

SELF-ADVOCACY

RESPONSES TO DISABILITY:

Increased employment and educational opportunities; greater inclusion of people with disabilities in the community.

There are still tens of thousands of people with disabilities in institutions, and thousands more in nursing homes.



One way that self-advocates have redefined the "disability problem" is through reclaiming the language used to describe them. If disability is important in describing someone, it should be secondary to the person. Rather than "disabled people," self-advocates prefer "people with disabilities." Better yet, don't mention the disability at all unless it's relevant to the situation.

Self-advocates in Minneapolis organized and picketed for the right to hold a union election at their workshop. Workers not only demonstrated their ability to speak for themselves, but also recognized the importance of economic justice. Many sheltered workers at this time were paid less than \$1.00 per hour, with no vacation or sick leave. (The workshop would not even let the workers vote on whether to have union representation, but through legislation, self-advocates did win \$55,000 in back pay.)

An important goal in self-advocacy is closing institutions. "Institutions remove all of the things worth living for — joy, happiness, love, tenderness, feelings, emotions — and make you give up on life itself. As self-advocates we must close down every institution and liberate our unfortunate brothers and sisters who are now wasting away."

Self-advocates in Connecticut held a press conference from within the Southberry Training School, an institution they wanted to close. Three TV networks covered the event, and the show "60 Minutes" later did an investigative report on Southberry.

We must be listened to as we express ourselves, and we must be allowed to make our own mistakes. We must help those who have higher support needs and cannot speak for themselves, so their decisions can be understood and respected.

PERSONS WITH DEVELOPMENTAL DISABILITIES ADVOCATE FOR THEMSELVES AND OTHERS WITH DISABILITIES, PROCLAIMING "WE ARE PEOPLE FIRST!"

Some self-advocates have objected to the Special Olympics and its method of treating people with disabilities as "eternal children" and "objects of pity." For many, the word "special" has come to mean different and less than...

"We are people first." Many self-advocacy groups call themselves People First in honor of this principle.

"Self-advocates effect change through helping others."
— Perry Whittico

"We have the right to participate in the community, attend our public schools, and grow up with other children. We must have the opportunity to do the same things as everyone else and to share the joys of daily living."

Many self-advocacy groups serve a social function, bringing people with developmental disabilities together in an environment where they can speak openly with people they trust. Other groups have developed the sophistication and resources to take on large issues, like fighting for "real" health care for people with disabilities.



SOCIETAL VALUES:

Self-determination and freedom of choice; celebration of diversity.

"There are a thousand hacking at the branches of evil to one who is striking at the root."

— Henry David Thoreau

1978
The federal government agrees to fund Independent Living Centers.

1980-83
Sears, Roebuck and Co. begins selling decoders for closed captioning for television.

1980s
Group homes become common in communities, providing a "least restrictive environment" for individuals with developmental disabilities.

1985
19 states still have laws permitting the sterilization of persons with mental retardation.

Mental Illness Bill of Rights Act expands coverage of Protection and Advocacy to cover mental illness.

1980
Self-advocates in Minneapolis picket their sheltered workshop for a union election.

1984
Voting Accessibility for the Elderly and Handicapped Act ensures that all polling places must be accessible.