



N Y L N

National Youth Leadership Network

**FUTURE DIRECTIONS AGENDA
FOR YOUTH WITH DISABILITIES**

2003



**Developed by National Youth Leadership Network,
Youth Leadership Policy Committee**

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2003 FUTURE DIRECTIONS AGENDA FOR YOUTH WITH DISABILITIES

In order to make real progress, young people with disabilities must be involved in shaping the policies and services that affect them. The National Youth Leadership Network (NYLN) is a voice for young people with disabilities across the United States and its territories. We work to promote the next generation of leaders with disabilities, while developing the following priorities for improving policies and services for these youth. We encourage communication among young people and the policymakers and professionals who are focusing on these priorities.

2003 Priorities: Educate and Prepare Youth Through Informed Choice

Concerns and Needed Actions:

Many young people with disabilities have limited understanding of their accommodation needs. They are also unaware of the laws that affect them, the rights they have, and the responsibilities accompanying these rights. Youth are often unprepared to participate in educational and transition planning as well as health care decision-making. Nor do they know how to access the resources available to them. Traditionally, youth with disabilities also have had very little chance to participate in the leadership activities that enable them to contribute to their communities and to shape the policies and services affecting them.

Beginning as early as elementary school, young people with disabilities must be educated with an understanding of disability accommodations, self-advocacy, benefits planning, laws that affect them—including the ADA,

IDEA, Section 504, and Social Security—and the limitations of, and benefits to, using public supports.

Simultaneously, we must reform the educational planning process to increase opportunities for student self-advocacy and involvement. Youth can do this by actively participating in their educational and transition planning. In order to better support and contribute to the development of youth with disabilities, all teachers (including general education teachers) should be encouraged to be involved in education planning meetings. We must increase opportunities for youth with disabilities to graduate with a diploma, while identifying creative and individualized ways to earn school credits and develop alternative methods to assess student achievement. Finally, we must increase opportunities for young people with disabilities to assume leadership roles.

Recommendations:

- ◆ Videos, CD-ROMS, DVD's, resource books, and other instructional technology must be available to educate all youth concerning these issues. This information must be provided in understandable, informal language.
- ◆ Educate families of youth with disabilities about the importance of promoting the youth to become informed decision-makers.
- ◆ Give youth a real voice in policymaking, including meaningful positions on government boards and other policymaking groups.
- ◆ Support youth leadership conferences and other activities that build young people's skills and encourage information sharing. Ensure cultural diversity as well as disability diversity to promote a wider understanding of common issues.
- ◆ Modify all teacher certification requirements to include courses on disability laws and issues—such as the ADA, IDEA, and transition planning.

Increase Employment Opportunities

Concerns and Needed Actions:

Approximately 60% of youth with disabilities are not employed after high school, and those who are employed are often in entry-level positions with little opportunity for advancement. We must increase opportunities for youth with disabilities to establish careers that match their interests and provide a beneficial, goal-oriented future.

Disincentives to employment keep many youth with disabilities from entering the working world. This should be changed so that youth with disabilities will have the same employment opportunities as their peers, without it affecting their SSI benefits, for example. We must work to remove the stigma that youth with disabilities are to be treated differently in terms of their ability to advocate for themselves, or to advance in a chosen field.

Recommendations:

- ◆ New initiatives are needed that increase the opportunities for internships, job-shadowing, and employment in chosen careers for young people with disabilities.
- ◆ Youth and young adults must be educated about, and connected to, existing career development programs.
- ◆ Agency leaders and legislators should visit places where people with disabilities obtain services. This includes places such as sheltered workshops, nursing homes, special education classrooms, colleges, and segregated housing developments. They should talk to people with disabilities about their experiences in these places and ask the people where they want to learn, work, and live. Agency leaders and legislators should do this so they understand the specific barriers that people with disabilities face due to misguided and seemingly conflicting policies. This step will also promote the importance and

benefits of de-institutionalization so officials will understand why youth need to be in their own homes rather than nursing homes.

- ◆ Eligibility for SSI/SSDI must be redefined so it is not based on income or whether a person can work.
- ◆ A program is needed in the Social Security Administration that supports youth who are transitioning from high school to work or college.
- ◆ Professionals should be trained to support all youth with disabilities in acquiring a meaningful career of their choice, rather than depending on public support programs.

Promote Mentorship

Concerns and Needed Actions:

Many youth with disabilities lack role models to share common experiences, to give advice, and to help empower them to fulfill their goals. We must develop and implement policies and programs that make mentors available for future generations.

We call for mentors with disabilities from all fields to mentor youth with disabilities. We also call for the participation of youth with disabilities in general mentorship experiences. Initiatives are needed that increase opportunities for peer mentoring.

Recommendations:

- ◆ Make current mentorship programs more inclusive of youth with disabilities.
- ◆ Support youth with disability organizations that work to match and foster peer mentoring among youth with disabilities.
- ◆ Support development of a "roadmap" to mentorship. This roadmap will provide successful mentoring strategies, including how to find a

mentor and how to develop a consistent, mutually beneficial relationship.

- ◆ Promote and collaborate with already existing programs such as Disability Mentoring Day.

Establish Youth Information Centers

Concerns and Needed Actions:

Parent Training and Information Centers have clearly demonstrated the benefits of enabling parents of youth with disabilities to share their wisdom and support with one another. Unfortunately, youth with disabilities do not have such a resource for information sharing and support. As a result of this missing resource, many youth with disabilities are isolated. Youth would benefit from the encouragement and support that comes from sharing with youth who have common experiences. We envision Youth Information Centers as places where young people get the information and support necessary to build a successful life.

We call on policy makers to establish youth-led Youth Information Centers that would provide a variety of services in each state. These resources should include, but not be limited to, education and technical assistance, mentorship, leadership development, youth speaker bureaus, and mediation. These centers could also gather information from youth about issues affecting them. Youth Information Centers would promote youth participation in the workforce and the development of a livelihood outside of social services.

Recommendations:

- ◆ Develop programs and policies that establish and support Youth Information Centers for youth and young adults with disabilities.

- ◆ Fully fund the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA), helping to ensure that Youth Information Centers will become a reality and will thrive.
- ◆ Work in collaboration with Parent Training and Information Centers, as well as Centers for Independent Living to make Youth Information Centers a viable resource for young adults with disabilities.

Promote Disability Culture and Diversity

Concerns and Needed Actions:

Young people with disabilities often feel isolated and are unaware of disability history and the cultural perspectives of the disability community. Disability culture and/or issues must become a part of the curriculum of general education, while promoting awareness and sensitivity about the Disability Rights Movement. This can be accomplished by relating it to examples such as Black History Month.

We must increase opportunities for youth with disabilities to learn about disability history and to become involved in the disability community. A community of youth with disabilities must be fostered by building coalitions among disability groups with either a youth emphasis or a strong interest in youth issues. This cross-disability solidarity is important for the development of youth with disabilities, as it will provide them pride in themselves as well as a group with which they can directly identify.

In addition, partnerships must be encouraged among disability and other minority groups and coalitions. Disabilities do not discriminate based on race or culture. All groups in our society must examine themselves and provide sensitivity training to promote a greater understanding of the unique needs of people with disabilities.

Increased visibility of successful members from all ethnic and cultural groups is needed. These figures can provide invaluable motivation and relief for youth with disabilities who may not be aware that there are others with similar backgrounds and experiences who have become successful.

Throughout this process, increased access to assistive technology and interpreters will be essential for groups to work together in a collaborative and widespread effort.

Recommendations:

- ◆ Increase funding for assistive technology and interpreters.
- ◆ Focus services and improved outcomes in low income, minority, and rural communities.
- ◆ Develop curricula including disability history and/or culture in representation of the Disability Rights Movement.
- ◆ Promote the visibility of successful people who have disabilities from all ethnic and cultural groups.

Conduct a National Media Campaign

Concerns and Needed Actions:

Young people with disabilities are often negatively portrayed by the media as helpless, dependent, or maladjusted. The few positive portrayals show individuals with disabilities as saints, or exceptional people, who must be supernatural to overcome their disability and become successful. This extreme portrayal of people with disabilities being either superhuman or invalid needs to be changed.

A national media campaign; using public service announcements, infomercials, and famous entertainers and sports stars with and without disabilities, is needed to educate the public about disabilities. Consultants from the disability community should provide the media with accurate

information about People First Language and how to move beyond traditional stereotypes in the way people with disabilities are portrayed. The media should begin to be held accountable for their portrayals as well as becoming active players in a movement to change the often biased view of the public.

"Everyone can work and should work" is a key message we must communicate through the media to promote the inclusion of people with disabilities in the work force. More ideas, like this, can be worked on collaboratively between youth with disabilities and the press.

Recommendations:

- ◆ Through the media, show the benefits to society of IDEA, ADA, Section 504 and other laws focusing on the rights of people with disabilities.
- ◆ Work to correct the melodramatic portrayal of individuals with disabilities within the media.
- ◆ Use the media to increase public awareness of important issues such as the Olmstead decision, judicial appointments, the New Freedom Initiative, and Ticket to Work.