

# NYLN

National Youth Leadership Network

## 2001 POLICY AGENDA FOR YOUTH WITH DISABILITIES

Despite modest gains, youth with disabilities face many barriers to becoming fully contributing members of their communities. To make real progress, young people with disabilities must be more involved in shaping policies and services that affect them. The National Youth Leadership Network (NYLN) is a voice for young people with disabilities across the United States, promoting the next generation of leaders. We have developed this agenda to improve policies and services for youth with disabilities; and to encourage communication among young people and policymakers.

### Youth Leadership

- ◆ 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 peoples' skills and encourage information sharing. Make sure that young people from diverse cultures, with different disabilities and languages, are involved in youth leadership.

### Employment

- ◆ Redefine eligibility for SSI/SSDI so it is not based on whether a person can work or his or her income.
- ◆ Provide more opportunities for youth to get work experience without it affecting their SSI benefits.
- ◆ Create a program in the Social Security Administration that supports youth who are moving from high school to work or college.

### Professional Training

- ◆ Modify all teacher certification requirements to include courses on disability laws and issues, such as the ADA, IDEA, and transition planning for students in special education.
- ◆ Train professionals to support all youth in moving to meaningful careers of their choice, rather than depending on public support programs.

## **Education of Youth and Families**

- ◆ Require that young people in high school receive training on policies that affect them, including the ADA, IDEA, Section 504, and Social Security. Educate high school students about their rights and responsibilities, including the importance of voting.
- ◆ Increase opportunities for youth with disabilities to graduate with a diploma, including identifying creative ways to earn school credits and developing alternatives to assess student achievement.
- ◆ Provide youth with training on how to work with systems and use supports, such as One-Stop Centers, Vocational Rehabilitation, SSI, Medicaid, Work Incentives, and personal assistance services. Explain the benefits and limits of using public supports. Give information in understandable, informal language.
- ◆ Educate families about the importance of children and youth learning to take care of themselves and directing their lives as much as possible.

## **Disability and Health Services**

- ◆ Agency leaders and legislators should visit places where people with disabilities get services, including sheltered workshops, nursing homes, special education classrooms, and segregated housing developments. They should talk to people with disabilities about their experiences in these places and where they want to learn, work, and live.
- ◆ Focus services and improved outcomes in low income, minority, and rural communities.
- ◆ Remove pre-existing condition exclusions from health insurance plans.
- ◆ Increase funding for assistive technology and interpreters.

## **Media**

- ◆ Use radio, television, and the Internet to communicate with youth and their families.
- ◆ Educate the public about the good things that young people do and communicate the message, "Everyone can work and should work."

## **Enforcement**

- ◆ Fully fund the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA).
- ◆ Enforce IDEA, ADA, Section 504 and other laws that protect the rights of people with disabilities.

## **2002 Priorities**

The focus of the 2002 National Youth Leadership Conference is on employment and career development. Approximately 60% of young people with disabilities are not employed after high school. In response to this problem, the National Youth Leadership Network has identified three major priorities.

### **Mentorship**

Many youth with disabilities lack role models to share common experiences, give advice and help empower them to fulfill their career goals. Policies are needed that promote mentorship for the next generation. We call for mentorship programs that reach out to involve mentors with disabilities from all fields as well as to include youth with disabilities in mainstream mentorship experiences. Initiatives are needed that encourage youth mentoring youth, and that match young people with disabilities to other people with disabilities who have jobs in their career interest areas. We must support the development of “a road map to mentorship” that provides successful mentoring strategies, such as how to find a mentor and how to develop a consistent and mutually beneficial relationship.

### **Employment Opportunities**

Most people with disabilities are unemployed or they have low pay, low status jobs with little chance for advancement. We must increase opportunities for youth with disabilities to establish careers that match their interests and provide a real future. Youth must be educated about and connected to existing career development programs. New initiatives are needed that increase internships, job shadowing, and employment opportunities for young people with disabilities, including more opportunities in government where youth also can learn about how policy is crafted.

### **Youth Information Centers**

Whereas Parent Information Centers enable parents of children with disabilities to share their wisdom and support with other parents, we envision Youth Information Centers where young people can learn and get assistance from other young people who have similar experiences. We call on policy makers to establish Youth Information Centers in each state that are led by young people and provide education and technical assistance, mentorship, leadership development, youth speaker bureaus, and mediation, as well as gathering information from youth about issues that affect them. We believe that Youth Information Centers will promote youth participation in the workforce and development of a livelihood outside of social services.

**For additional information about the  
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