



Don't Let Mental Illness Stop You from Working

*By Maura Kelly – Director Buffalo Peer Connection, NYAPRS President Elect and NYSILC council member
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When I first started working at Western New York Independent Living, I was one of "the working poor." But since then, I've worked hard, received promotions and salary increases and now own my own home and support my beloved greyhound. In other words, I control my life.

That wasn't always the case. I've been homeless, been in the hospital 13 times for psychiatric illness and have been declared unemployable.

During a five-year period when I wasn't working, I worried I'd never work again. It was stressful dealing with government red tape to receive a disability check, food stamps and health insurance.



It was stressful dealing with slumlords who wouldn't turn up the heat in the winter or fumigate the apartment for cockroaches. I had nothing to do on the days I wasn't in mental health treatment. I lived on Ramen noodles.

Now the only government reporting I do is my income tax, and I can pay someone to do that for me. I now have health insurance that's accepted almost everywhere in Erie County, so I can choose who treats my mental health and physical care needs. Best of all, I have a place to go during the week, and no matter how tough the day is at work, it's still less stressful than being unemployed.

Recent reports indicate that more than 70 percent of people with mental health disabilities able to work are unemployed.

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What I can't understand is that if the U.S. unemployment rate, which at around 8 percent, is considered too high, why isn't the jobless rate for those with serious mental health issues considered an unemployment epidemic? The unfortunate truth is that too many people believe that those of us with serious mental illnesses cannot - or should not - work. For that 70 percent, there is no expectation of work.

I believe successful employees need three skills: 1) show up, 2) be on time and 3) don't steal. If job seekers can keep their appointments when undergoing mental health treatment, why wouldn't they keep an appointment with an employer? I also don't see a rash of people with mental illnesses showing up late for appointments - or stealing things.

I've seen for myself that people with serious mental illnesses can work and contribute their talents and skills to their jobs. It may not always be a 40-hours-a-week job or a corporate position, but it is something of value. Yes, sometimes our symptoms flare and we may need to take a break, but that doesn't exclude us from working, volunteering and contributing to the community.

Many with mental illness fear it's too hard to transition from disability to employment. But there are work incentives and special programs to assist them in obtaining employment, volunteer opportunities and community involvement. They just have to say, "I want to work."

At Mental Health Peer Connection, we run two successful employment programs for people with mental health disabilities and people from poor economic backgrounds. We serve more than 500 people a year, and about one-third achieve their goal of employment. I've been where they are, and now that I'm working I totally control my life. If I can accomplish that, so can they.

Dignity Act Law Takes Effect

By Patty Black

The Dignity for All Students Act (*The Dignity Act*) was written to enable New York's public elementary and high school students to access their educations in safe, non-hostile environments. Whether attending classes, on school transportation, or at a school event *The Dignity Act* will seek to provide an environment that will prevent bullying, intimidation, discrimination or any type of harassment based on actual or perceived "differences." *The Dignity Act* was first signed into law in September 2010 and took effect on July 1, 2012. It amended State education law by creating a new Article 2 – Dignity for All Students. Also, *The Dignity Act* amended Section 801 of NYS Education Law regarding instruction in Civility and character education. In amending and expanding the law in this way, tolerance and respect for diversity are sought.



These expansions include (but are not limited to) the following:

- Different races
- Different weights
- National origin
- Ethnic groups
- Religions
- Religious practices
- Mental or physical abilities
- Sexual orientations
- Gender identity
- Sex

Also, under *The Dignity Act*, schools will have to gather and report data regarding specific incidents of discrimination and harassment. For more information, see *The Dignity Act Fact Sheet* link below:

<http://www.nyscenterforschoolsafety.org/files/filesystem/thedignityactfaq.pdf>

Hopefully, the expansion of these laws can provide a basis for ever more compassionate and tolerant environments in New York State's elementary and secondary classrooms.

Our Stake in Opposing the Voting ID Laws

By Joe Adler

In the wake of the disability community's momentous victory in the protracted voting machine and polling place controversies, a new threat to universal voting has emerged. A concerted national effort has been underway since 2010 to make the registration and voting process more cumbersome for poor

people, undocumented immigrants and non-drivers. Thirty-six states, including New York, have introduced voting legislation. The specific goal is to reduce the vote count among these groups in selected polling districts which traditionally vote Democratic. While not specifically targeting voters with disabilities, it is clear that our community is represented disproportionately among voters who are less well off, less mobile and less acculturated. Ten states have passed voter ID laws (Alabama, Kansas, Mississippi, Pennsylvania, Rhode Island, South Carolina, Texas, Tennessee, Virginia and Wisconsin), and in Florida a restrictive measure was put in place by executive order. According to the Brennan Center for Justice, each law is different. Some are waiting for preclearance under Section 5 of the Voting Rights Act, and others are in litigation at the state level. The wording of this act is specific and incisive, providing that that each state must demonstrate that its voting laws "have neither the purpose nor the effect of harming" its minority voters." In addition, Section Five freezes existing election practices in certain states until new procedures are reviewed.

Florida is an egregious example of the imposition of state Voter ID laws. In 2011 Governor Rick Scott requested the Secretary of State to identify noncitizen voters on the election rolls. A search of the database initially turned up 180,000 people who were registered to vote but could be noncitizens. Further checking narrowed this list to about 2600 out of a total of eleven million registered voters.

The shorter list was sent to county election supervisors with the recommendation that each of these persons be contacted by letter and directed to provide proof of citizenship within thirty days, or their name would be deleted from the voting rolls.

This procedure alarmed local election supervisors and civil rights groups, and prompted the Brennan Center for Justice to seek the intervention of the voting rights section of the federal Department of Justice.

In May 2012, Florida's inspection of motor vehicle and social service rolls for noncitizens was cited as a possible violation of both the Voting Rights Act of 1965 and the National Voter Registration Act of 1993. In addition, the Justice Department alleged that Florida officials bypassed the requirement of Section Five of the Voting Rights Act that proposals to change voting procedures be submitted in advance to either the federal court in Washington or the attorney general.

The government set a deadline of June 6, 2012 for Florida to either halt its voter review or come up with a more acceptable plan. Nonetheless, the Governor of Florida, Rick Scott, responded by refusing to order a halt to the purging of the voter rolls on the grounds that the federal government had exceeded its authority.

It is outrageous that we should be having to fight this battle nearly a half century after the passage of the seminal Voting Act of 1965, which Congress reauthorized in 2006. The wording of this act is specific and incisive, providing that that each state must demonstrate that its voting laws "have neither the purpose nor the effect of harming" its minority voters.

Some may argue that New Yorkers need not get involved in these legal battles, since no such measure is near enactment in our state. It is recalled that disability advocates in other states supported our protracted struggle for electronic voting machines and accessible polling places. Now we must come to their aid! As challenges to these laws make their way up through the federal court system, we must close ranks with stakeholders in other states and publicize this issue.

There is even a more compelling reason why these challenges to universal suffrage, the quintessential right of all Americans, demand a strong response. In the presidential elections of 1960 and 2000, the margins of victory for the winning party came down to a very small number **in one or two states.**

The politicians who have pushed through the voting ID measures are well-aware of these narrow victories. This explains why they are targeting their efforts within certain states and not others. The stakes are huge: control of the White House and the right to nominate replacements for Supreme Court justices who may retire or die in office during the next few years.

There is still time to act: We need to circle the wagons, rather than wait until the arrows are pointing our way!

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