

Our Lives, Our Voices!

CONFERENCE

October 6 & 7, 2005
Richmond Downtown Marriott
Richmond, VA

CONFERENCE PROCEEDINGS

Sponsored by:
New Voices Planning Committee
Virginia Board for People with Disabilities
Partnership for People with Disabilities
Virginia Commonwealth University
Providers who sponsored individuals to attend



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FINAL CONFERENCE PROCEEDINGS PUBLISHED FEBRUARY 2006

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY WITH GENERAL RECOMMENDATIONS

The New Voices initiative seeks to provide opportunities for people with disabilities to speak about issues that are fundamental to the way they live their lives. Over the past two years, a New Voices Planning Committee, composed of 10 individuals with disabilities from across Virginia, met to talk about their experiences, to discuss issues important to them, and to plan and organize a conference. The *Our Lives, Our Voices!* conference was held in Richmond on October 6 & 7, 2006, with 173 stakeholders including people with disabilities, family members, providers, agency representatives, and interested others in attendance.

The conference included both general sessions and workshop sessions. The general sessions addressed the importance and value of the voices and experiences of individuals with disabilities. The workshop sessions featured topics identified by the New Voices members as central to their lives and to the lives of other people with disabilities. These include: housing, transportation, adult education, employment, and personal assistance services.

The workshop sessions focused on “solutions that work” in each topic area. In these sessions, participants were also given the opportunity to provide recommendations in each of the workshop topic areas. The following recommendations cross all of the topic areas.

- ❖ There is a great need for more information and education to policymakers and the general public about disabilities;
- ❖ More public funding is needed to expand services and supports to people with disabilities so that they can live independently in communities; and
- ❖ Information about available services and supports needs to be more accessible to people with disabilities and their families/supporters.

The full conference proceedings provide summaries of the information presented, issues identified, and solutions suggested for each workshop topic area. The richness of the discussion and of individuals’ perspectives, recommendations, and comments is noted under each workshop summary. The following general recommendations broadly represent some of the key issues by topic area.

- ★ Housing: There is a need for affordable and accessible housing in all areas of the state with a choice of options for living arrangements and funding. Architects and builders need to understand housing requirements of people with disabilities.

- ★ Transportation: Virginia communities need to develop plans for reliable, accessible, and safe transportation options. Increases in the number of providers of transportation and additional public funding to offset costs would improve transportation choices.
- ★ Adult Education: Information on educational opportunities needs to be readily available to individuals who want to pursue adult education options. Access to funding for education classes and programs would help with affordability, and individualized accommodations would make opportunities more accessible.
- ★ Employment: Two complementary approaches are recommended to increase employment opportunities for people with disabilities: 1) locate employers who are willing to hire individuals with disabilities and provide them with awareness information on the advantages and successes of individuals with disabilities; and 2) provide creative job training for individuals with disabilities. Additionally, issues of earned income and the impact on other benefits remain areas for additional clarification.
- ★ Personal assistance services: The process for finding and retaining personal assistants needs to be enhanced to improve the quality of the support provided by personal assistants. Additionally, there needs to be an increase in the payment rates for personal assistants. Greater flexibility in support plans and the way plans are written and implemented could also affect quality.

In addition to discussing targeted topics and potential solutions at the conference, the New Voices project also produced a video to personalize the messages of New Voices members. In the video, members talk about key issues and the impact of these issues on their day-to-day life. This video was shared at the conference. Copies of the video are also available for sharing in communities across Virginia.

At the closing of the conference, attendees were challenged to take what they learned during the conference and try to make change in their home communities. As stated by Gregory, a self-advocate and conference participant, "Now it's time to get out and do the job...implement some of the ideas that came out of the conference. It's working with the legislature, working with each other, with all the various nonprofit and profit making groups - putting all the segments of society together to make some real differences."

CONFERENCE ORGANIZERS AND SPONSORS

NEW VOICES PLANNING COMMITTEE

The New Voices project brought together 10 adults from across Virginia, each of whom was interested in sharing a unique perspective about living with a disability and obtaining needed supports. New Voices Planning Committee members' ages ranged from 18 to 60. Members lived in rural, urban, and suburban areas of the state. The committee was composed of individuals with physical, mental health, sensory and cognitive disabilities. It was the responsibility of New Voices Planning Committee members to consider the realities of other individuals with disabilities in their respective communities in order to identify and explore the most vital disability issues around the state. Issues the committee identified became part of the conference agenda planned by the committee to prompt ongoing systems change.

PARTNERSHIP FOR PEOPLE WITH DISABILITIES

The Partnership for People with Disabilities, located at Virginia Commonwealth University, is Virginia's University Center for Excellence in Developmental Disabilities Education, Research, and Service. The Partnership's mission statement ties together commitments to partnering, systems change, community, and inclusion: "To partner with people with disabilities and others to build communities where all people can live, learn, work, and play together." The Partnership coordinates projects that promote effective and promising practices in developmental disabilities. Over the past two years, with funding from the Virginia Board for People with Disabilities, the Partnership facilitated the New Voices project by recruiting and selecting individuals with disabilities who became the New Voices Planning Committee, planning meetings for the New Voices Planning Committee, and providing administrative support for the "Our Lives, Our Voices!" conference.

VIRGINIA BOARD FOR PEOPLE WITH DISABILITIES

The Virginia Board for People with Disabilities serves as Virginia's Developmental Disabilities (DD) Planning Council, working for the benefit of individuals with developmental disabilities and their families. The Board identifies needs and helps develop policies, programs, and services that will meet these needs in a manner that respects dignity and independence. Under mandate of federal and state law, the Board works to promote and guide public policy changes and create opportunities for new approaches in our service delivery systems. The Board has invested in over 200 best practice, model demonstration, and research grant projects that have created change in the areas of education, employment, housing, early intervention, transportation, recreation, and community integration. The Board awarded funding to the Partnership for People with Disabilities for the New Voices project.

NEW VOICES PLANNING COMMITTEE MEMBERS

Jessica Boyce
Rocky Mount, VA

Jill Egle
Vienna, VA

Rosita Byrd
Richmond, VA

Bill Greaver
Manassas, VA

Michael Carter
Portsmouth, VA

Lisa Harp
Culpeper, VA

Eric Clark
Richmond, VA

David Russell
Winchester, VA

Christina Draper
Fieldale, VA

Charles Yelton
Norfolk, VA

PARTNERSHIP FOR PEOPLE WITH DISABILITIES STAFF MEMBERS

who provided support to the New Voices Planning Committee included:

Parthy Dinora, Evaluator
Betty Harrell, Events Coordinator
Nicole Rada, Conference Planner
Rachel Valenti, Member Liaison
Dana Yarbrough, Coordinator
Tera Yoder, Director

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CONFERENCE OVERVIEW

The New Voices Planning Committee, a group of 10 individuals with disabilities from across Virginia, planned and held the conference entitled “OUR LIVES, OUR VOICES!” October 6 and 7, 2005. The conference brought together 173 people with disabilities, family members, advocates, providers, and state and local agency representatives and officials. The diversity of people created an open, accepting, and engaging environment that welcomed the thoughts and perspectives of all participants.

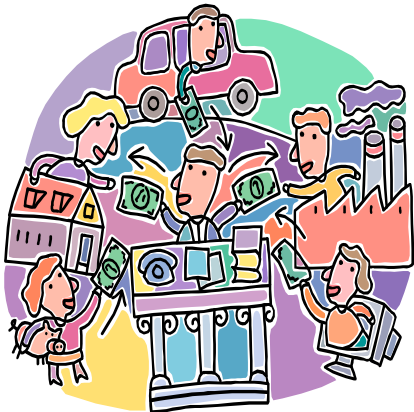
The general conference sessions featured individuals with disabilities who provided inspiring personal messages about the essential need for the voices of self-advocates to be heard. State and national experts provided timely and important information on “solutions that work” in the areas of housing, transportation, adult education, employment, and personal assistance services during workshop sessions. An interactive display of assistive technology allowed conference participants to view some of the latest innovations that increase independence and improve quality of life.



During the workshop sessions, facilitators gathered information from participants about their own experiences with the issues under discussion. These findings and a summary of the key ideas covered in the general and workshop sessions are included under each of the workshop session summaries beginning on page 11. The conference provided a powerful forum for listening to voices of individuals with disabilities. A video, featuring members of the New Voices Planning Committee, highlighted some of the most important challenges and interests they experience as Virginians with disabilities. The video was shown during the opening session of the conference and provided a unifying theme for conference topics and sessions. Copies of the video are available for groups interested in supporting all citizens’ ability to fully participate in their communities (see website listed below for ordering information).



Additional information about the New Voices project, planning committee members, issues identified as important to members and others with disabilities, the video, and pictures and proceedings from the conference can be found on the New Voices website (www.vcu.edu/partnership/nv) or by calling 804-828-0352.

CONFERENCE AGENDA

Thursday October 6, 2005	Description
9:30 - 11:15 Registration	
9:30 - 1:30 Assistive Technology Lab	Display of interactive assistive technology that you may visit at your convenience
11:15 - 11:45 Welcome	♥FRED ORELOVE, Executive Director, Partnership for People with Disabilities ♥HEIDI LAWYER, Executive Director, Virginia Board for People with Disabilities ♥ <i>Our Lives, Our Voices</i> Video ♥Introduction of New Voices Members
11:45 - 1:00 Lunch and Keynote Address	TITLE: What Is It That You Believe? ♥DAN WILKINS This keynote address will focus on increasing awareness and understanding. It is about the celebration of individuality and difference and the search for common ground, shared truths, interests, histories, goals, and fears.
1:00 - 1:30	Break and getting to your workshops
1:30 - 3:00 Workshop Session THEME: Housing TITLE: Creative Options	Housing options are important for everyone. This session will explore "solutions that work" to expand community housing options for people with disabilities. <u>Presenters:</u> ♥BILL FULLER, Virginia Housing Development Authority ♥ WAYNE MCVICKER, HOME, Inc. ♥ GAIL BRAHAM, VA Housing Registry ♥ MARK RUSSELL, L'Arche of the Blue Ridge <u>Moderators/Facilitators:</u> ♥BILL GREAVER and LISA HARP, New Voices members ♥TERA YODER, Partnership for People with Disabilities



<p>Thursday October 6, 2005</p>	<p>Description</p>
<p>1:30 – 3:00 Workshop Session THEME: Transportation TITLE: Developing Partnerships</p> 	<p>This session will highlight the need for cooperation between the disability and transportation communities to achieve universal access in transportation for people with disabilities.</p> <p><u>Presenters:</u></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ♥ KEN THOMPSON, Easter Seals Project ACTION ♥ NEIL SHERMAN, United We Ride Program, Virginia Department of Rail and Public Transportation <p><u>Moderators/Facilitators:</u></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ♥ JILL EGLE and MICHAEL CARTER, New Voices members ♥ PARTHY DINORA, Partnership for People with Disabilities
<p>1:30 – 3:00 Workshop Session THEME: Adult Education TITLE: Continuing to Learn</p> 	<p>Adult education experiences promote ongoing learning. The presenters for this session will discuss innovative models for adults with disabilities seeking entrance to institutions of higher education from two college level programs.</p> <p><u>Presenters:</u></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ♥ JEANANNE DIXON, LEAP program, New River Community College ♥ CLARE TALBERT, GMU Life Project, George Mason University <p><u>Moderators/Facilitators:</u></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ♥ CHRISTINA DRAPER, New Voices member ♥ DANA YARBROUGH, Partnership for People with Disabilities

Thursday October 6, 2005	Description
<p>1:30 – 3:00 Workshop Session THEME: Employment TITLE: Innovative Opportunities</p> 	<p>This session will cover creative approaches for individuals with disabilities as they plan for and enter the work world. The possibilities of self-employment and/or tele-working from home will be discussed.</p> <p><u>Presenters:</u></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ♥ MARK HILL, Employment Support Institute, VCU ♥ HOWARD GREEN, Rehabilitation Research and Training Center, VCU <p><u>Moderators/Facilitators:</u></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ♥ DAVID RUSSELL and ROSITA BYRD, New Voices members ♥ RACHEL VALENTI, Partnership for People with Disabilities
<p>1:30 – 3:00 Workshop Session THEME: Personal Assistance Services TITLE: Quality Support</p> 	<p>Personal assistants are essential direct support providers. The presenters for this session will discuss some of the issues in finding and keeping personal assistants. They will talk about traits to look for in personal assistants and nurses to ensure quality care.</p> <p><u>Presenters:</u></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ♥ PAULA TRAVERSE CHARLTON, Hope House Foundation ♥ COLIN MAYBEE and KATHY MAYBEE, Advocates <p><u>Moderators/Facilitators:</u></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ♥ JESSICA BOYCE and ERIC CLARK, New Voices members ♥ EILEEN HAMMAR, Partnership for People with Disabilities

Thursday October 6, 2005	Description
2:00 - 5:00 Video Conference Evaluation	A booth has been set up to videotape your thoughts about the "Our Lives, Our Voices!" conference
3:00 - 3:30 Break	Break and getting to the general session
3:30 - 4:00 General Session and Keynote Address	TITLE: Finding Your Voice ♥ED TURNER A long time advocate in Virginia, Ed will talk about his journey to becoming an effective and vocal advocate. His presentation will cover ways to become active in local communities and at state and national levels. As a leader by example, Ed will relay experiences that have made him a devoted self-advocate in his own life and will motivate others to find their voices.
4:00 - 6:00 Reception and Keynote Address	Hors D'oeuvres and Refreshments ♥Jackie Crews Excellence in Leadership Award presented by the Virginia Board for People with Disabilities TITLE: ♥BRETT LEAKE This is the story of a man with a progressive neuromuscular disease overcoming the limitations of his disorder through the healing power of humor. Brett will share stories about the value of humor and managing change.
6:00 - 7:30 Networking Dinner on your own	Informal Networking Time Live Music by "Goodfellas"

Friday, October 7, 2005	Description
8:15 - 9:15 Registration	Registration and Continental Breakfast
8:15 - 12:00 Assistive Technology Lab	Display of interactive assistive technology that you may visit at your convenience
8:15 - 2:00 Video Conference Evaluation	A booth has been set up to videotape your thoughts about the "Our Lives, Our Voices!" conference
9:15 - 10:00 General Session and Keynote Address	<p>TITLE: The Importance of Community Connections</p> <p>♥ANNIE FORTS</p> <p>Annie Forts is a vibrant and passionate woman who just happens to have Down syndrome. She has dedicated her life to ensuring that those with Down syndrome are included in and respected by their communities; and she wants the world to know that everyone can make a contribution to society, no matter what challenge he or she experiences.</p>
10:00 - 10:30	Break and getting to your workshops
10:30 - 12:00 Workshop Sessions	A repeat of Workshop Sessions from Thursday, October 6, 2005 with different moderators and facilitators
12:15 - 1:45 Lunch and Closing Session	<p>TITLE: Making Your Voice Heard</p> <p>♥Mark Russell, Parent/Advocate</p> <p>Mark will connect the issues discussed at the conference with the work that needs to take place in communities. He will inspire conference participants to make their voices heard at individual, local community, state, and national levels. He will provide a summary of the key issues that have been presented at the conference with strategic steps for future action.</p>

CONFERENCE KEYNOTES: HIGHLIGHTS FROM PRESENTATIONS

What Is It That You Believe?

DAN WILKINS

Summary:

Dan talked about the importance of "finding your voice" and telling your own story. A storyteller at heart, Dan shared three stories about events in his own life that helped him find his voice, weaving into his presentation both humor and poignant accounts of discrimination and segregation. His presentation magnified the importance of each individual's experience and provided encouragement to others to speak out as a way of enhancing others' understanding of disability issues. As a speaker on this topic and as the owner of a small business called the Nth Degree, Dan increases awareness and understanding by celebrating individuality and differences, by searching for common ground, and by seeking shared truths, interests, histories, goals, fears. His presentation set the stage for the remainder of the conference.



Finding Your Voice

ED TURNER

Summary:

Ed shared his life's experience finding and using his voice, beginning with his parents' advocacy for his inclusion in school and community activities.



Throughout Ed's high school years, he used his voice in advocating for services, in seeking inclusion in school activities, and in being given the right to graduate with a general diploma. Ed believes self-advocacy is about believing in yourself and your abilities, learning about options, and making choices. It is an affirmation of your belief that you are a human being who belongs in the community. "Self-advocacy is a tool which, in the words of the Army commercial, will enable you to 'be all that you can be.'"

Ed spoke about a variety of types of advocacy and encouraged conference participants to learn about and engage in multiple advocacy efforts.

The Importance of Community Connections

ANNIE FORTS

Summary:

Annie shared her list of 12 motivating factors that have had the greatest influence on her living on the “Up Side of Down Syndrome.” They include:

- Developing and maintaining a positive, or “up,” attitude at all times;
- Making things happen, not waiting around for someone else to make things happen for you;
- Getting to meet and know as many people as you can;
- Developing lots of friends;
- Learning how to become independent;
- Always looking for and trying new experiences;
- Remembering to always do your very best so you can be proud of your efforts;
- Learning how to speak out and be willing to do so. Before you speak out, listening and learning about what you want to talk about;
- Getting involved – volunteering and becoming active in your community;
- Being willing to change and learning how to adjust to change;
- Learning and understanding the issues that will help to improve your life; not letting others prejudge the limits of your abilities; and
- Dreaming and setting goals for yourself.

Annie’s inspirational message concluded with, “I have a life that is filled with lots of friendships, excitement, accomplishments, and acceptance in my community ...without any reservations.”



Making Your Voice Heard

MARK RUSSELL

Summary:

Mark summed up the conference with his closing comments about societal responsibility, about attitudes, and about community. Mark suggested that, without a shift in people’s thinking, things that are important to the way people with disabilities live their lives (waiver slots, funding,



laws, regulations, housing, wages, relationships, and transportation) will never change. Mark's comments were placed in the following context: 1) real change in the meaningful parts of the lives of people with disabilities cannot happen without a deeper understanding and demand by society; 2) this deeper understanding and demand will result in citizens wanting to be friends, co-workers, and neighbors; 3) there will never be enough money to fund the current top-down system with layers of government control and limited flexibility; and 4) current debates over Medicaid slots, higher wages for support personnel, and other support and funding issues will only result in small changes year to year, which means the same discussion over the same issues will be taking place 20 years from now.

Mark challenged conference participants to find their new voice for advocacy—and to speak with passion. He reminded participants that what they are asking for is at the essence of liberty, of justice, and of community; it is not just for a piece of the pie with all the other spending items. “No one can carry this voice better than those who live the lives most affected. Speak loud, speak often, and speak convincingly. Don't take no-- or not yet-- for an answer.”



WORKSHOP SESSIONS:

SUMMARY OF INFORMATION PRESENTED, ISSUES IDENTIFIED, AND SUGGESTED SOLUTIONS

HOUSING: Creative Options

Presenters:

- ◆ BILL FULLER, Virginia Housing Development Authority
- ◆ WAYNE MCVICKER, HOME, Inc.
- ◆ GAIL BRAHAM, VA Housing Registry
- ◆ MARK RUSSELL, L'Arche of the Blue Ridge

Moderators/Facilitators:

Day One:	BILL GREAVER and LISA HARP, New Voices members TERA YODER, Partnership for People with Disabilities
Day Two:	DAVID RUSSELL and CHRISTINA DRAPER, New Voices members EILEEN HAMMAR, Partnership for People with Disabilities

Summary of Information Presented:

The panel provided information on several aspects of housing, including accessibility, affordability, and support. The fundamentals of universal design were pointed out in examples of new and renovated living spaces built with attention given to accessibility in all areas of the home. The discussion also included the importance of access to parking, sidewalks, entrances, and other, sometimes simple, features that significantly increase accessibility. To complement this presentation and to provide additional information on specific design elements, a DVD was given to all session participants



describing features of universal design and examples of floor plans and that can be used to build or modify homes to make them accessible. One speaker described the freedom gained buildings are accessible and features within homes are individually tailored to meet the needs of individuals with limited mobility. Affordable housing was recognized as a concern in all areas of Virginia with speakers emphasizing the need for each individual to examine multiple funding avenues. The session also focused on models of support that are designed in response to individual preferences and needs. Presenters spoke about how individually-crafted supports increase the full participation of individuals with cognitive disabilities in actively engaging in all aspects of their home life. One of the models discussed reinforced the need for homes to be supportive of all members of a household, those with and without disabilities. Presenters and workshop participants recognized that communities are enriched when individuals with disabilities are fully included.

Issues Identified and Suggested Solutions:

Conference attendees overwhelming indicated that affordability was one of their biggest concerns in the area of housing. Other areas of need that were identified included the lack of availability of accessible housing and the lack of housing choices for people with disabilities.

One of the central ways that respondents indicated that housing issues could be better addressed was through increased state and local funding for housing for people with low incomes. Encouraging home ownership was also proposed as a way to address housing issues for people with disabilities in Virginia. As stated by one participant, “more opportunities for home ownership would engender greater pride and maintenance of spaces. It would also disperse the low cost housing rather than locate it in one area of the community.”

Respondents also advocated for “getting the word out” about housing concerns for people with disabilities. They stated that people in the housing community, such as builders and architects, need to better understand the needs of people with disabilities. They also felt that the legislative community needs to be better informed so that they can make changes to public policy to better meet the needs of all Virginians.

TRANSPORTATION: Developing Partnerships

Presenters:

- ◆ KEN THOMPSON, Easter Seals Project ACTION
- ◆ NEIL SHERMAN, United We Ride Program, Virginia Department of Rail and Public Transportation

Moderators/Facilitators:

Day One:	JILL EGLE, New Voices member PARTHY DINORA, Partnership for People with Disabilities
Day Two:	BILL GREAVER and LISA HARP, New Voices members DANA YARBROUGH, Partnership for People with Disabilities

Summary of Information Presented:

Conference participants who attended the transportation workshop learned about several state and federal initiatives to increase transportation options for people with disabilities. Representatives from the Virginia Department of Rail and Public Transportation (DRPT) discussed their work in providing support to over 100 public and private partners. The DRPT speaker explained how the agency provides project management services, planning support, technical assistance, and financial support to agencies seeking funding for capital improvement for transportation services that benefit individuals who are elderly and/or who have disabilities. Additionally, the discussion included information on a small state coordination grant to assist developing Virginia's plan for coordinating human services transportation by establishing a clear baseline of the human services transportation systems throughout Virginia (i.e., destinations, unmet needs, fare policies, resources, and costs).



Easter Seals Project ACTION (Accessible Community Transportation In Our Nation) was also highlighted in this workshop. Project ACTION promotes cooperation between the transportation industry and the disability community to increase mobility for people with disabilities under the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) and beyond. Various resources are offered through the project including, training, and technical assistance. The speakers explained that the project also conducts mobility needs assessments to get from “where does a

person with a disability want to go” to “what does the community need to know about mobility options in the community.” Through surveys, focus groups and interviews, data is collected on access and barriers. The project uses data and education to inform the transportation system on the travel difficulties experienced by people with disabilities and the need for and value of removing barriers.

Issues Identified and Suggested Solutions:

Participants in this conference workshop reported a variety of aspects of transportation that are difficult for people with disabilities. The difficulties most commonly mentioned were the lack of reliable, accessible transportation available within Virginia communities and safety concerns when using available transportation. As participants stated:

- ✦ “When I send my daughter in Metro-Access and Fast-Tran, I feel that she is not safe,”
- ✦ “I have no ride to my job which is in a different county from where I live,”
- ✦ “There is no accessibility for persons outside of 9 am to 5 pm hours. People need to have an opportunity to be social and people need to be safe on these rides.”



Participants also proposed a variety of ways that transportation problems could be addressed in Virginia. One solution identified by several participants was to increase the number of transportation providers in communities in order to give greater choice. Another was to offset costs for providers with public funds so that transportation is affordable for individuals and sustainable for providers. Expanding service areas for transportation providers was also identified as a way to improve transportation services for people with disabilities. Another recommendation was to address the staffing issues of transportation providers by informing them about the problems that people with disabilities are having with their services and by having providers improve staff screening, provide safety and sensitivity training to staff, and provide better pay for high-quality service delivery and consequences for substandard service delivery.

ADULT EDUCATION: Continuing to Learn

Presenters:

- ◆ JEANANNE DIXON, LEAP program, New River Community College
- ◆ CLARE TALBERT, GMU Life Project, George Mason University

Moderators/Facilitators:

Day One:	CHRISTINA DRAPER, New Voices member DANA YARBROUGH, Partnership for People with Disabilities
Day Two:	JILL EGLE and JESSICA BOYCE, New Voices members RACHEL VALENTI, Partnership for People with Disabilities

Summary:



In this workshop, speakers presented innovative approaches to making adult education on a college campus available to people with disabilities: the George Mason University (GMU) Learning Into Future Environments (LIFE) project, the Learning Enrichment and Achievement Program

(LEAP) at New River Community College, the Program for Adults in Vocational Education (PAVE) at J. Sargeant Reynolds Community College, the College Bound Conference at Virginia Tech, and Real World Day at Radford University. A brief description of the information presented is included in the following paragraphs.

The GMU LIFE project provides an opportunity for young adults with intellectual disabilities to further develop their literacy, vocational, and independent living skills on a college campus. The Mason LIFE Program is a four-year program with the option to return for evening classes/activities for an additional two years. GMU LIFE students are not admitted to Mason, but do earn a certificate upon completion of the program at Mason.

New River Community College's LEAP program includes, but is not limited to, students with learning disabilities, brain injury, sensory, and other physical

disabilities. LEAP has supported over 900 students with disabilities since 1984 to enroll and achieve in any of the college's programs of study with customized services to meet their individual needs.

The PAVE program is offered at J. Sargeant Reynolds Community College and is designed to give students with intellectual disabilities, severe learning disabilities, and emotional disabilities an introduction to vocational skills that will prepare them for employment. Students in the PAVE program earn a Career Studies Certificate from the college.

College Bound is a summer orientation program designed by New River Community College, Radford University, and Virginia Tech to help students address concerns that are common among college students with disabilities. The two-day program increases participants' knowledge of the accommodation process, assistive technologies, leadership skills, and other exciting aspects of college life. College Bound is open to rising high school juniors, seniors, and entering college freshmen who are considering a future at any college. The College Bound experience introduces participants to the typical life of a college student and familiarizes students with some necessary survival and self-advocacy skills.

Real World Day is designed for individuals interested in assistive technologies that enhance or assist the life, learning, work and recreational activities of individuals with disabilities. The annual event, now in its tenth year, is designed for high school students with disabilities, adult consumers, consumer advocates and service providers interested in learning about the latest resources and strategies for transitioning into college and the workplace.

Issues Identified and Suggested Solutions:

Attendees identified a broad range of difficulties that people with disabilities encounter in the adult education arena. Individuals reported that more accommodations are needed such as large monitors for individuals with visual impairments or interpreters or personal assistants in the classroom so that they can successfully pursue their education. In



addition, the cost of attending higher education classes is becoming more prohibitive. Many people expressed concern that information is not readily available on adult education in Virginia. As one attendee stated, “there is no single champion or home for adult education in Virginia. We leap from school-based special education to adult services (e.g. employment and housing).”

A variety of solutions were offered regarding challenges that people with disabilities face in adult education. Some identified solutions included:

- ✦ The establishment of a central hub where information about adult educational opportunities could be collected and effectively disseminated. (There were a number of comments about people not knowing what opportunities are available or how to take advantage of them.);
- ✦ Informing legislators and the community at large to raise awareness to encourage improvements in services and funding;
- ✦ Offering lower education costs for students involved in health care in exchange for hours spent as a personal assistant. For example, college students pursuing nursing, social work, and special education degrees could be offered reduced tuition by agreeing to provide personal assistance services to their fellow students with disabilities.

EMPLOYMENT: Innovative Opportunities

Presenters:

- ◆ MARK HILL, Employment Support Institute, Virginia Commonwealth University
- ◆ HOWARD GREEN, Rehabilitation Research and Training Center, Virginia Commonwealth University

Moderators/Facilitators:

Day One:	DAVID RUSSELL and ROSITA BYRD, New Voices members RACHEL VALENTI, Partnership for People with Disabilities
Day Two:	ERIC CLARK, New Voices member PARTHY DINORA, Partnership for People with Disabilities

Summary:

Attendees in this session heard from two of Virginia’s leaders in the employment arena. One presented strategies for preparing for and finding work and the other described a specific computer program that assists individuals in understanding the impact of multiple funding sources on their work experiences.

The importance of work for each individual was stressed. General information was shared about the barriers individuals with disabilities face and the need to educate employers on the creative strategies that some companies use to ensure



job success of individuals with disabilities. The speakers also talked about the responsibility of individuals with disabilities and those who support individuals to build relationships with potential employers, to identify specific skills, and to match those skills with employer needs. Speakers mentioned that for some individuals, it is important to work with someone who can

help with employment planning. This service is sometimes found at one stop career centers or through employment agencies. Presenters also shared examples of individuals with disabilities and highlighted their paths to success. Several individuals developed business plans to become self-employed. One example highlighted was an individual who owned his own car washing business. Another example of a type of self-employment presented was “teleworking.” As workforce demands increase and the structure of the American economy changes, “teleworking” is becoming a viable option. Presenters indicated that over 20 million people work from home and daily “telework” to communicate with their employer, to complete billing, to write computer programs, and to do data entry and graphics projects, to name a few. Employers have found increased benefits when employees can work from home, particularly a reduction in staff turnover and absenteeism. Some individuals with disabilities have found this to be a viable option as it helps to solve some of the transportation and other work problems.

The WorkWORLD™ software – software designed to help individuals with disabilities understand how to best use the work incentives associated with federal and state benefit programs – was presented during this workshop session. As explained by its founder, one of the workshop speakers, WorkWORLD is designed to help people with disabilities, advocates, benefit counselors, and others explore and understand the interaction of various funding sources. It automates the computation of benefits, and takes into account the complex interaction of income, benefit programs, and work incentives. Work-WORLD is designed to be used with individuals and asks a series of questions specific to the individual’s

situation. Results are generated showing benefits, earned income, and expenses, and recommendations are presented that allow the individual to decide changes that can be made to help the individual become self-supporting.

Issues Identified and Suggested Solutions:

Conference attendees identified multiple challenges that people with disabilities face in area of employment. Many individuals reported that finding an employer who is willing to hire a person with a disability can be difficult. As one respondent stated, “Coming out of an institution, people didn’t want to give me a chance to work. As soon as they found out that I was in an institution, the doors closed.” Also, issues around earned income and the impact that this has on individuals’ social security is a challenge for people with disabilities.

Additionally, attendees stated that there is not enough staff support to help people identify potential employment and to work with them to secure employment.



One of the central solutions presented by attendees regarding employment issues for people with disabilities was more education and awareness training for employers. Respondents stated that employers need to have more information about the benefits of employing people with disabilities. As one individual stated, “Employers need training to understand that people with disabilities can work and be dependable.” Once an employer is more open to considering employing a person with a disability, respondents stated that people’s work will speak for itself. This was conveyed in a comment by one attendee, “I can show people that I am honest and dependable and I give 100% effort. If employers give me the chance, my work will advertise for itself.”

Another potential solution identified by workshop participants was more creative job training and development for individuals with disabilities. Attendees stated that people need to be trained in skills that employers need, thus increasing the chances for employment.

PERSONAL ASSISTANCE SERVICES: Quality Supports

Presenters:

- ◆ PAULA TRAVERSE CHARLTON, Hope House Foundation
- ◆ COLIN MAYBEE and KATHY MAYBEE, Advocates

Moderators/Facilitators:

Day One:	JESSICA BOYCE and ERIC CLARK, New Voices members EILEEN HAMMAR, Partnership for People with Disabilities
Day Two:	ROSITA BYRD, New Voices member TERA YODER, Partnership for People with Disabilities

Summary:

The presenters of this session combined the sharing of information by the panelists with guided involvement of session participants to discuss the importance of quality personal assistance services in the lives of individuals with disabilities and their families. The panelists spoke from the vantage points of a user of services, a family member involved in arranging personal assistance services, and a provider of supports. The session topics included: the practical everyday importance of work style and personality of the personal assistant, the need for a training program and career ladder for personal assistants, and the importance of hiring strategies and matching users with assistants. The discussion of personal assistant work ethic and style included:



- Arrival and departure time
- Professional manner of conduct in job responsibilities
- Interest in disability and/or long term care
- Level of responsibility
- Attitude (positive) and respect
- Resume and references to assist the individual and others in getting to know personal assistant's skills

The issues of training and career ladders promoted discussion in several areas, including:

- The need to provide training for personal assistants
- The importance of personal characteristics and natural inclinations
- Establishing minimal standards for personal assistants
- Training responsibility and payment for training time/sessions
- Reimbursement issues and payment guidelines

In the discussion of hiring strategies and matching assistants with individuals, there was recognition of differing approaches, one variable being whether personal assistant services were consumer-directed or agency-directed with choice, or agency-directed. It was agreed that matching was important and, while some agencies pay significant attention to ensuring that the individual and assistant complement each other, often who is available dictates who is “assigned” as the assistant. When services are consumer-directed and agency-directed with choice, advertising for assistants is based on the individual and includes individual preferences, hopefully resulting in hiring an assistant who is more compatible.

The session recognized the essential role of personal assistants and included tips for keeping quality assistants. Presenters encouraged people who employ personal assistants to discover ways to make their assistant feel valued by involving assistants in important aspects of their life, making them aware of goals, recognizing and using the strengths of each personal assistant, and appreciating and thanking personal assistants.

Issues Identified and Suggested Solutions:

Individuals attending the personal assistance services workshop sessions identified a variety of concerns about personal assistance services. Finding and retaining personal assistants was the most frequently occurring concern of respondents. Low pay rates for personal assistance services were identified as one of the major barriers to finding and keeping quality personal assistants.

Several solutions were posited for the concerns about personal assistance services in Virginia. Increasing the pay rates for personal assistance was stated as a fundamental change needed to improve personal assistance services. Also, respondents indicated



that there is a need for greater flexibility and choice in the system. This includes flexibility with developing support plans and increased options in choosing case managers and providers. Lastly, respondents stated that more legislative advocacy is needed to better inform policy-makers about the challenges that people with disabilities face in recruiting and retaining quality personal assistants.



ASSISTIVE TECHNOLOGY: DESCRIPTION OF EXHIBITS

A hands-on assistive technology exhibition featured a wide variety of technologies designed to give people with disabilities greater opportunity to participate in community life, greater independence and improved quality of life. Demonstrations by exhibitors served to increase conference participants' awareness of the barriers that may prevent people with disabilities from fully participating in schools, workplaces, and other social settings. Exhibitors presented numerous technologies as well as information about programs and services that increase access to those technologies.

Together We Can, the Virginia Deaf-Blind Project of the Partnership for People with Disabilities, invited conference participants to experience some of the challenges people with dual sensory loss experience everyday in accessing information. Project staff used a variety of simulation equipment to create a virtual deaf-blindness experience. Together We Can staff also shared information about the training and technical assistance they provide to teams supporting individuals with both vision and hearing impairments.



At the **Virginia Assistive Technology System (VATS)** table, a wide array of practical low-tech devices were exhibited including personal care items, kitchen aids, and reachers. While each device was simple and even affordable, each can make life easier at home, work, school, and play.



The Consortium on Hand Held Technology at the Partnership for People with Disabilities displayed and demonstrated a variety of hand held devices that support individuals with many everyday life functions. These included watches with built in organizers, palm pilots, and other personal digital assistants that can help with memory, organizing, scheduling, and note taking. Project staff shared information about how they are matching individuals with cognitive-behavioral impairment caused by brain injury or autism with appropriate handheld computer devices, training these individuals in how to best use the devices to manage everyday tasks, and offering follow-along intervention and trouble-shooting, while tracking outcomes from functional assessment tests and satisfaction surveys.

Children's Hospital of Richmond invited conference participants to try out a variety of communication devices typically used by people with physical and/or cognitive disabilities. In addition, some simple technologies that aid daily living were available for conference participants to examine. These included a talking clock, a talking wrist watch, a talking indoor/outdoor temperature reporter, a jumbo remote, a wheel chair call bell, and the remote accessible Ameriphone.



The Virginia Department for the Deaf and Hard of Hearing displayed and demonstrated the use of various assistive listening devices including text telephones (TTYs), amplified handsets, voice carryover phones, and visual and audible signalers. Staff provided information about how the VDDHH is making technology available to Virginians who are deaf, hard of hearing, or speech impaired.

LC Technologies guided conference participants through the use of the *Eyegaze Communication System*, a communication and control system for people with complex physical disabilities operated entirely with the eyes. The *Eyegaze Communication System* is a hands-off, unobtrusive, remote human-computer interface that can be used to track a user's gazepoint or allow an operator to interact with their environment using only their eyes. By looking at control keys displayed on a screen, a person can synthesize speech, control his environment (lights, call bells, etc.), type, run computer software, operate a computer mouse, and access the Internet and email.



Staff of the Virginia Department of Education's **Training & Technical Assistance Center (T/TAC)** at VCU demonstrated a wide array of software used to improve educational opportunities and contribute to the success of children and youth with disabilities (birth-22 years) and children who have disadvantages or are at-risk for academic failure (birth-8 years). Four demonstration and exploration stations informed conference attendees about the accessibility

feature of Microsoft Office; using MP3 players to listen to audio books and text; TextHelp software to convert text into MP3 form; Microsoft E-Reader to listen to books via a Tablet PC; the handwriting to text feature of the Tablet PC; the IRIS PEN to scan text and import to a laptop; ReadPlease free software to read digital documents aloud; And using Browse Aloud to access the Internet.

Staff from the **Virginia Department of Rehabilitative Services (DRS) Computer Accommodations Lab** demonstrated voice to text & text to voice technology using special software. Conference participants were able to speak into a microphone and have their words appear in text on the computer screen. DRS staff demonstrated how written text could be typed or scanned and then read back to an individual by the computer. By

ensuring that Virginians with disabilities are receiving appropriate accommodations like these technologies, the Department of Rehabilitative Services promotes competitive employment opportunities.

The City of Virginia Beach Facilities Management Office loaned one of three beach wheelchairs to be exhibited at the *Our Lives, Our Voices!* conference. In an effort to afford people with disabilities the same freedom to enjoy popular recreational areas in Virginia, the City of Virginia Beach has established a relationship with a private business that rents and sells recreation equipment. The city loans beach wheelchairs for use on the beachfront to interested residents or tourists at no charge. Information about VA Beach Facilities Management Office's innovative approach to increasing access to recreational opportunities was available for conference participants.

In addition, **self-advocates** participated as independent exhibitors, further increasing conference participants' understanding of the importance of assistive technology and service animals.

Barbara Watkins displayed a video she created about her own use of a communication device called a Dynavox. Ms. Watkins took time to answer questions and demonstrate for conference participants how she uses assistive communication technology everyday.



Gloria Raftery, another active self-advocate from the Richmond area, along with her service dog, Slurpee, explained to conference participants some lesser known functions of daily life that a service animal can be trained to perform in order that a person with a disability can gain independence. Slurpee demonstrated that he is much more than an extra pair of eyes. Ms. Raftery shared a video presentation from Saint Francis of Assisi Service Dog Foundation and answered many questions.



Through these demonstrations and active participation, conference participants gained broader awareness of high and low tech devices designed to give people with sensory impairments, people with cognitive disabilities, and people with limited mobility greater independence and improved quality of life. Information about financing options was made available by the **Assistive Technology Loan Fund Authority (ATLFA)**.

JACKIE CREWS EXCELLENCE IN LEADERSHIP AWARD

The first annual Jackie Crews Excellence in Leadership Award was presented at the conference on October 6, 2005. The Virginia Board for People with Disabilities was pleased to recognize Edmond (Ed) Turner as the first recipient of the award and presented him with a \$1,000 cash stipend. The award ceremony concluded with the reading of personal letters of congratulations to Ed from both Governor Mark Warner and Lieutenant Governor Tim Kaine. In his life and through his work, Ed, who was born with cerebral palsy, exemplifies and advances the four goals of the Jackie Crews Award: independence, productivity, inclusion, and self-determination. The Virginia Board for People with Disabilities calls on all Virginians to congratulate and recognize Ed for his diligent work and his steadfast commitment to these four goals on behalf of all citizens. To find out more about Ed Turner visit the VBPD website at www.vaboard.org.



BRIEF INFORMATION ABOUT SPEAKERS

GAIL BRAHAM: Gail has extensive experience with housing issues in Virginia. She is currently the project manager for the Virginia Housing Registry at the Virginia Housing Development Authority. The project is funded to develop and distribute a listing of housing options for individuals with disabilities.

JEANANNE DIXON: Jeananne has 20 years experience working in post-secondary education with students with disabilities. She is the coordinator of the Regional Center at New River Community College, which, under her leadership, has won four national awards for their services for students with disabilities. In a national competition, Jeananne was selected as one of four national mentors to participate in the U.S. Department of Education's Improving Disability Support Services in Higher Education program.

ANNIE FORTS: Annie is a popular, nationally recognized motivational speaker and self-advocate for the needs and rights of individuals with disabilities. Annie served on the President's Commission on Mental Retardation and National Down Syndrome Congress. Annie is the recipient of many state and national awards, including the Joseph P. Kennedy International Self Empowerment Award.

BILL FULLER: Bill holds degrees in Social Work and Urban Services. He holds quite a few prestigious awards including the President's Award, and is a former wheelchair athlete. Bill has published several articles in the field of disability policy and collaborated on a legislative housing study for the Virginia General Assembly's Disability Commission. Bill has a long history of developing accessible, affordable housing for individuals with disabilities and currently serves as the Housing Initiatives Officer with the Virginia Housing Development Authority.

HOWARD GREEN: Howard is a strong advocate for individuals with disabilities, especially in the field of employment. He holds a degree in Social Work and is an instructor and business liaison with the Rehabilitation Research and Training Center on Workplace Supports at Virginia Commonwealth University. Over the past several years, Howard has co-authored and contributed to several articles and book chapters relating to the employment of individuals with disabilities.

MARK HILL: Since 1979, Mark has directed some of Virginia's most important initiatives related to supporting individuals with disabilities in competitive employment. He co-founded the Employment Support Institute at Virginia Commonwealth University's School of Business where he coordinated the development of the national recognized WorkWORLD Knowledge Based Decision Support System. He co-authored a host of publications related to employment for individuals with disabilities.

BRETT LEAKE: A standup comic since 1983, a sit down comic since 1998, Virginia native Brett Leake, is an energetic performer of observational humor. Brett became the first comic with a disability to appear on NBC's The Tonight Show. He has also appeared on Entertainment Tonight and the American Comedy Awards.

COLIN MAYBEE: Colin is a recent graduate of Tucker High School and currently attends J. S. Reynolds Community College. He is interested in technology and sports and is pursuing a career that combines the two interests. As a self-advocate, Colin uses personal assistance services on an ongoing basis.

KATHY MAYBEE: As Colin's mother, Kathy has been the person that has coordinated supports, including finding, hiring, training, supervising, supporting, and letting go of personal assistants for Colin. Kathy has a wealth of knowledge and she generously shares this with others who need her help and assistance.

WAYNE MCVICKER: As President of the Board of Directors of Housing Opportunities Made Economical, Inc., Wayne is an advocate for housing options in Virginia. In his position, he is instrumental in assisting families in obtaining affordable housing options.

MARK RUSSELL FROM LYNCHBURG: Mark currently is director of L'Arche of the Blue Ridge Mountains, an intentional community living option for individuals with and without disabilities. Mark brings a wealth of information to disability issues as a father and a professional. Prior to working at L'Arche, Mark worked at Central Virginia Training Centers as a community liaison, assisting numerous individuals in integrating into community life.

MARK RUSSELL FROM NORTHERN VIRGINIA: Mark and his wife, Helen, are parent advocates for their four children. Their 3rd child, Martin, had a variety of disabilities and was best known as a boy who lived his life to the fullest. Martin died in December 2004. Mark began his career in disability advocacy in 1999. In addition to numerous volunteer roles, he served as director of The Arc of Northern Virginia and of the Joseph P. Kennedy, Jr., Foundation, and as assistant director of the Arc of the United States.

NEIL SHERMAN: Neil serves as the Specialized Transportation Program Manager for the Virginia Department of Rail and Public Transportation. He advocates for individuals with disabilities and has administered many programs concerned with the transportation needs of welfare recipients, the elderly, and individuals with disabilities.

CLARE TALBERT: Clare is the director of the George Mason University Learning into Future Environments (LIFE) post-secondary program for students with disabilities. Previously, she worked as a transition specialist for the Virginia Department of Education's Training and Technical Assistance Center located at George Mason University.

KEN THOMPSON: Ken, who holds a degree in Public Affairs, is a Technical Assistance Specialist for Easter Seals Project ACTION. He is responsible for the technical development and oversight of products and initiatives that expand transportation options for individuals with disabilities. Ken has more than 20 years of experience in disability employment, access, and human services transportation.

PAULA TRAVERSE-CHARLTON: Paula has worked in the disability field for over 20 years in both community-based and residential settings. She also has experience in the area of disability law. Paula holds a degree in Psychology with a specialty in Applied Behavioral Analysis and for the past 15 years has provided behavioral consultation services to families and school systems. Paula also administers the Health and Wellness Project at Hope House, Inc.

ED TURNER: Ed has 32 years of experience in the disability rights field as an advocate, special educator, peer counselor, consultant, administrator, and training associate. Ed has written numerous articles on the importance of individuals with disabilities advocating for themselves to successfully manage their services and supports.

DAN WILKINS: Since 1989, Dan has been an advocate, storyteller, and visionary for individuals living with disabilities and the culture to which they belong. Dan sits on several boards and advisory committees and also operates the Nth Degree, a progressive, forward-thinking graphic design company geared towards issues related to the disability rights movement.



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