

Community Members Learn Advocacy Skills



Individuals with disabilities and parents of children with disabilities are often looking for a way to become more involved, informed, and active participants in the policies affecting their lives and the lives of their families. In many cases, these individuals with disabilities and parents become community leaders and advocates. Many people have found success through their involvement in *Partners in Policymaking*. *Partners in Policymaking* is a leadership training program that offers education, training, and the tools needed for individuals to enact change in their own lives and in the disability community as a whole. Through information and up-to-date education, participants learn about legislation at the local, state, and national level and its effects on individuals with disabilities.

"Ordinary people, just like me, do extraordinary things to help our children with disabilities," stated Ellen Coulston, a 2004 graduate of *Partners in Policymaking*. According to Ms. Coulston, she was able to learn about laws and the history of disabilities in the United States. Through learning about pioneers who advocated for groundbreaking legislation for people with disabilities, Ms. Coulston became motivated to continue advocating for her son and the disability community.

Partners in Policymaking was first developed by the Minnesota Governor's Planning Council on Developmental Disabilities and spread nationwide to 40 states. Today, over 14,000 people have been trained through this program. In 1993, the Delaware Developmental Disabilities Council began its program and continues to offer the training today with great success. Almost 200 Delaware residents have completed *Partners in Policymaking*. According to Becky Allen, Executive Director of The Arc of Delaware, *Partners in Policymaking* is the main leadership training program of its kind in the state of Delaware.

Topics discussed during the training session include the history of the disability movement; inclusive education; community supports and supported employment; vision for the future and the planning process; assistive technology; local, state, and federal policy and legislative issues; how to meet public officials and give legislative testimony; community organizing; and working with the media.

A limited number of participants each year are selected through an application process which seeks men and women of culturally diverse backgrounds from various regions of the state. Preference is given to adults who have developmental disabilities and to parents of young children with developmental disabilities. All sessions of the program are held in Dover, Delaware, and are conducted over eight, two-day sessions held once a month from March through October.

"My miracle is not for my disability to go away; a miracle happens when we give ability a chance," stated Randy Chang, a 2003 graduate of *Partners in Policymaking*. According to Mr. Chang, he not only learned about social issues that affect him, but he also became motivated to share his talents with the community. Mr. Chang volunteers his time at nursing home ministries (currently serving three nursing homes), senior centers, and fund raisers for non-profit organizations. Additionally, Mr. Chang is the author of *The Rhythms of Life*, a collection of his poems and articles, and has played the piano at a variety of charity events and functions including the Kennedy Foundation International Award Ceremony. *Partners in Policymaking* has inspired Mr. Chang to learn about disability issues and to continue serving his community. By being involved, he now feels he has reached his goal of full inclusion. Participants in *Partners in Policymaking* gain understanding through a more in-depth examination of public policy and legislation regarding individuals with disabilities. By becoming well versed in these policies, graduates of the program are able to offer lawmakers and political figures a unique perspective that informs their voting on laws that will affect the disability community. Since graduating, Ms. Coulston has joined the executive board of the Parent Information Center of Delaware, which offers education and support to parents seeking to understand and utilize the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA). Additionally, Ms. Coulston has co-founded the Brandywine Special Needs PTA, the first of its kind in Delaware. The focus of the PTA is to help students with disabilities reach their full potential in academics and in their social lives. Ms. Coulston stated that one of the most important and influential aspects of the program was

developing friendships with her classmates. In addition to the speakers and classroom material, she learned a great deal from her classmates.

"Partners taught us about opportunities to participate on state councils and committees; and together, as classmates, we grew into disability advocates," stated Ms. Coulston. After graduating from the program, many people with disabilities and parents become advocates for people with disabilities.

Partners in Policymaking is funded through the Delaware Developmental Disabilities Council, the Delaware General Assembly, MBNA Foundation Helen F. Graham Grants Program, the Delaware Department of Education, and the Birth to Three Program. There is no fee charged to participate in *Partners in Policymaking*, and participants receive lodging and meals during the training. Additionally,

personal attendant care, facilitator services, child care, and respite care may also be reimbursed on the basis of individual need.

Becoming involved and being active participants in the community is the main teaching and philosophy of *Partners in Policymaking* both in Delaware and nationwide. Ms. Coulston's sons understand what disability advocates are and realize the importance of self-advocacy. They have participated in rallies and have delivered awards to legislators who have made positive differences in the disability movement. "My family and I have learned you have to be active in the process to affect the process," said Ms. Coulston.

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