The Center for People with Disabilities: Independent Living through Consumer Choice

Maddie Offstein, 2019, Ecology and Evolutionary Biology
The Center for People with Disabilities – Boulder, CO
Funded by the Center for Health and Wellbeing under the Health Scholars program

Introduction
- The Center for People with Disabilities (CPWD) started in Boulder, CO, in 1977. The non-profit is one of over 400 Independent Living Centers (ILCs) nationwide. It provides services, to 5 counties in the state, that focus on:
  - Independent Living Skills
  - Advocacy
  - Information and Referral
  - Peer Support

Objective of Internship
This internship provided me with the opportunity to better understand the barriers people with disabilities face as they pursue more independent lives. It also allowed me to develop a more complex definition of ‘independence’ and to recognize how inherent the prejudice of ableism is in my thought processes.

Work profile
- Worked closely with the consumers of CPWD’s Independent Living Program (ILP) – an adult day program for individuals with disabilities that assists them in achieving their personal goals and helps to create a community.
- Designed curriculum for a skill-building series taught to youth that are enrolled in Colorado’s ASPIRE program.
- Performed research and taught classes on self-advocacy and self-determination.
- Met with outside partner organizations, to better understand the intersection of different public health issues (i.e. disability and homelessness).

Reflection
- When hearing the word ‘consumer’, a negative connotation is typically associated with the world – especially in healthcare settings. But, with the individuals that I worked with this summer in ILP, being a ‘consumer’ is empowering. The label implies that those that attend the day program are actively choosing to do so and that there is no element of dependence on CPWD to provide services. ‘Patient’ and ‘client’ – terms commonly used/preferred in public health conversations – inadvertently put the disability before the individual and imply that services provided are ones that attendees could not otherwise provide for themselves.

- Every week, I got to engage with the consumers on a personal level and witness the importance of encouraging independence through the practice of self-advocacy.
- I now recognize how the principal of consumer choice is key in preventing power imbalances at ILCs. Consumers have the option to opt out of any or all of the activities ILP engages in. This helps break down paternalistic assumptions about what is best for someone else and helps maintain autonomy in decision-making processes.
- I am grateful to have interned at CPWD because I now appreciate how important community building is for individuals with disabilities. Community needs to exist because I now appreciate how important community building is for individuals with disabilities.

- I am grateful to have interned at CPWD because I now appreciate how important community building is for individuals with disabilities. Community needs to exist because I now appreciate how important community building is for individuals with disabilities.
- I am grateful to have interned at CPWD because I now appreciate how important community building is for individuals with disabilities. Community needs to exist because I now appreciate how important community building is for individuals with disabilities.

Looking ahead
This internship has helped to clarify my interests and steer me towards a career in public health. I am now hoping to apply for one of Princeton’s Project 55 Fellowships or to continue my education through graduate school. Disability rights and the policy surrounding differential access to services are issues I would love to continue to study and understand from a holistic perspective – that always considers the person before the disability.

Questions
- How can other Independent Living Centers be encouraged to devote money and employee time towards the creation of their own day programs?
- How can the importance of creating community compete with other more tangible goals (i.e. providing transportation assistance) in the non-profit world where resources are especially limited?

Conclusion
There is a striking need for individuals with disabilities when it comes to creating a continuous sense of community post high school. Adult day programs, like CPWD’s ILP, seem to be a good first step towards meeting that need and should be based on the principal of consumer choice.

Acknowledgements
I would like to thank the CPWD staff, Lisa, Kia, Debbie, Jane, Maria, and most importantly the CPWD consumers, for allowing me to be a part of their community. Additionally, special thanks to the CHW and the Health Scholars Program. This transformative summer experience would not have been possible without their funding.