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Independent Living Centers: A “Value Added” Community Resource for Students in Transition - By Mike Flaherty

Extensive historical research indicates that students with disabilities, particularly those with learning disabilities, are more likely to drop out of school and become marginally employed than their non-disabled counterparts. Current studies reveal that youth in school settings are especially vulnerable and require good career guidance well before graduation and the subsequent loss of in-school supports. Independent Living Centers (ILCs) can teach skills that will help students achieve success both during their middle and high school years and beyond. ILCs across the nation actively embrace a focus on youth with disabilities. Their “outside-the-box” initiatives recognize youth self-advocacy as the critical “change-element” for students with disabilities seeking full and active community inclusion. This effort is particularly important in the “in-school” transition programs seeking to connect young students with employment fitting their interests and desires.

What is an Independent Living Center?

Independent Living Centers are typically non-residential, private, non-profit, consumer-controlled, community-based organizations providing services and advocacy by and for persons with all types of disabilities. Their goal is to assist individuals with disabilities to achieve their maximum potential within their families and communities.

Also, Independent Living Centers serve as a strong advocacy voice on a wide range of national, state, and local issues. They work to assure physical and programmatic access to housing, employment, transportation, communities, recreational facilities, and health and social services. These are just a few of the services offered:

- ⇒ Training on topics such as self-understanding, community access/resources, and integration into community living.
- ⇒ Person-centered workshops on a wide variety of topics related to mentoring and self-esteem.

- ⇒ Advocacy in terms of dealing with the “system,” specifically the bureaucratic red tape of government programs and regulations, such as Medicaid, Social Security, service providers, the Americans with Disabilities Act, benefits planning, etc.
- ⇒ Peer Support, either through person-to-person or a variety of group-themed activities. Peer advocacy is a popular method of connecting persons with disabilities with mentors, providing focused assistance on a wide variety of personal areas of both challenge and opportunity.

Over 500 Independent Living Centers located across the country are actively seeking out “customers” with disabilities. In 2002, ILCs made it their primary objective to seek out and support youth, particularly students making the leap from school settings and educational supports to work/community living. ILCs recognize the great value of collaborating with schools to provide advocacy education outreach. The schools, in turn, receive a value-added bonus...the opportunity to partner with the IL, in addition to the advocacy skills acquired by individual students.

Text Box Quote

“Transition is the passage from one stage of development to another. For young adults who have learning disabilities, this transition stage is critical to the rest of their lives. In this context, transition refers to the passage of the learning disabled youth from high school into the adult world of work and/or post-secondary education and that transition requires preparation. Of course, these students will work with a career counselor, but they will not have all the same goals and aspirations. The career counselor must then try to guide them and help them prepare for the different paths they may take. The professional must also be able to think “outside the box” and direct them toward a combination of routes to their goals” (J. Cobb, Career Trainer Journal, 2007).

Summit Independent Living Center staff in Missoula, Montana, has developed and continues to refine an effective “self-advocacy tool” for youth in the western counties of the state. Summit staff seeks to engage school-aged youth with disabilities through their BALLS (Building Advocacy and Learning Leadership Skills) initiative. BALLS is a curriculum designed to educate youth to engage in self-advocacy, utilizing it as a means to promote their interests, particularly as they transition from school to community working/living environments. It is understood students given the opportunity to acquire and hone self-advocacy skills are more likely to succeed when they make choices representing their best interests rather than simply taking what is offered from another’s perspective.

Currently, Hellgate High School in Missoula is slated to host the BALLS program as part of its transition focus. This series begins in February and runs through April. Big Sky High School will also include the BALLS program as part of its transition curriculum this spring and it is anticipated that Sentinel High School will include the program in its transition curriculum once timelines for the series are established. The program will be continually marketed to both middle schools as well as high schools in the Summit catchments area as time and funding permits. It should also be noted that the BALLS program continues to evolve, refining and defining its role and focus per the expressed desires of students.

Teaching self-advocacy skills is a valuable “outside-the-box” tool for schools interested in supporting students in transition. Whether schools utilize BALLS or substitute a similar program in their curriculum, it is both a process and a technique that encourages students

to take an assertive first-person role in their vocational development. Although BALLS is a very recent addition to the youth advocacy curricula, it has received praise from both youth participants as well as professionals in school settings.

Summit's approach could be summed up as, "Youth finding their voice as self advocates." This "voice," the product of a student's involvement in BALLS, becomes their statement of full range participation in school transition activities. A most telling tenet of self-advocacy is that the person's voice is heard and acknowledged both in the initial as well as in the ongoing process of the IEP (Individualized Education Program). Self-advocacy as promoted by Summit staff is described by the phrase, "We didn't invent self-advocacy; we simply made it more available and accessible to youth!"

Summit Independent Living Center, its staff, and the BALLS program is a great example of how community resources can support what students need to find success in employment and community living. The schools, along with the participating students, benefit from a resource developed BY youth FOR youth! Relationships developed with the local Independent Living Center can foster valuable community links that create more opportunities for students in transition. Students realize an immediate benefit from acquired self-advocacy skills in the initial (and ongoing) IEP process. And the connections students make with the ILC create a resource and support network on which they can rely as they move from school settings to adult relationships in the community.

Text Box Quote

*The process of transition planning should help the student become an independent and **self-affirming** adult. With this process the young adult should be able **to act as a self-advocate and understand the strengths as well as the challenges he or she possesses** (J. Cobb, Career Trainer Journal, 2007).*

Schools, parents, guardians, students, and other community support systems have at their disposal a ready resource for community links through their local Independent Living Centers. To locate the nearest ILC, visit this Web site:

<http://www.ilusa.com/links/ilcenters.htm>. ILCs are mobilized and ready to partner with these new young customers.

Benefits of schools collaborating with ILCs:

- Connecting to established IL community programs/disability services
- Access to networking with IL referrals to employment, housing, transportation and community recreation
- Utilizing IL youth-focused self-advocacy initiatives offered in-house and in schools
- Partnering opportunities with students, improving their chances of more "seamless" inclusion into adult

References:

<http://www.careertrainer.com> (Career Trainer On-line)

<http://www.ilusa.com/links/ilcenters.htm> (Independent Living Centers/USA)

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Emerging Leader Perspective: Independent Living and an Emerging Generation

By Michael Beers, Travis Hoffman and Darren Larson, in collaboration with Jude Monson, and Mike Mayer

Independent Living (IL) is a philosophy and a way of looking at disability and society and how the two interrelate. In practice, IL is people with disabilities working towards self-determination, self-respect, and equal opportunities for all people with disabilities. Independent Living Centers (ILCs) are non-residential advocacy and resource centers which were established by the Rehabilitation Act and are dispersed throughout the United States. ILCs work to promote the full inclusion and integration of persons with disabilities in their local communities by focusing on what are known as core IL services when providing direct services. Those services are: information and referral, peer advocacy, independent living skills training, self-advocacy, and systems advocacy as needed in a one-to-one or group process.

Summit Independent Living Center, Inc. in Missoula, Montana, which serves Western Montana, is one such Independent Living Center in the United States. Summit's mission is to promote community awareness, equal access, and the independence of people with disabilities through advocacy, education, and the advancement of civil rights.

Over Summit's 26 years of providing services, we have experienced and come to understand how to merge IL philosophy with the needs of students with disabilities. Our goal is to meet with more students so that their transition into adulthood can be more informative as they become more pro-active both as youth and adults.

The phase of one's life as they pass from adolescence into adulthood is a challenging time for every one of us but these years of transition can be even tougher for youth and young adults with disabilities. Transition for youth with disabilities is a hot and seemingly quite complex topic these days among educators, parents, professionals, and disability rights/independent living organizations.

Now all of these people have a vested interest in ensuring a smooth and successful transition into adulthood for youth with disabilities, but can any of these people truly speak for the youth? All too often there is that one voice missing. The most important voice. The voice of the youth themselves.

Do they feel intimidated taking charge and making their wishes known in front of so many figures of seniority? Are they afraid to let their voices be heard because for so long, they've been told what they are and are not capable of based on a lesser standard imposed on them by others who assume they are not capable of achieving a higher standard and therefore, should not even attempt it?

The truth is, youth with disabilities often get lost or left behind in the transition process because of a multitude of reasons including bureaucracy, complexity of services, always being told what they are capable of and what they should do based on those perceptions, their habit of putting things off until tomorrow what should be dealt with today, or other unforeseeable barriers.

Many activities have been taken on throughout the years to improve transition outcomes for these youth. It hasn't been until recently, however, that these efforts have been focused on the youth themselves. We've always lived in a "do good" society where if we do something "good" for somebody and get them through the system, then we have succeeded. But then what? Sure, WE got them through the system but it was all done for them and that brings to light one major problem. That along the way the youth themselves never learned the skills they will need throughout their lifetimes in order to be effective self-advocates or to be able to negotiate the often complex and highly intimidating systems that many of them will encounter as they try to seek employment, further their education, or even obtain health care once out on their own. It has finally been realized that an overarching solution to improving transition outcomes for youth with disabilities above and beyond successfully completing high school is to empower the youth themselves so that they are better able to negotiate the complex and frustrating world of their own transition and today, many federal, state, and private agencies and organizations are spending vast resources to do just that.

Some of the national efforts are programs and organizations such as the National Youth Leadership Network (NYLN), Kids As Self-Advocates (KASA), state Youth Leadership Forums (YLFs), Youth Information Centers (YICs), and local independent living centers (ILCs). They work to empower youth with disabilities by implementing different strategies and/or programs that reach out to youth in many different ways including teleconferences, summer camps, written briefs, websites, policy agendas, and this list goes on.

Realizing how great all of these youth resources that have been developed through-out the years by many different entities are, but also understanding how just how vast and overwhelming all of it can be, youth leaders at Summit have compiled, using bits and pieces of various other youth trainings, a curriculum for youth with disabilities entitled "Building Advocacy and Learning Leadership Skills" or "BALLS." The BALLS curriculum is a 7- to 8-week one-hour series or a full one-day training for students with all types of disabilities who are entering or are already in the transition process. It covers a variety of topics including:

- Disability History and Culture
- Accepting Your Own Disability
- Communication/Self Advocacy
- Leadership
- Values and Goals
- Relationships and Sexuality (optional)

We chose the name BALLS for this training because it is our belief that while leadership and advocacy skills can be taught from a book, it takes more than a general knowledge of the laws, and these skills, to be able to really learn and build those skills in order to become an effective self-advocate. BALLS brings out a little bit of abrasiveness in the process of building the self-confidence that is required for students to truly become effective self-advocates and to finally start taking on leadership roles both within their own lives and

among their peers. BALLS does this by engaging students in a fun, hands-on curriculum that challenges the expectations that they and others have placed on them. It gives students with disabilities the tools, resources, and mindset that they need in order to be able to stand up for themselves and their needs as well as to guide them through their transition from high school into adult life.

Programs such as these work to give youth their own voices by teaching them about their own rights and responsibilities and giving them the tools they need to become effective self-advocates, mentoring them in how to develop their communication skills and speak up about their own goals based on their own values and ambitions, and helping them realize their own leadership potential. Youth are empowered by hearing and discussing disability history and culture, which lets them know that they are not alone in this struggle.

So we challenge you...youth, teacher, and professional alike, to empower youth with disabilities by giving them their own voice in the process that is their life by encouraging and challenging them to accept ownership in their own responsibilities and pride of their own accomplishments. Every student's situation is different but if every student feels empowered and has a person who is invested in their future alongside of them, then we can all achieve.

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Transition TIP

We all want to know that we are valued in our community, that we belong. In order to achieve this sense of belonging, we need to establish connections and relationships with those around us. Here are some ways that you (or your daughter or son) can begin building those connections:

- ⇨ Get involved in extracurricular activities at your school (band, orchestra, choir, sports, drama, student council, Future Farmers of America...)
- ⇨ Join clubs in your community (4-H, Scouts, scrapbooking, bowling, CB radio...)
- ⇨ Sign up for classes outside the school day (karate, foreign language, quilting, cooking...)
- ⇨ Stay active in your faith community if you have one (choir, youth groups, religious study groups...)

- ⇒ Volunteer (Humane Society, library, political campaign, community gardens, food bank, nursing home, mentoring other students...)
- ⇒ Learn about disability history, culture, and pride by meeting other successful young people and professionals who have disabilities
- ⇒ Consider completing job shadows or job trials, where you can find out more about a job you think might interest you, and you can meet people who share your interest
- ⇒ Work in the community –this will give you the opportunity to develop connections with co-workers, supervisors, and customers

Sometimes people without disabilities will be nervous when you ask to join their group or to volunteer at their facility. They might not have experience with disabilities and they might worry that they won't know how to act around you. If this happens, first and foremost, remember that this is your community and you have a right to actively participate. Know what accommodations and supports allow you to be successful; learn when it is someone else's responsibility to provide these and when you should expect to provide them yourself. Consider doing things as a family. For example, your family could volunteer together at the local senior center. This might make you (and your parents) feel more at ease. It might also help others understand what support strategies work the best for you – sometimes it's easier to learn when people model something than when they just describe it. Find a way to get involved in your community...the relationships you develop will open doors you never knew existed!

Save the Dates

The “Independent Living Centers as a Resource to Youth in Transition” Web conference will be held on June 2, 2008, from 1-2:30 PM Mountain Time as a part of the Rural Institute Transition Projects' training series. Travis Hoffman and Michael Beers will provide more information about the Summit training curriculum for students with disabilities, called “Building Advocacy and Learning Leadership Skills” (BALLS).

The first annual Montana Youth Transitions conference will be held in Great Falls September 15-17, 2008. Details will be provided as the conference takes shape. Be sure to mark your calendars now and save the date!

DisABILITY Employment Awareness Training - “PUTTING ABILITIES TO WORK.” Come learn more about attracting, hiring, accommodating, and welcoming employees with disabilities. May 8, 2008, Helena, MT. Call (406) 444-3985, FAX (406) 444-0703 or email: pd01@mt.gov to register.

Resources

University of Montana's Rural Institute Transition Projects <http://ruralinstitute.umt.edu/transition?>

Parents, Let's Unite for Kids (PLUK) <http://www.pluk.org>

Montana Council on Developmental Disabilities <http://www.mtcdd.org>

Administration on Developmental Disabilities Youth Information, Training and Resource Centers
<http://www.addyic.org>

National Alliance for Secondary Education and Transition <http://www.nasetalliance.org/>

National Dissemination Center for Children with Disabilities
<http://www.nichcy.org/resources/transition101.asp>

National Secondary Transition Technical Assistance Center <http://www.nsttac.org>

National Center on Secondary Education and Transition <http://www.ncset.org>

The National Youth Leadership Network www.nyln.org

Kids As Self-Advocates www.fvkasa.org

The National Collaborative on Workforce and Disability for Youth (NCWD/Youth)
www.ncwd-youth.info

The Association of Youth Leadership Forums (AYLF) www.montanaylf.org/?p=aylf

The Association of Programs for Rural Independent Living www.april-rural.org/youth.html

National Council on Disability Youth Advisory Committee
www.ncd.gov/newsroom/advisory/youth/youth.htm

The National Council on Independent Living <http://ncil.org/resources/youth.html>

Training Calendar

Web Conferences

The audio portion of the Web conferences can be accessed from any telephone and the video portion from a computer with Internet access. There is no cost for any of the sessions.

All sessions take place from 1:00pm - 2:30 pm Mountain Time.

Dec. 3 - Alternatives to Guardianship

Jan. 7 - Montana VR: Navigating the Transition from School to Work

Feb. 4 - Montana Youth Leadership Forum

Mar. 3 - Assistive Technology and the Transition Process: Part I

Apr. 7 - Assistive Technology and the Transition Process: Part II

May 5 - Montana's Disability Navigators

Jun. 2 - Independent Living Centers as a Resource to Youth in Transition

Aug. 4 - Self-Advocacy Skills for Transition-Age Youth

Session fliers and registration information will be sent to Montana Transition Listserv members. To join the Montana Transition Listserv, send your email address to Kim Brown at brown@ruralinstitute.umt.edu

Fliers may also be downloaded from the Transition Projects Web site as they become available. Audio recordings of conferences that have already taken place may be downloaded from the Rural Institute Transition Projects and PLUK Web sites: <http://ruralinstitute.umt.edu/transition> and <http://www.pluk.org>

Other Trainings

ADAPT Youth SUMMIT, Summer 2008 in Chicago, IL Contact: rahneek@hotmail.com

NYLN Teleconference on Voter Registration/Participation, April 2008 Contact: bvalnes@tie.net

Third Annual Transition Seminar, June 18-20, 2008, University of Montana, Missoula
Contact: mika.watanabe-taylor@umontana.edu

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