

Gail Godwin Testimony  
Senator Harkin's HELP Committee ~ June 24, 2014

For half a century or more, people with disabilities and their allies have demanded *community living*. Yet many people with disabilities are still removed from their communities in the name of treatment. Many of these people hope to return to their homes or start new independent lives, but are told they will not be allowed to do so until they reach a certain skill level or meet a particular standard of behavior. This is not a test that we impose on people without disabilities before we allow them to choose their own living situations. Yet despite ongoing advocacy, despite agencies implementing “best practices” and “state of the art” programming and facility building, countless people with disabilities are not living as real citizens in their communities.

It is popular to think about person centeredness and community living as a philosophy, however, it is *past time to execute* delivery of personalized services to all people with disabilities in the real community. People with disabilities of any level, like anyone else, want and are entitled to live in neighborhoods of their choosing, homes of their choosing, with schedules and relationships of their choosing. People want choices in hiring their staff, where services come from, and whether they want to use an agency or an individualized method without an agency.

Shared Support Maryland, Inc. has been in business for 8 years and offers fully inclusive, person directed supports in partnership with people with disabilities, their families, and other allies. We are one of fewer than 100 agencies in the country like this.

Our organization offers the same service types as other organizations: residential, habilitation, respite, employment and support brokering. We offer support to people with fragile medical needs, with significant ‘behavioral challenges,’ and with severe and profound intellectual disabilities. Shared Support Maryland uses the same funding sources available to all organizations and has found ways to offer fully person-driven and/or individualized supports to the people we serve.

Shared Support Maryland sees people with disabilities as partners in leading the organization. We are not an administration of experts who have years of experience in the field but lack the life experience of someone with a disability. Together we tackle the areas of:

- Service delivery

- Staffing management processes
- Ownership, control and power
- Organizational design and structure
- Quality assurance and compliance.

We work to promote self-determination. We view people with disabilities as competent people who deserve to have control of their lives and, because of that, behavior changes. Housing is separate from services. We do not co-sign leases or own property that is leased back to people. This is paramount and by not doing so we eliminate the possibility of a person choosing to change services and losing their housing. People interview, select, hire and manage their own staff. People have individualized budgets. Monthly meetings result in high accountability. People choose with whom they plan and spend time.

Any agency can offer and provide services so that community living is a reality. It means a lifetime of changes, challenges and successes for everyone and most importantly for the people who have chosen our agencies to provide them with services and support.