

# **Disability and Transition**

A white paper written by youth leaders from the Youth Leadership Development Institute

2011

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## **Youth Leadership Development Institute**

### Introduction to the Youth Leadership Development Institute (YLDI):

The Youth Leadership Development Institute was established through support from the Maternal and Child Health Bureau's State Implementation Grant. This Institute worked to promote the development of advocacy and leadership skills in youth with disabilities. The developers of the curriculum believed in the importance of creating youth lead and youth focused programs, in order to develop a network of peer mentors. Youth who attended these events were between the ages of 16-28, had a disclosed disability, and were identified as emerging leaders.

### Purpose of the YLDI:

The goal of the YLDI is to provide a safe, accepting environment to cultivate the growth of self-acceptance, confidence, and self-advocacy skills. Youth leaving the YLDI program should feel more accepting of themselves with a disability, more confident in their abilities and choices, and a connection to the other youth attending the YLDI, as well as to the disability community as a whole.

## **Youth Leadership Development Institute White Papers**

### Introduction to the White Papers

In recognition of the finite time that this group of youth leaders had together, the members of the YLDI decided that they wanted to leave a legacy of the work that they had done together. They recognized the devastating outcomes that can be a result of the unaddressed barriers that youth with disabilities commonly face. In an effort to address these issues, the youth decided to develop a set of twelve white papers, which identify the discrimination and barriers that youth endure.

### Development of the White Papers

In November of 2009, the first YLDI was held in Cranberry Pennsylvania, approximately twenty youth with disabilities attended this event from that group eight youth were selected to take on leadership positions for future YLDI events. Throughout the following two years three additional YLDI trainings were held and from those three twelve additional leaders were chosen to assist in creating training materials, leading sessions, speaking to officials about youth issues, and creating white papers. In the last year of the program these twenty leaders attended advanced leadership institutes where they assisted in developing the twelve white papers.

During this two-year endeavor, the twenty leaders (ages 16-29) met on four different occasions to identify the top issues faced by youth, define source of the problems, and create recommendations. These four weekend meetings produced the foundation of each of these documents. The twelve white papers developed include:

- Employment
- Education
- Self-Advocacy
- Healthcare
- Independent Living
- Youth Leadership Development
- Social Relationships
- Disability Stigma
- Transition
- Transportation
- Top Issues: Summary of Concerns

Youth then volunteered to further develop these documents into policy papers. Each paper was then edited by the other leaders. These papers are to be used to identify the barriers faced by youth and to recognize the importance of the youth voice in developing solutions.

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## Disability and Transition

Transition into adult life can be difficult for any individual, with or without a disability. Unfortunately, individuals rarely realize the preparation required to successfully achieve transition. Transition involves education, healthcare, support services, service eligibility, independent living, and law. Entitlement changes into eligibility so that people with disabilities no longer have a right to a service; rather they have a right to be eligible to apply for the service. Additionally, eligibility requirements often change as an individual becomes an adult. The complete transition of services and supports can cause further barriers in the success of young adults with disabilities.

Individuals with disabilities live in an environment of low expectations. The supports are therefore not established to encourage them to grow into successful adults; pursuing higher education, competitive employment, marriage, or home ownership. Since there are limited expectation for people with disabilities to succeed in these areas of the American life, there are few supports for people who exceed the expectations. Unfortunately, the services that are available force individuals into accepting a lower quality of life in order to receive necessary supports. It is falsely assumed that if an individual is able to achieve a well-paid, competitive employment position, is married, or owns a home, that he or she is not "disabled enough" to receive supports. This assumes a false perception of the capabilities and needs of people with disabilities, denying their individuality and potential to become included contributing citizens.

### Services After Graduation-

#### PROBLEM

Prior to high school graduation, students with disabilities are entitled to a multitude of academic and personal support services, supporting them in their personal achievement. Although the accommodations may vary according to the school, district, Intermediate Unit, teachers, and individual circumstances, all students with diagnosed disabilities have a right to receive the services necessary to receive an appropriate education in the least restrictive environment. These services may involve extended test taking time, accessible transportation to and from school, a scribe, wraparound services, therapies, and assistive technology.

Although at the age of fourteen, in Pennsylvania, students with Individualized Education Programs are required to have a transition plan,

many of a student's transition needs may not be addressed, preventing the student from being fully prepared for life after high school.

## RESOLUTION

*Transition Preparation Class-* When transitioning from grade school to high school, college, or independent living youth are often thrust into the process without any formal training or preparation. This can prevent the youth from receiving necessary accommodations, which could lead the youth to not reaching their full potential. In order to avert this, schools should offer final year transition classes, which include the students' rights as a transitioning youth and available services. All youth, regardless of the provision of special education services should have the opportunity to receive transition training. This training could be provided through a senior level high school course which teaches basic personal finances, safety, applying for and finding services, and other independent living skills.

## IDEA to ADA

### PROBLEM

After high school, the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act is no longer applicable to youth with disabilities, eliminating entitlement services. In addition to the cessation of services provided by the school system, many other services may change during this time period, creating further transition barriers.

### RESOLUTION

*Service transition in the IEP-* In the final versions of the IEP, prior to graduating, students should be provided with information on adult services, with the inclusion of goals to apply for these services. The transition councils should take an active role in recognizing, suggesting, and assisting students in finding adult services that can assume the role of service providers at transition.

## Over Protection

## PROBLEM

All individuals regardless of disability should have the right to risk. Respecting one's dignity infers respecting one's humanity, including that of being imperfect. The most valuable life lessons are often learned from mistakes; unfortunately these lessons cannot be learned if a person is overprotected. All individuals should have the right to make mistakes and have access to support to recover from them. This requires the development of a safe environment where freedom and individuality is encouraged. Individuals should be able to make decisions about their life and future without the forced control of other individuals.

## RESOLUTION

*Supportive independence-* Youth independence is an integral part of life and must be supported by all involved, including parents, professionals, and the youth. In order to provide a smooth transition from dependent living to independent living education must be provided to parents to encourage supportive independence of the youth. This can be achieved by seeking the help of a disability liaison who could act as an intermediary conflict resolution advisor to parents of youth who are transitioning. This advisor would need to understand available support services and providers that will educate youth about common mistakes that could be made during transition. This advisor should also be able to advocate for the needs of the youth in their pursuit of a successful and independent adult life.

## Self-Advocacy

### PROBLEM

During high school, most students with disabilities are provided support services without a need to be able to personally advocate for their needs. Although this is a tremendous support to these students in elementary and high school, many students leave the school system without understanding their disability, accommodations, and advocacy skills. Unfortunately, after graduation individuals are expected to be able to advocate for their needs. Higher education, employment, and independent living require self-advocacy skills, which are often neglected in the school setting. Self-advocacy should start at an early age for youth

with disabilities. Often a youth will attend an IEP meeting with no understanding of the proceedings, while their parents, teachers, and administrative staff discuss their future and what accommodations they require to succeed. It is great that these youth are receiving accommodations; however, the youth need to develop the skill of advocating for their needs

#### RESOLUTION:

*Self-advocacy curriculum-* The skill of self-advocacy must be taught at a young age, through the development of a school based curriculum. This curriculum would present the youth with various issues or problems often faced and would teach them how to respond to these situations. By providing a controlled environment the youth can feel comfortable with making mistakes and in turn learn from them.

In the past there have limited opportunities for youth to voice their opinions and express their needs. By increasing these opportunities youth will become more experienced and prepared for when they must to advocate for their needs. Given opportunities to advocate such as; youth groups, leadership development institutes, IEP meetings, and having key roles on various boards can provide the youth with the tools necessary to advocate for themselves.

### Finding Accessible Schools

#### PROBLEM

Although many universities and colleges have made tremendous strides in improving physical accessibility to the campuses and classes, there remains a tremendous barrier for individual students with disabilities in pursuing and succeeding in higher education. For individuals with invisible disabilities there is often a lack of preparation and availability of services to adequately provide accommodations.

#### RESOLUTION

*Promoting awareness of disability services-* When a youth with an invisible disability tours, applies, and gets accepted to a college or university the last thing the youth thinks about is accommodations. Without proper transition training or experience, this process can become a daunting task.

Often, by the time a student realizes they need learning accommodations it is too late. These students may require tutoring, counseling, one-on-one support, and independent living services. Access for all students must be encouraged beyond ramps, and must be presented to all students at the beginning of the year or during new student orientation. Often during orientation students will attend an activity fair displaying various clubs, fraternities, and sporting teams, rarely is there a table for disability services or accommodations. By providing new students with an opportunity to educate themselves about the services and accommodations available he or she may be able to increase their chances to succeed.

### Information about Services

#### PROBLEM

The silos of services have prevented many individuals with disabilities from receiving necessary supports. Schools, transition coordinators, and other professionals are often uninformed about the range of services available and their eligibility requirements. Without this information, young adults may be prevented from achieving their maximum potential.

#### RESOLUTION

*Collaboration-* Often students and youth seek a single professional for advice on services in hopes of receiving help in finding all available services. Unfortunately, there is little collaboration between schools, coordinators, counselors, and service providers, preventing professionals from knowing what is available or the guidelines for receiving these services. By establishing collaboration between service providers and professionals, youth will have a greater access to the services available and will know the requirements necessary for receiving services.