

Our Declaration of Independence says, "...all men are created equal, that they are endowed by the Creator with certain unalienable Rights that among these are Life, Liberty and the Pursuit of Happiness." Some self-advocates (working with The Harvard Project on Disability) said this another way in a very good reference booklet called ***We Have Human Rights***.

*"We are regular people. We are not a problem. Society is the problem. The problem is we are treated badly and denied rights. We don't need to be fixed. Society needs to be fixed. We are not broken. Society is broken. We must be included in decisions about our lives. We are in charge of our lives. Not some experts. We are tired of being labeled as 'mentally retarded.' We are people first before our disability."*

What these advocates were expressing was their right to be treated with dignity and respect. The UN Universal Declaration of Human Rights affirms that all people are born free and equal in dignity and with rights. People with disabilities are people first, and their rights should not be "special", but the same as everyone else. Either much more or less, is often expected of people with disabilities. For example, sometimes people with disabilities are expected to display better behavior in public than other people, to be seen and not heard, to be extra polite, to not talk back, to comply and follow all directions, to not engage in risky or rowdy behavior...and so on. And other times, people with disabilities are afforded low expectations. They aren't expected to excel, to be able to learn, to have feelings, to want privacy, to take charge of their lives, to make their own decisions, to have successful jobs, to engage in a relationship, and to participate in an activity fully and give it their full attention. Both sides of this expectation "coin" have the same effect –diminishing people. This is a violation of the right to dignity and respect.

Supporting people to exercise this right includes assisting people to understand their responsibilities to others and themselves. It is a real disservice to anyone to excuse his\her needless rude and disruptive behavior and pass it off as, "She\he doesn't know any better." This is the height of a low expectation and very destructive.

Supports must support people to understand socially acceptable behavior and know how to display this behavior. Efforts to enhance someone's self-image, like helping a person practice good hygiene and know what kind of clothes to wear to certain social events, enhances the ability of the person to exercise this right.

One of the greatest ways to help people exercise their right to dignity and respect is to support people to fully exercise their rights and understand their responsibilities as equal citizens, regardless of whatever challenges, disabilities, or barriers they may experience in their lives.

## **RIGHTS**

- Be accepted as a person.
- Not be discriminated against.
- Live safe and free from harm.
- Be involved in decisions affecting your life.
- Have your feelings, ideas, opinions and defined quality of life respected.
- Have privacy and have your information remain confidential.
- Have equal access to community, culture, work, social welfare, public services, and health care.

## **RESPONSIBILITIES**

- Observe the Golden Rule – Treat others as you want to be treated.
- Speak up for yourself.
- Accept consequences for your decisions
- Fulfill your duties to your family, friends, employers, and community.
- Respect the rights of others.
- Be charitable.
- Display socially acceptable behavior.
- Rights = Responsibilities.

## **SUPPORTS**

- Presume competence and set high expectations.
- Promote self-esteem, encourage independence.
- Use respectful People First language.
- Provide education about community resources and social services.
- Respect privacy, choices, feelings, ideas, and personal goals.
- Support development and attainment of meaningful goals.
- Know and honor what really matters.

### **Thoughts for Consideration:**

- ✓ How do team members show dignity and respect?
- ✓ How do team members insure that they respect personal differences?
- ✓ How do team members use person first language?
- ✓ What is presuming competence?
- ✓ Why is confidentiality so important?
- ✓ How do team members keep people safe and free from harm?
- ✓ How do team members encourage people to speak up for themselves?
- ✓ How do team members show that they value a person's abilities and inner qualities?
- ✓ Listen for words/conversations that demonstrate mutual respect
- ✓ Listen for words that encourage people to pursue their goals
- ✓ Seek to support, not to control what people do
- ✓ Rather than judge a person's behavior, search for meaning
- ✓ Encourage people to pursue community membership