

PEOPLE FIRST CONTROLLING THEIR OWN FUNDING

R. Timm Vogelsberg December 26, 2007

I have great pride with the strength that Council members have demonstrated by assuring the People First Chapters have the opportunity to make their own decisions about the use of Council funds and their chapter activities. As of now, the majority of the People First Chapters have met and determined what to do with the funding made available by the Montana Council on Developmental Disabilities. The process has been successful and many members have voiced their approval that they're involved and able to decide how they'd like to spend their funds.

Although some chapter advisors had misgivings and one initially refused to allow People First Chapter members to meet and vote on their budget, we seem to have passed that phase. It is not empowerment when people without disabilities decide how the chapter People First members prioritize their funds and activities. The change was threatening to many and has created some difficult feelings, but it is the right thing to do to support increased independence for people first members. Anything less would be inappropriate use of Council funds.

The simple Council decision to support People First Chapters to manage their own finances has become ridiculously controversial. I'm challenged by why empowering chapters to control their own resources can be so difficult to accept. As Council members we have pledged our support for self-determination and empowerment of people with disabilities. It's clearly written in the Developmental Disabilities Act that our role is to encourage full participation in society. It's also the role of the sister agencies supported by the Administration on Developmental Disabilities.

The most amazing aspect of the controversy, is that it's fueled by people who claim that they're working in the best interests of People First members. I think people making these statements believe them, but they're not supporting the development of independence by demanding that they control the funding or the decisions of People First members.

Society has worked hard to assure that people with disabilities are "kept in their place", segregated, and barred from making their own decisions and having access to the community. Throughout history well meaning people who want to help have kept people with disabilities from developing and recognizing their true competence. All too often help is provided in the form of overbearing support that doesn't identify or develop the competence of the person who experiences the disability. The examples are everywhere:

Schools decide that segregated special classes are best for the person;

Schools and adult service agencies decide that sheltered workshops, group homes, and institutions are safer and better than working or living in the community because people with disabilities need the "support and protection";

Recreation services like YMCA's decide that they'll have a special hour for people with disabilities to swim or exercise instead of providing them access to services the same as other community members ; and

Transportation agencies decide that driving licenses are not possible for people with disabilities.

As a member of the service system it is obvious that we're frequently mired in self-interest and conflicts of interest. We think we're here to support people with disabilities, but when our control over their lives and their funding is challenged, our perspectives change. If we're truly going to empower people with disabilities, then we have to give them control of the funding, regardless of what it does to our personal and financial interest.

Recently the state of Vermont closed all of their sheltered workshops and long ago they were one of the first states to close all of their institutions. They've determined that there will be no support for institutions or segregated sheltered work in Vermont. I'm challenged by the fact that some states can move ahead quickly, while other states continue to support efforts which restrict independence.

Perhaps this one small step by the Montana Council will be another beginning for the system to understand the importance of empowerment and true support of independence. The concept of the person with a disability as an 'eternal child' has no place in a conversation about empowerment and independence.