

People First of Montana/MCDD



Information Bulletin #8

Supporting People with Disabilities

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The Montana Council on Developmental Disabilities believes that true empowerment means people with disabilities controlling their futures and speaking for themselves.

The following information comes from the Council Support Person's Code of Conduct Policy and from personal and anecdotal observations throughout my life while attempting to provide adequate support to people with disabilities.

Reaction to the empowerment statement has created incidences of people without disabilities attempting to speak for people with disabilities. This is not respectful to the person with a disability, and is an indication that the person without the disability is not allowing or does not believe that persons with disability can think or speak for themselves. The reasons this happens are many. Some possibilities include the following:

- ❖ The person without a disability believes that their opinion is correct and more important than that of the person with a disability;

- ❖ There is money involved and the person without a disability hopes to influence their ability to gain access to and control of the money;
- ❖ The person with a disability speaks slowly or needs more time to think about the response;
- ❖ The support person believes that they know what's best and that he or she is helping by telling the person with a disability what to say; and
- ❖ Multiple additional reasons which all reflect great disrespect for the ability of the person with a disability to speak for themselves and to think for themselves.

Indications that someone else is speaking for the person with a disability or that the person with a disability is not being treated respectfully follow:

- ❖ During meetings the support person writes questions and hands them to the person with a disability to read and ask;
- ❖ The support person sits very close and continually whispers in the person with a disability's ear, touching them a lot and telling them what to say;
- ❖ The person (who may or may not be a paid support person) requests and demands the opportunity to provide support even when it hasn't been requested;
- ❖ The person without the disability interrupts the person with a disability to "explain" what the person with a disability meant; and

- ❖ Many other examples which do not allow the person with a disability to speak for themselves. Can you think of any more examples?

What Should I Do Now to Provide Support?

An extreme reaction to the above information is to say, "What does this mean? Do you mean I can't talk with the people I support and that I can't give them advice?"

Of course that is not what it means. What it does mean is that as a person of trust in any support relationship there are serious responsibilities which we must all deal with and do our best to meet. Some of them include:

- ❖ Always respect the person with a disability's opportunity to speak and state their opinions;
- ❖ As a person identified to provide support part of our responsibilities include supporting decisions and teaching how to make informed choices - NOT how to make decisions for others;
- ❖ When providing advice present ALL of the options to the best of your ability (even the options you don't like should be presented); and
- ❖ If you don't agree with the choice made, it is natural to attempt to provide additional advice to change the person's mind, but you should be very careful if you do this. Unless it is a potential personal safety issue, you need to respect the decision. If it is a personal safety issue, then you need to provide more information and possibly bring others into the discussion.

Providing adequate support and advice to people with disabilities isn't easy. The more we listen, respect, and honestly present options for choice, the better our relationship should be. A good support person works to reduce the amount of support that they are required to provide and works to develop an equal relationship instead of an authority relationship. We have to learn to work closely with people with disabilities at the same time that we're supporting increased independence in all their activities. That's the support person's role in empowerment!

This is the eighth of a series of Information Memos all Chapters managing their own funds will be receiving. Each Information Memo will be about a specific topic and sent to the Chapter President with copies made for all Chapter members.

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