

November 16, 2011

To Our Friends in the Disability Community

Introducing the Guiding Principles for Partnerships with Unions and Emerging Worker Organizations When Individuals Direct Their Own Services and Supports

The Guiding Principles presented in the attached document address areas of extreme importance to the movements for disability and worker rights. They provide a framework for how disability advocates can work with labor unions and emerging worker organizations to advance people's ability to direct and control their own services and supports while also improving workers' wages, benefits, and working conditions.

These Guiding Principles recognize that the interests of the disability community and labor can at times conflict and that each group has historic grievances borne from lack of understanding or lack of respect. Each group may fear loss of control or losing ground because of the actions of the other. However, the need to work together is greater than at any time in our history, as devastating fiscal crises at the state and federal levels threaten our freedoms and the progress we have made.

Urgent Need for Broader Coalitions

The unprecedented cutbacks in Medicaid funding and the resultant cuts in eligibility and supports are unique in the history of the Medicaid program for individuals with disabilities. In Washington and across the country public supports for people with disabilities are under attack with a ferocity and depth never seen before. Longer-term, the viability of Medicaid is threatened by a future of tighter public funding, at the same time as the need for supports and services is growing rapidly.

Unprecedented problems call for unprecedented solutions. Our survival may depend on not going it alone or working against each other, but instead building political power together to protect and expand funding that allows individuals to direct their own supports and services.

Furthermore, as people with disabilities, of all ages, struggle to gain control of their services and their lives, the direct support worker is the means through which people can achieve full citizenship. Yet, a dispersed workforce combined with poor compensation and high turnover make it difficult for many to find and retain skilled workers. Thus, unresolved workforce issues and ongoing fiscal crises threaten progress, requiring new thinking and bold actions.

History of Struggle and Common Interests

People of all ages with a diverse range of disabilities and the workers who support them share the same human aspirations to pursue a life of meaning and happiness in their communities, with family and friends. Both groups share in the same struggle to lift themselves out of poverty and to support themselves and their families with economic security and well being. Both groups also share the same human and civil rights to advocate for their own interests and to join with others to pursue those interests.

People living with disabilities are struggling to emerge from historic discrimination, and to achieve basic human rights through making their own life decisions; such as where and with whom one lives, the role within his or her community, and sustaining and/or entering into long term relationships. The pervasive low expectations and devaluing of people with disabilities parallels the devaluing of the workforce that supports them, leading to a transient workforce with poor compensation and little or no voice in the policies that affect them. People with disabilities must be able to choose and supervise who supports them, but choice has less meaning if they are not able to locate or retain competent support.

Justice for All

We believe in justice for all. The fundamental rights of one group should not be achieved at the expense of another group. For too long, people who use long-term supports and services have been told where, how, and by whom they will receive the most intimate of care. For too long, people living with disabilities have suffered forced impoverishment, and their personal assistance workers have received unlivable wages and little access to affordable health care. People with disabilities and personal assistance workers are natural allies who have a mutual interest in defending and improving funding for services and supports directed by individuals and for improving labor standards to attract and retain skilled workers. Such collaboration requires:

- Recognition from both groups of the oppressive practices and the barriers to a meaningful quality of life with which each group struggles.
- A workforce committed to control, direction and freedom of choice for those who seek personal assistance services and supports.
- A commitment by the individuals who utilize personal assistance to support the struggle of their workers to organize and advocate to lift themselves out of financial poverty.

Join Us

We have the power, and we have the choice, to pursue our interests in ways where both groups win. These Guiding Principles present an historic opportunity to align our interests to make that possible.

You are invited to review the Guiding Principles and explore alliances in your states between disability and labor advocates that are based on these principles. We believe that we are stronger when we work together and support each other. And we believe there has never been a more important time for us to do that.

If you have questions about these Guiding Principles, if you want assistance in reaching out to others to explore an alliance, if you want facilitation during early discussions, then please let us know.

Yours in solidarity,

 Bob Kafka, -The ADAPT Community

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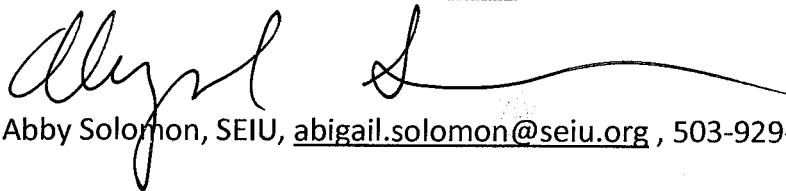
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