

These statistics demonstrate why it is important for individuals with learning disabilities to get diagnosed as early as possible, for them to receive appropriate educational services that will help them graduate school and for support to continue throughout their adult lives as well.

People with learning disabilities can be at a disadvantage in New York's current service system. Agency gate-keeping tactics such as eligibility restrictions for people to receive services, cutbacks or lack of funding in programs such as family support and educational counseling and the misguided notion that learning disabilities are solely an education department concern have created a disconnected service system full of cracks that many people with learning disabilities are falling through. New York's agencies are very compartmentalized. For instance, mental health services are offered by OMH, substance abuse services are offered by OASAS and OMRDD provides services to individuals with mental retardation and developmental disabilities. Our experience has shown us that when it comes to getting these services for people with learning disabilities, it can be a logistical nightmare. Here's an example: our LDA of the Capital District was working with a man we'll call "J", who had been diagnosed early on with learning disabilities and other emotional behavioral disorders. He was in need of mental health services but because they considered him "developmentally disabled" he was not able to receive services. On the flip side, when an attempt was made to get "J" some in-home residential habilitation services to help him with cooking skills, he was found to not qualify for services through OMRDD because he was *not* considered to have a developmental disability. This is just one example of how people with learning disabilities who need services don't fit neatly into any one particular agency box.

Many people with learning disabilities need a variety of support services that may not come from a single agency. In order for them to successfully maintain a job, many people need assistance in other aspects of their lives such as arranging child care, making and keeping required appointments, mental health or substance abuse counseling and social skills development. While the individual services may exist, people with learning disabilities may need a case manager or service navigator to help them access the services. There are currently no case management services for people with learning disabilities, unless they happen to fit the OMRDD eligibility criteria. Additionally, many service agencies may not understand or recognize individuals with learning disabilities in their systems, and as such, may not be able to deliver programs and services in a way that is meaningful and beneficial to individuals with learning disabilities.

LDANYS has two specific recommendations to improve access to current services and enhance future outcomes for individuals with learning disabilities in New York State. A key to people with learning disabilities getting appropriate services is acceptance of people with learning disabilities into the various service systems. Denying access to services in one system because they don't "fit" may keep costs down in one system but raise costs in another when more intensive intervention may be required. Since it is unlikely that in the governmental downsizing movement we will see the establishment of the Office of Learning Disabilities any time soon, it is imperative that state agencies' policies be reflective of the fact that because the needs of individuals with learning disabilities cross multiple systems and agencies, programs and services should be open to and accommodate *all* individuals, with and without disabilities. The Department of Labor has taken a step in the right direction through its welfare to work pilot programs designed to identify and assist individuals with learning disabilities on TANF find and

maintain employment. While DOL is not an agency that is typically considered a provider of services to people with disabilities, by acknowledging that many of the folks left on TANF despite successful welfare reform efforts may have unidentified barriers to employment, such as learning disabilities and developing a method to identify and assist them, many people have been able to move off the TANF rolls.

In lieu of an independent Office of Learning Disabilities, an alternative would be the establishment of a coordinating body, possibly a state-level interagency council, to work collaboratively on developing a feasible structure or process of cross-systems services for people with learning disabilities or at the very least, interagency agreements to serve people with learning disabilities if services are required from more than one agency.

In closing, LDANYS strongly urges the Most Integrated Setting Coordinating Council to consider the number and needs of people with learning disabilities in New York State when preparing and implementing its recommendations to ensure New York's compliance with the Olmstead decision and the Americans with Disabilities Act as well.