

Partners in Policymaking®

Summary – Class of 2008

The Arc of Greater Cleveland's third class of **Partners in Policymaking®** gathered in Independence, Ohio for a five month two-day intensive leadership program. There were sixteen class participants comprised of six self-advocates and ten parents. They represented six counties throughout Northeast Ohio including urban, suburban and rural locations. Twenty five percent of the participants were male and thirty-three percent were represented minority interests.

Partners in Policymaking® is a leadership training program designed for adults with disabilities and parent of young children with developmental disabilities. The program teaches leadership skills, and the process of developing positive partnerships with elected officials and other individuals who make the policy decisions about services for persons with disabilities and their families. Partners is about system changes; creating, working towards, and achieving a vision of shared values about people with disabilities.

The purpose of the History session was to offer a foundation of the history of people with disabilities in our culture and society and how it affects the present and the future. Participants were encouraged to understand the past in order to develop a vision and direction for developing public policy that will positively impact the lives of people with disabilities by enhancing their independence and productivity.

The competencies gained during the session were that participants:

- gained an increased knowledge of the historical perspective of services for people with developmental disabilities.
- are able to describe the history and role of the parent movement.
- are able to describe the history and role of the independent living movement.
- are able to describe the importance and role of the impact of the self-advocacy movement.

Guest speakers offered personal examples and current trends based on the relative impacts of their specific movements. Participants were offered reflective opportunities on how their beliefs and values were established as well as where they were in space and time as it relates to the disability movements. From this training, participants were offered a resource tool in communicating across the generations and the impact of public policy on change. The participants were encouraged to begin to unite their voices and to remember that “we are our brother's keeper” and must work hard to include everyone in the struggle to impact public policy so that no one group feels “pitted” against another group.

Participants had evening hours to build natural supports and relationships with open discussion and dialogue during a welcoming reception sponsored by the Upside of Downs. New friendships have begun and an exchange of ideas has started to emerge. Partners were charged to develop a major project that they may leave as their “mark on the world.”

The purpose of the Inclusive Education session was to learn how children with disabilities can be successfully educated in regular classrooms at their neighborhood schools. Current laws mandate a free appropriate public education, but more than thirty years after PL 142-02 was passed in 1975 many students still receive their education in segregated settings. Partners learned how to be equal participants in the educational process.

The competencies gained during the session were that participants:

- were able to describe the reason for quality inclusive education.
- were able to outline specific strategies to achieve inclusion and quality education.
- were able describe assistive technology from low to high tech and how it supports students in accessing the general education curriculum and Ohio's academic content standards.
- were able describe assistive technology from low to high tech and how it can help a student transitioning out of high school to be more independent and self determined.
- were able to understand the changes under IDEA 2004 and its alignment with NCLB (No Child Left Behind)

Guest speakers offered personal examples and current information on Ohio policy and procedures. Participants were engaged in developing their internal philosophies for best practice in inclusive education s as well as systemic change opportunities. Speakers shared their expertise in the areas of special education law, assistive technology and best practice in community inclusion.

Parents and self advocates learned that it is important to be actively involved from the beginning. Active listening and perceptions play a key role in interaction with school districts. Some of the participants interviewed peers, friends and neighbors about their experiences and shared them with the group over the two days.

The purpose of the Local & State Service Coordination session was to help Partners understand how service coordination between state and local governments and agencies work to help both families and individuals with disabilities live quality lives. Participants learned about how agencies collaborate together and coordinate funding and services through their local Family and Children First Council. They heard how to communicate with their legislators at the local, state and federal level. Partners are learning how to tell their stories and were given several opportunities to practice getting their thoughts on paper and to develop the "elevator" speech.

The competencies gained during the session were that participants:

- will be able to demonstrate how to meet public officials and discuss issues.
- will start to build a shared vision with fellow participants for the year 2016.
- will be able to describe how a bill is made a law.
- will be able to demonstrate successful techniques for advocating for services to meet the need of unserved and underserved individuals.

- will be able to draft and tell their story to legislators and their staff.

The participants were given a rare insight into working with their elected officials and to remember that they are people too. Senator Bob Spada and Jane Campbell, past Mayor of Cleveland, County Commissioner and State Representative expanded upon their roles in state and local governments. The participants began developing an awareness of how to impact legislators through Making Your Case curriculum to sharing your story in 90 seconds. We also offered individual support and guidance to participants and encouraged them to make change happen for people with disabilities in Ohio. Participants also heard about available local programs and how service coordination works. The session ended with an intimate conversation with role play of talking with your local elected official and the group developed a vision for the year 2016.

The purpose of the Community Living session was to give individuals and their family members an understanding of how to plan for the future in the area of person centered planning, competitive/supportive employment, supported living/home of your own, and building community connections. Participants learned about advocacy and protective services and the impact self determination can make an individuals life. They also learned the importance of family support systems and needs for effective mental health and wellness.

The competencies gained during the session were that participants:

- will be able describe the importance of competitive/supportive employment opportunities
- will understand the types of supports necessary in creating a positive home environment, life in the community and using natural supports.
- will be able to develop a mission statement that is meaningful to themselves and their families.

Guest speakers on the first day prepared individuals and family members for preparation and transition into adulthood. For families the speaker spoke about the importance of family support. Participants learned about the importance of developing a mission statement for their child's future in order to help define the direction they want to work towards. Individuals were also challenged with the idea of developing their own mission statements. Both individuals with disabilities and parents listened as speakers spoke about self determination and personal choice. Class participants shared some of their home experiences with members and more individual stories were shared. The day ended with a discussion regarding personal protections and advocacy services and choices of guardianship as well as other decisions that need to be considered in planning for ones future.

On the second day person centered planning prepared individuals for their career choices and community selection of living accommodations. Speakers emphasized natural supports and community connections. The session ended with the participants beginning to plan a group mission statement.

The final Becoming an Active Participant session gave the self-advocates and family members an understanding of how to participate on boards and advisory councils, single issue campaigns and building collaborative connections, active participation and what that looks like. This final session takes the last four months of class work and builds upon that foundation to move the participants into a proactive level of systemic change and interaction with policymakers. This was our final session, graduation and reflection.

The competencies gained during the session were that participants:

- will be able to identify critical federal issues and the process by which they can personally address their concerns.
- will understand the role of when and how to use the media to effectively promote their issues.
- will be able to demonstrate successful techniques for advocating for services to meet the needs of un-served and underserved individuals.
- will be able to demonstrate proper procedures for conducting a meeting and have a basic understanding of parliamentary procedure and serving on boards.

Guest speakers on the first day prepared individuals and family members for effective participation in meetings through the use of parliamentary procedures, community organizing, and building coalitions. Participants organized their personal presentation for graduation ceremonies by preparing to give personal testimonies and completed a report on their individual project.

On the final day of class participants shared some of their homework assignments and more individual stories were shared about the learning that they are experiencing. Participants were challenged with the idea of fulfilling the promise to work with Partners Alumni within Ohio and around the Nation by the keynote speaker and graduate of Minnesota Partners in Policymaking®, Sue Swenson. The day ended with a circle of leadership ceremony and the presentation of graduation awards.

The participants have embodied their mission statement:

**Our vision as passionate advocates is to build an inclusive community that values, offers opportunities, and fosters self-determination for all people.
We will continue to influence policy through action, education, and promoting positive attitudes.**