

Partners program helps next-generation leaders

by [Access Press Staff](#) // August 10th, 2016



Today's disability community leadership has roots in the parent, self-advocacy and independent living movements that took shape starting in the 1940s. By 1971, when what is now the Governor's Council on Developmental Disabilities was created, many of those leaders were preparing to step down. New leadership was needed, but what was the best way to groom successors?

The closing minutes of a Congressional hearing on Medicaid on September 19, 1986, were ticking down.

After three hours of testimony before panels of experts, the final speaker was a young mother who was given lots of conflicting advice prior to her presentation. Even so, she proceeded and said, "Medicaid is incoherent. The state pays for a person's care in an institution but not at home. It is heartless to force spenddowns to poverty level on people with disabilities."

From those few moments, the concept of the Partners in Policymaking Program was born. Preparing people to testify before Congress, and teaching these skills in a safe and supportive environment, were all within the realm of possibility.

After that hearing the council began to design a leadership training program. The participants would be self-advocates and parents of children with developmental disabilities. They would be provided with the communication skills and leadership tools to influence elected officials and other policymakers in their decision-making regarding changes to existing policies, and legislation and the development of new funding sources and programs.

In the spring of 1987, the council launched Partners in Policymaking, a competency-based and value-based leadership training program. The first class of 35 participants – 15 self-advocates and 20 parents of young children with developmental disabilities – began a series of eight-weekend sessions designed to teach best practices in the field. They also learned the advocacy and leadership skills to work effectively with elected officials to change systems. Four faculty members attended the first program. They were Ed Roberts, Gunnar Dybwad, Lotte Moise and Dolores Norley.

Weekend sessions were planned, to make participation easier. The focus was on participants with no previous experience in the disability rights movement. Applicants were to be identified and recruited through the existing network of organizations. In turn, participants would make a

strong commitment to the program. They would receive help with child care, personal assistances, and transportation.

Mentoring with an elected official would be one aspect of the program. Other focuses included the continuing move away from institutionalization and a focus on public policies promoting the development of programs. In 2015, the publication *Changing Lives, Changing Policies* was released. It includes more than 200 stories. Parent Judy Olson said, “Through Partners, I learned more about advocacy. My son is 41 years old now, and he has gone on to learn advocacy [skills] and has become an advocate for others.”

“Partners taught me how to deal with housing for people with disabilities. I have been able to get out of the group homes, and I now live independently with support in the community,” said self-advocate Allie O’Muircheartaigh.

The Partners program is a critical part of the council’s work and has been consistently managed, supported and funded by the Council since its inception. The Partners program has grown and evolved over the years and has been replicated nationally and internationally. More than 27,000 self-advocates and parents are Partners graduates today.

Access Press is interested in reader submissions for the monthly History Note column, to complement the articles. Submissions must center on events, people and places in the history of Minnesota’s disability community. We are interested in history that focuses on all types of disability topics, so long as the history has a tie to Minnesota. We are especially interested in stories from Greater Minnesota. Please submit ideas prior to submitting full stories, as we may have covered the topic before. Contact us at access@accesspress.org or 651-644-2133 if you have questions. The History Note is a monthly column sponsored by the Minnesota Governor’s Council on Developmental Disabilities, www.mnddc.org or www.mncdd.org and www.partnersinpolicymaking.com.