Disability Issues: Organizing Community Support
From the ILRU at Texas Institute for Rehabilitation

As a disabled person or as somebody close to a disabled person, you are aware of the problems that disabled people face daily. Living in a small town, you probably experience these problems to a greater extent than disabled people in large cities. There are few if any service agencies located in your community. There is little or no public transportation available to you. If you are in a wheelchair, there are few curb cuts or ramps in local business and public buildings. If you are blind, nobody uses braille. If you are deaf, there are no interpreters. Perhaps your local school representatives say that the school cannot accommodate students who have disabilities. In other words, you are segregated by the environment.

These problems are not only your own personal problems, but they are problems for today's and tomorrow's disabled people, too. Since they are the problems of a group, their final solutions are best sought by a group. If one person attempts to resolve these problems, he or she is often viewed as a person with a personal problem. When a group addresses these problems, however, the problems are viewed as "community issues", deserving of the attention and action of the community.

There is also support in numbers. Group members support each other, while "going it alone" can be frightening. In addition, solutions to the difficult problems facing disabled people require problem solvers with varying levels of skills, information, and contacts. Only a group can provide all that is needed.

**Recruiting your support**

The first step in developing a group is selecting an "issue"; that is, a problem that affects disabled people as a whole. An issue attracts many people with the same needs and interests. An example may be reducing physical barriers to all disabled people whether they have visual, hearing, or mobility impairments. The first issue you pick should be one that would be fairly easy to accomplish; people are more likely to try to tackle difficult problems after they have experienced some success. Research the facts about your issue by contacting such organizations as the Disability Rights and Education Defense Fund, 2212 Sixth St, Berkeley, CA 94710, United States, or your nearest Independent Living program (your state vocational rehabilitation agency should have this program address). Then organize your thoughts and opinions.

The next step is to plan your first meeting carefully. Some important points to remember are:

**Site and time selection**

* Be sure you select a site that is barrier free and a time which is convenient to most people. If you have blind or deaf participants, try to make arrangements for readers and interpreters.
* Invite people with different disabilities - Don't work against each other.

**Advertise**

* Try to let as many people as possible know about the issue and the meeting. This can be done through word-of-mouth, church bulletins, newsletters, community organizations, clubs, hospitals, community calendars, or the local paper and radio stations.

**The meeting's agenda**

* Allow an opportunity for participants to respond to your opinions on the issue, to feel like active members of the discussion. Allow time for the group to decide on the time, place, and agenda of the next meeting.

**Organize your group early**

It is important that your group make some decisions on how it is going to operate as soon as possible. Obviously, your first meeting or two will be devoted to clarifying your issue to all members of the group, gathering the members' opinions, and getting members to commit themselves to resolving the issue. Once you have the understanding and commitment, it is time to make all the various members into a unified, thinking, working group.

The members need to elect officers or leaders of the group. Every group needs leaders to ensure that all members are working together, to keep members informed of each other's activities, as well as to speak on behalf of the group when it is time to act. Since the group is working on disability issues, it is important that disabled people are seen in roles of leadership in your group.
Finally, the group needs to decide on its goals. What is the final result the group wants from its efforts? Having that goal, the group can decide on the steps needed to reach that goal and the members who will work on each step. This kind of planning is sometimes difficult for a group to begin. You may want to ask somebody from an established organization to help with this initial planning. But remember, the final goal and plan to reach that goal must be what the group as a whole wants. Only then will all the members dedicate their time and effort to resolving the issue.

**Taking action**

Once the group knows what it wants, it is time to take the agreed-upon steps to reach the goal. It is time to make the community aware of the group's issue and the solutions. Whether the appropriate place to voice your issue is at a public hearing or at a meeting with community leaders, there are two points to remember:

* Be prepared-Before you go to your public hearing, make sure the whole group agrees on the major points it is going to make. Do not contradict each other. However, the group should not look like a copy of its leader. Each member should prepare various examples of the group's points.
* Go public-Before the hearing or meeting, each member of the group should tell as many people as possible of the group's issue, solutions, and upcoming meeting. Get them to support you, if possible, by sending letters of support or other obvious means such as signing petitions. If possible, contact the media-write a letter to the local paper, see if you can talk about the issue on the radio. Make your issue a community issue.

Finally, after each step is taken, the group should discuss its results. What did we accomplish, if anything? What should we have done differently? What should we do next?

**In conclusion**

There are many existing rights and services for disabled people that you may not know about. Moreover, just because you learn about them does not mean they will automatically protect and serve you. These rights and services must be insisted upon by the people they are supposed to benefit or they may never be practiced. An organized group of committed people is the best avenue to attain and ensure the rights of disabled people. When disabled people become active in the community, it benefits the entire community. So, help yourself. Help the community. Get organized.