life regardless of whether or not they have a disability, it is critical for them to have the right to make choices, express preferences, and exercise control in their lives. For persons without disabilities, the ability to make life choices free from discrimination was established with the passage of the Civil Rights Act of 1964. This same right to choice was recently extended to individuals with disabilities with the passage of the ADA. Although the ADA provides a mechanism through which individuals can accomplish their goals, many persons with severe disabilities may still depend upon professionals to

provide them with knowledge of the alternatives available to them and to assist them in achieving their desired goals.

Unfortunately, the opportunity to make choices concerning life, work, and recreation has been limited or nonexistent for individuals who have disabilities. It has become increasingly evident that the powerlessness and lack of self-direction often felt by people with disabilities are more frequently related to the attitudes and practices of caregivers, service providers, funding agencies, social institutions, and society, in general, rather than to any limitations or impairments resulting from the disability itself. For example, some individuals may never have been provided with more than one choice, decision-making skills may never have been taught, adequate information about alternatives may never have been made available, decisions may have been made by professionals who feel they know best, or capabilities and self-assertions may have been ignored or underestimated.

Choices made by persons with disabilities have often been based upon the avoidance of undesirable alternatives or upon the acceptance of the available rather than on true preferences. Decisions have also frequently been restricted by other external forces, such as agency regulations, lack of accessibility, inadequate supports, or stereotypical attitudes. For example, to avoid sitting at home or attending a sheltered workshop, an individual may agree to work at a particular job that he or she does not really enjoy. An individual may also take a job because the employer was the only person who would hire him or her. In other cases,

the rehabilitation professional may have recommended the job as the 'only job he or she could do', or it was the only job opening of which the individual was aware, or it was the only job for which the agency could provide the needed assistance and support. With the passage of the ADA, it is hoped that many of these external factors will be eliminated.

One way in which the ADA will help to eliminate external factors is by serving as a vehicle to empower persons with disabilities. The concept of empowerment, which is closely related to choice, is considered to be a process by which people can gain mastery over their lives. To empower a person is to provide him or her with the information, skills, or supports that can enable him or her to make choices and decisions regarding his or her life.

The limited opportunities for choice that have typically been available to persons with disabilities are likely to negatively affect their feelings of

empowerment. For example, an individual may have learned that his or her opinion is meaningless or that others know best whenever he or she expresses a choice, while another individual may be told that his or her preferences are not possible. For persons with disabilities, empowerment is most often realized when external entities, such as society, service providers, or government agencies, relinquish their power and control and allow the individuals to make their own choices. Quality of life is best measured by the power that individuals have to make choices, and their degree of satisfaction with the results of those choices.

In this issue, Gilson and contributors have done an outstanding job of exemplifying the issues associated with choice disability and empowerment. The papers are well done and timely.

Paul Wehman