COLEMAN INSTITUTE

INTRODUCTION & OVERVIEW

BACKGROUND

I have been President and CEO of a midsize nonprofit, OHI, located in Downeast Maine, for 36 years. We provide an array of services to persons with intellectual and developmental disabilities as well as people with mental illness in eight Maine Counties. We provide a Food Pantry and a Thrift Shop and also provide training to many other Maine agencies.

I am a former two-term President of the American Network of Community Options and Resources (ANCOR), am currently on the ANCOR Foundation Board of Trustees, and have been on the Boards of both AAIDD and CARF.

I have been guardian for a woman with multiple disabilities for 35 years and am a proud mother of an Occupational Therapist, Holli Diohep, and Nurse Practitioner, Misti Guerin.

In 2013, my third year of attending the Coleman Institute for Cognitive Disabilities Conference, in conjunction with ANCOR, I was in the front row of the audience when David Braddock, Ph.D., Conference Chair, Associate Vice President, University of Colorado; Professor/Executive Director, Coleman Institute for Cognitive Disabilities, introduced the incredibly inspiring and hopeful Rights of People with Cognitive Disabilities to Technology and Information Access. Needless to say, I was moved beyond words and knew that this Declaration was well overdue and too long in coming. I rushed right out the door and immediately signed on to the Declaration both for myself and my organization as did two other Mainers who were in attendance. If only we had been insightful and futuristic enough to have included, these Rights it in the Americans with Disabilities Act 25 years ago!!

One State’s approach to gaining the unanimous vote of a Legislature to adopt a Joint Resolution is, by the nature of State governments, very different than another State’s approach. Their structures, rules, leadership, and protocols can vary widely. It is important for each state to know the local legislative processes that are not always in the formal rules. Then BOTH the formal rules and the informal rules must be followed with dogged determination. In Maine for example, Joint Resolutions don’t require a Roll Call vote or the Governor’s signature.

Following are some brief tips on how we approached proposal and passage of a Joint Resolution in One Hundred and Twenty Seventh Maine Legislature.

TIPS

- Having one or more committed people spreading the word about the importance of the Declaration can make a huge difference.
- I was only one person, among several, who brought our dream to fruition.
• In 2013, I came home from the Colorado Conference making a pledge that I would advocate for support of this Declaration in any way I could until it reached the United States Congress.
• I started advocating and training my own staff, people supported, families, and the OHI Board of Directors.
• In 2013, when the State revised the State’s Olmstead Plan, I asked that the Declaration be included in the Plan. This is a great way to bring awareness about these Rights. While it was not specifically included, there was strong mention of technology for persons with disabilities.
• At the 2014 Coleman Conference the video showcasing the “Rights” was unveiled. I learned that the Colorado Legislature had just become the first State to pass a Joint Resolution regarding the “Rights”. I resolved that Maine would be the second State in the nation to do so!
• I returned from the 2014 Conference after seeing the video and recommitted myself to the passage of a Resolution in Maine and proposed that the Maine Association for Community Support Service Providers’ (MACSP) Legislative Committee adopt an initiative asking the Maine Legislature to pass a Joint Resolution as a part of its 2015 Legislative agenda. My request to the MACSP Legislative Committee, of which I am a member, was accepted and referred to the full membership.
• As Chair of the Maine Association for Community Support Providers (MACSP) Professional Development Committee, I showed the video to all of the members and spoke of the importance of people getting on the website and signing the Declaration.
• I continued to emphasize this at each monthly meeting.
• I showed the video to all of the Managers and Administrative staff of my own organization and asked them to support the Declaration.
• The Managing Director of MACSP and our part-time lobbyist began to talk with the leadership of both Houses emphasizing the non-partisan nature of the Declaration. Throughout the Session they kept educating the Legislative leadership and other Legislators.
• The House and Senate staff members are key to the successful passage and were reminded to keep the Declaration on the front burner!
• I asked that the Declaration initiative be a standing agenda item at each weekly MACSP Legislative Committee meeting.
• There must be a strong and persistent advocate for the Declaration – one who acts like a dog with a bone in her teeth!
• In order to get the Joint Resolution unanimously approved, we had to slightly change some wording because the Legislative leadership was fearful that some people could interpret some of the language as a mandate for funding and this would kill the Joint Resolution.
• Another change upon which we compromised was to use the term “intellectual disabilities and autism” instead of “cognitive” disabilities.
• We decided to accept the compromise to move the Declaration forward but will go back to the drawing board again to reassert that this should cover all people with cognitive disabilities.
• Continue to watch the Legislative Calendar to see when it is scheduled. Don’t let the Session end without it being scheduled.
• On May 19, 2015, the Maine House of Representatives and on May 20, 2015, the Maine Senate unanimously passed the Join Resolution.

After being inspired by the words and advocacy of Dr. Braddock and Peter Blanck, Ph.D., JD, University Professor Chairman, Burton Blatt Institute, Syracuse, it was an emotional moment for me to sit in the balcony of the Maine House of Representatives and watch the Speaker of the House bring down the gavel on the unanimous passage of this Joint Resolution!
• As Chair of the MACSP Professional Development Committee, I convinced our state association to hold a 2-day Technology Conference in Auburn, Maine on November 4th and 5th, 2015. Peter Blanck will be our Keynote Speaker and we will kick off the Conference with a showing of the Declaration Video. We will showcase technology innovations and continue to urge the participants to understand that access to technology for people with cognitive disabilities is right—not a privilege.

If Maine and Colorado can achieve this next step in our Civil Rights movement, you can make it happen in your State, too.

We have only just begun. There is a long journey ahead until we see every State pass a Joint Resolution, until it is embedded in each State’s Olmstead Plan, until each State and the Federal Government commit to adequately funding technology and until this Declaration is supported and funded through State and Federal Statute.

Optimistically submitted,

Bonnie-Jean Brooks