

We Are Never too Old for Self-Determination: Integrating the Gifts of Elders, Families, Communities, and Human Services

Self-determination is a powerful and historic term. It was perhaps best described by a former Milwaukee school teacher, Golda Meir, who as an elder and Prime Minister of Israel said, “We want only that which is given naturally to all people's of the world – to be masters of our own fate, in cooperation and friendship with others.”

In America, the world's foremost democracy, we are only beginning to realize how “... that which is given naturally to all peoples of the world” is given naturally to our elders when they encounter disability and frailty late in life. Across the country we are working to enable our elders who need support from our service systems to be masters of their own fate, in cooperation with others. Self-determination refers to the self-determination movement that has created the momentum for this change, and can be an integral part of the redesign of our service system that enables elders in need of support (and often their family caregivers) to be *full partners* in deciding how the funding spent on their behalf is used.

There are at least three essential areas of expertise needed to redesign a service system based upon self-determination:

1. *The expertise of the system* will allow:
 - a fair, equitable and adequate *individual allocation of funding* for each person;
 - *flexibility* in defining how that funding may be used, in order to support the *individuality and expertise* of each person and family in helping maintain and create a life that makes sense to them; and,
 - an opportunity for individuals and families to receive *unbiased assistance and support* in planning, designing, choosing, purchasing, and monitoring the quality of the supports and services they need.
2. *The expertise of individuals and families* about how they wish to live will allow people who receive services to have authority over the allocation of service funding based upon their needs. That authority will allow them to purchase support where they want to live and where they want to spend their day from existing providers; act as employers of care assistants; and even develop or purchase needed support from non-traditional or new providers on their own or in combination with other individuals or families.
3. *The expertise of communities* will be deliberately sought by both the system, and by the individuals and families it serves, maintaining connections that individuals and families bring, and thoughtfully adding life-enhancing relationships as appropriate.

With all these elements in place, we will plant the seeds for, in the words of Justin Dart, “... a revolution that will empower every 21st Century American to live his or her God given potential for *self-determination*, productivity, and quality of life,” regardless of age or disability.

