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Though slavery ended in the 1800s, most African Americans did not have equality and the liberty to exercise rights as citizens for another 100 years. They experienced segregation and oppression in all aspects of their lives, including housing, education, and employment and voting. While “free,” these individuals were not given the same liberties that were assumed by other Americans. In the early 1900s, African Americans began to organize and advocate. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. and Rosa Parks became national figures who promoted human and civil rights messages. However, they would have not been successful without the steadfast strength of grassroots leadership across countless communities.

“In contrast, mass protests and demonstrations at the local level gave political leverage and credibility to national leaders who spoke on behalf of African Americans.”¹

Activism from these groups demonstrated results with the landmark Supreme Court decision in *Brown v. Board of Education* which led to the desegregation of public schools. With this victory, African American communities continued to build their grassroots strength. The voices of equality became so strong they resulted in the passage of the Civil Rights Act and the Voting Rights Act.

¹ Carson, Clayborne “African American Leadership and Mass Mobilization”, *Black Scholars* Vol 24, No 4; Fall 1994; 2-7

“The most successful black organizers of the 1960s established a mobilization that emphasized the nurturing of grassroots leaders and organizations.”²


In addition to legal and legislative accomplishments, success of the Civil Rights Movement developed not only a few national leaders but spurred advocacy by thousands of individuals in their own communities who collaborated to reach shared goals. These examples had far-reaching effects that led many Americans who were excluded from full participation and equal opportunity to organize and lead social change.

People with disabilities have experiences of segregation and oppression similar to those of the African American community because they are perceived by society as having a life not worth living. In the early 1900s individuals with disabilities were hidden and institutionalized, not allowed to live where they chose, to attend school or be employed. They were prevented from exercising basic rights, with limited access to liberties available and expected by citizens without disabilities. With examples of success by African Americans who organized and led their Civil Rights Movement, people with disabilities began to work towards claiming their rights.

Great lessons are to be learned from this history and applied by advocates with disabilities who are asserting their rights and calling for inclusion in their communities. One of the most important directives to follow is assuring that disability advocacy have more than a few loud voices. It must have the involvement and leadership of many. To be effective means working within the community and assisting others to become leaders in the movement. When many communities have countless voices proclaiming the same message, the impact will be widespread.

“Careful study of black freedom struggle offers support for the more optimistic belief that participants in a mass movement can develop their untapped capabilities and collectively improve their lives.”³

² Ibid



People with disabilities have made great strides toward equality with the passage of state and federal legislation in recent decades, including the 1990 Americans with Disabilities Act. However, they have not realized full integration into society. Today people with developmental disabilities still face barriers when it comes to attending college or working in community jobs that pay more than subminimum wages. They continue to confront service providers with outdated programs that impede the fulfillment of potential. There is also a struggle to build an advocacy movement led by people with disabilities who are the real leaders, not the providers of disability services, not parents, and not others who attempt to take charge.


Fifty years ago workshops were seen as innovative programs that provided opportunities for people with disabilities to attend a training program and be productive. Decades later, however, many in sheltered or other segregated work settings continue to face impediments to building skills and to prospects for moving into gainful community jobs. Sheltered workshops are still the norm for employment of individuals with developmental disabilities after leaving high school.

“Over the years, however, we have learned that preparing individuals with disabilities for employment in this manner often translates into unemployment. That is, individuals are far less likely to leave sheltered workshop and find competitive work than if they never entered them at all and went directly to work.⁴

Today, as a result of earlier civil and human rights movements, the focus of disability services and supports is aimed toward integration of people with disabilities, not on segregation. Many states are seeing the benefits of providing more opportunities for people with disabilities to contribute, to move out of sheltered workshop employment into real jobs that pay competitive wages. To achieve this goal for more than only a few, it will require people with disabilities themselves, self-advocates at the grass roots, state, and federal levels to come

³ Ibid

⁴ Aldridge, Karen “Sheltered Employment: If You Have to Ask the Price, You Can’t Afford It”, The Center for System Change; January 2012



together to speak for real equality and full integration. The barriers that remain and the organizations that continue to impede must change, but only when individuals with disabilities through strong leadership insist that this is what they need and must have to become fully invested citizens.

There is great appreciation by individuals with disabilities for the African American struggle and achievements in the protection of basic rights and access to opportunity. The Civil Rights Movement showed the way for people with disabilities to obtain full equality and entry into a more integrated world. Only when self-advocates organize and build leadership among themselves, will the disability rights movement be more successful. Individuals with disabilities must come together, gain skills and use meaningful support to advocate effectively for rights to independence, self-determination and full inclusion in their community and their country.

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State Council on Developmental Disabilities, Statewide Self-Advocacy Network
Statewide peer advocacy network that links advocates, communities, regions and statewide leadership.

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Board Resource Center (BRC)

Facilitates trainings and develops instructional media using accessible formats to support all individuals to engage in civic life. BRC is the statewide facilitator for the Statewide Self-Advocacy Network.

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