



NYSILC NEWS BRIEFS

The New York State Independent Living Council (NYSILC) is a champion of systemic change promoting opportunities and full participation in all aspects of society for people with disabilities.

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Being Part of the Solution

By Susan Gray (NYSILC Vice Chair and Chair of Options for Independence)

It is easy to complain when we experience difficulties. As advocates, we at Options face accessibility issues on a daily basis. When the system doesn't function accordingly, we address it, but more importantly, we seek out solutions to the problem.

My difficulty voting in the most recent election put me in contact with Susan Cohen, of Voting Access Solutions, an independent consulting firm. Susan works closely with Dominion Products, the maker of the ImageCast Ballot Marking Device (BMD). This is the ballot machine that we all use when voting.

Most people do not need to use the built-in functions of the ImageCast BMD that assist people with disabilities. They would just mark their ballot and hand it to a poll worker, or personally feed it into the



machine to tally their vote. For people with disabilities, however, additional helpful functions range from an audio feedback to paddles and a straw that allow for independent voting.

Since its inception, Dominion Products has worked on the functionality of the ImageCast BMD, tweaking its programs to more effectively serve the specific disabilities. In 2009, the programmers worked on making the BMD more accessible to people with learning disabilities, but in doing so, the functionality for vision-impaired and blind users was compromised.

I was able to be a part of the trial of the new programming in December of 2011, when Susan Cohen and Dominion Products were at the Onondaga County Board of Elections. Several other people

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with disabilities were also there testing out the machine and giving their feed back to Cohen and the Dominion staff. I was brought to the ImageCast BMD and given a set of headphones and a handheld controller panel with several buttons. The buttons were clearly marked as up and down arrows, right and left arrows, a large "X" in the center, and a bar at the bottom for pausing the audio feedback. There were also smaller buttons that controlled the speed and volume of the audio feedback. Audio instructions were given at the outset to familiarize the user with the functions of each key. When comfortable with the control panel, the user hits the advance button to move on to the mock slate of items to vote for. For users like me, who cannot see the video screen at all, it was strongly suggested that the user turn off the screen, as the audio feedback works much smoother by doing so.

As I ran through the selections, voting for my favorite ice cream, season of the year, movie and musical group, I had no difficulty in following the prompts and completing each selection. At the end of the process, the user is given an opportunity to review the ballot to ensure its accuracy. Once confirmed, the ballot is printed out, and the process is complete. The only difficulty that I noted was in the ability to write in an answer or candidate. That process is very tedious, the programmer explained, and they just do not have a good fix for that at this time.

Before leaving, I completed a survey, which asked about the voting experience and whether or not I would be interested in joining a focus group, or being a part of future training. I look forward to these opportunities, and would also like to work with the Cayuga County Board of Elections to eliminate any future

problems for voters with disabilities, as I believe that all of us at Options have much to offer in the way of support and education toward improving this process for people with disabilities.

I was distressed to learn that many people with disabilities choose not to vote, and I would like to work on changing that mindset. The more responsibility we take in participating in the choices our government is making, the more effective we can be.

Disability Services at Empire State College

By Patty Camarota Black

I will be graduating from Empire State College in May with a BS in Human Services and Diversity. I am beyond excited to be finishing after 5 years of part-time readings, papers and individualized meetings with my faculty mentor. However, the hard work and long hours I have invested have all been well worth it as the knowledge I have gained has been invaluable and has helped me grow both individually and in my work setting at NYSILC. Also, Empire State is unique in the sense that it has offered a different type of learning experience from traditional college settings. As a result, aside from making study groups and mentor meetings at the college sites accessible, most reasonable accommodations are individualized because of the nature of the coursework.

Empire State hosts the Office of Collegewide Disability Services website, which provides information about the wide range of disability services it offers to students. Students request accommodations based on their own individual needs, and assistance is offered on a case-by-case basis.

Therefore, there is no set list of accommodations provided by the college. Just as I chose the individual course of study I would pursue at Empire, so students individually decide what would best and most precisely meet their individual needs. They then share that information with the specialist at the Disability Services Center at the college.

The unique aspect of Empire State College is based upon the individual relationship students develop with the individual mentor they receive when they are matriculated. If they feel comfortable disclosing their disability and requesting accommodations with their mentor, then this is the typical route travelled by most students to have their particular needs met. This personalized attention was actually very helpful for me with my disabilities, and I came to learn that if I requested accommodations costs would be covered by the college.

Finally, there is a distinct difference between simply talking about a disability with a mentor and requesting a special accommodation with a representative of the Disability Services Center. Both options are available to students, but the mentor relationship is preferred once established. Nonetheless, it was nice to know that as a student with a disability, I was entitled to all of the rights and protections covered under state and federal disability laws.

Attending Empire State was a wonderful and unique experience that was very rewarding. I believe anybody could benefit from the diversity and unique approach of this college, whether or not they use the resources provided by the Disability Services Center. For more information, please see www.es.edu/disability-services/.

Ch-ch-ch-ch-changes

By Brad Williams

The logo for SILC Congress is “connections” to highlight the benefit from networking with each other on issues. However, this year, the unofficial theme could have been had “changes.” Where to start? A new executive committee needed two replacement members by mid-year. The regional representatives were consistent throughout the year, but a few required others to fill in. The location and venue changed to Houston during what was a true transition year.

Once the Houston Marriott at the Texas Medical Center (see photo, right) was selected for January 7-10, 2012, more changes were in store.

Plenary and breakout sessions were developed by the program committee. The finance committee devised a budget and posted an Excel spreadsheet of expenses and revenues by quarter. The venue committee worked with the conference coordinator (who worked with all the committees) to address logistics related to conference space, A/V, food, and access needs. The Michigan SILC served as fiduciary, addressing registration, website and account management.

With all these changes, and a shorter timeframe to execute the plan, initial registration was slow, but picked up to where over 100 people participated at SILC Congress from 40 different states and territories (up from previous years). The SILC Net provided much needed technical support for the event. ILRU sponsored the opening reception where local peer and jazz musician Sebastian Whitaker had his trio entertain the group. Anecdotal feedback was positive related to various presentations. Evaluations will provide the final word. Other changes? The New York SILC put forward a resolution (signed by twelve other states and one territory) during the congress session that looked to firm up direction on policy for attendants, guest speakers, multiple formats for training materials, time frame for submitting resolutions, and creation of a policy committee to archive past congress materials and create a policy document. The one potential item that was taken out of the resolution and defeated was a move



to have SILC Congress alternate between a physical versus a virtual event during even and odd numbered years. A pre-assessment survey identified several issues (including costs) impacting on SILCs. Connecting in a virtual way is becoming a reality for many SILCs and applicable within our states. It was decided to have ILRU present on the topic of virtual meetings during next SILC Congress, which will be held in San Diego in 2013.

Oh...but there's more! About a third of the attendees were new to SILC Congress. In the debate to keep 2013 face-to-face, an appeal was made to have more colleagues step up and help with the event. Over a dozen individuals volunteered on the spot. Reflective of the change theme, many of these people were "first-timers" willing to get involved.

It was a very successful SILC Congress and as the song by David Bowie suggests, it was time to "Turn and face the strain."