

THE YOUNG ADULT LEADERS FELLOWSHIP: EFFECTING CHANGE IN MASSACHUSETTS

by Anya Weber, with contributions from the staff of Massachusetts Advocates for Children

Suggested audiences for this brief: Disability, advocacy and legal organizations and individuals with disabilities and their families

During a legislative briefing at the Massachusetts State House, Val Maclver is talking to the House Chair of the Joint Higher Education Committee. They're discussing ways to improve job prospects for young people with disabilities after high school.

Val can relate to this topic: she's one of six young people, all with autism and/or intellectual disabilities, who have participated in the Young Adult Leaders Fellowship Program.

The fellowship is run by Massachusetts Advocates for Children (MAC), an advocacy nonprofit that protects the rights of young people with disabilities. The fellowship's goals are for participating youth to develop specific job skills related to advocacy, as well as "soft skills" such as working on a team, problem solving, and communicating effectively.

The fellowship provides an effective model to increase MAC's advocacy success. It uses the voices, perspectives, and expertise of individuals with disabilities to strengthen the organization, benefitting hundreds of students with disabilities and their families.

WHO ARE THE FELLOWS, AND WHAT DO THEY DO?

The fellows in the program are young adults with developmental disabilities (intellectual disabilities and/or autism), ages 18 to 26. They work for one year (20 hours a week) at MAC, doing office tasks and learning to advocate for themselves and on behalf of other youth with disabilities.

Fellows go with MAC staff to the Massachusetts State House to hear and participate in legislative debate. They take part in MAC trainings for parents and professionals, and attend IEP* meetings for MAC clients. The fellows receive a stipend to help cover expenses.

Fellows in the program benefit by learning advocacy skills and soft skills that they can use in future workplaces. The initiative also benefits MAC, by lending the power of young advocates to MAC's advocacy work. And it benefits Massachusetts by improving and enforcing the

laws and policies that protect the rights of young people with disabilities throughout the commonwealth.

Each fellow is paired with a legal intern (someone without disabilities) in a mentoring relationship. Disability experts from the Institute for Community Inclusion, a research and training institute based at the University of Massachusetts Boston, also support the fellows.

In this brief, we offer more details about what the fellowship involves and how the various participants benefit from it.

A DAY IN THE LIFE OF A FELLOW

A typical day for Val or other fellows involves any or all of the following activities:

- ▶ Participating in staff meetings at MAC
- ▶ Going to the State House with a MAC legal intern to observe a bill being debated
- ▶ Testifying or presenting about a bill
- ▶ Going for coffee with the legal intern to discuss the debate session and to troubleshoot note-taking skills
- ▶ Returning to the MAC office to assist MAC staff with clerical and administrative work related to an upcoming MAC training

Brian Heffernan, a MAC fellow in 2012–2013, described his experience at the State House:

Of all the tasks I did, I loved lobbying at the State House. I liked teaming up with MA State Representative Tom Sannicandro, who plays a major role in my life. Tom made it possible for the Inclusive Concurrent Enrollment bill he sponsored to keep going. That meant me and my friends could go to MassBay Community College. The other big reason I liked this job is that I got to speak on my own behalf of my experience at MassBay.

*Students with disabilities can have an Individualized Education Program (IEP). The IEP details the type of programs and services the student will receive while in public school.

During the first six months, in addition to learning and performing standard office tasks, the fellows shadow MAC staff as they conduct MAC's three core advocacy and training activities: advocacy for individual students with disabilities, legislative and policy advocacy, and legal training for parents and professionals.

The fellows initially observe MAC staff during client interviews, IEP meetings, mediations, hearings, trainings, policy initiatives, and legislative advocacy at the State House. The fellows are also supported as active participants of all office staff meetings and activities.

With intensive supervision from MAC staff, as well as guidance from their peer mentor law students, fellows gradually increase participation in advocacy activities. In the second half of the year, fellows choose whether to concentrate on case advocacy, legislative advocacy, or legal trainings for the remaining six months, with intensive supervision provided by MAC staff.

HOW FELLOWS BENEFIT

Fellows build job skills, gain confidence and independence, and learn about the legal system and state government. They develop self-advocacy skills that help them ask for accommodations in postsecondary education and future work settings. And they develop soft skills, such as appropriate office behavior, listening and responding to colleagues, managing anxiety on the job, navigating public transportation, use of cell phones in an office environment, and time management.

Harry Goulart, a MAC fellow from 2013–2014, talked about learning to make effective presentations:

I have participated in many autism, advocacy, and bullying trainings with MAC staff. I had to create a PowerPoint presentation on my life from high school to college to living on my own. The first PowerPoint I worked on was good but it was too long and it needed to be shorter. I learned the “10 slides, 20 minutes and 30 font size rule” and that made it shorter.

One training I went to and presented at was at the Boys and Girls Club of Dorchester. The audience listened to me carefully and liked what I had to say. They asked me questions about college when we were done presenting. I also did a bullying training in Somerville and another one at Roxbury Community College. If I had to pick, I would say the trainings were the best part of my work at MAC.

HOW MAC BENEFITS

MAC gets better results when fellows help advocate at the State House, IEP meetings, and legal trainings. Their experience, insights, and perspective are powerful and persuasive, and often help tip the balance for decision makers so that MAC achieves more positive results.

Julia Landau, a MAC senior project director who also directs the Disability Education Justice Initiative, stated: “Self-advocates have had an extraordinary impact. Legislative leaders have repeatedly told us that their ‘yes’ vote directly resulted from the testimony they heard or meetings they had with the fellows and other self-advocates.”

Fellows’ participation provides youth, parents, educators, and legislators with vital information about the potential of young adults with disabilities to succeed in the workplace. The fellowship also helps convey the importance of providing services and funding, and of enacting legislative reforms related to access to school and work for people with disabilities.

Fellows not only learn to advocate for themselves, but also for others with disabilities. They have played a key role in the development and piloting of new workshops for older youth with disabilities who are still receiving special education. They also learn how to ask for what they need at their IEP meetings, and provide important insights when MAC represents clients at IEP meetings, frequently helping to persuade districts to provide necessary services and accommodations.

MAC'S MISSION: EQUAL ACCESS FOR KIDS WITH DISABILITY

MAC's mission is to be an independent and effective voice for children who face significant barriers to equal educational and life opportunities. Children with disabilities in Massachusetts have always been a priority focus of MAC, beginning in 1970 when MAC exposed widespread exclusion of students with disabilities from public schools.

MAC is unique in combining legal and legislative advocacy with community outreach and technical assistance. The organization builds coalitions, helps empower parents and community leaders, provides technical assistance and training, conducts case advocacy, advocates at the administrative and legislative levels, writes reports and, when necessary, litigates to protect the legal rights of people with disabilities.

MAC has had a sustained focus on the needs of youth with disabilities ages 14 to 22, and provides legal assistance for individual students and families seeking to enforce their right to special education services.

With the support of supervising staff and law student peer mentors, fellows are fully included in MAC's mission based on their own strengths and preferences. The fellowship supports youth as they assume increasingly more challenging advocacy skills and apply those skills in both legislative and training activities.

IN THE HALLS OF POWER

To support MAC's transition advocacy efforts, MAC invited young people to testify at State House hearings. Maria Paiewonsky from the Institute for Community Inclusion (ICI) worked with Julia Landau from MAC to prepare the fellows to testify.

"Preparing testimonies for state house hearings has given young people with disabilities the opportunity to value their own story," Paiewonsky explained, "as well as experience the influence that their stories have on others. The process of constructing a testimony, getting feedback on drafts from a public policy advocate, and presenting their testimony before state house legislators and the public is an incredible moment of self-determination."

SUPPORTING THE FELLOWS THROUGH UNIVERSAL DESIGN

MAC has worked with ICI to universally design office procedures and activities to support the fellows. Universal design involves making changes that accommodate people with disabilities, and are also helpful to a wider population. Sidewalk curb cuts for wheelchairs are a classic example, since they benefit not only wheelchair users, but also people with suitcases, those on crutches, those pushing baby strollers, etc.

MAC's universally designed changes included providing a large calendar system in a common work space so that all employees can see each other's schedules, and posting simple office maps in every office that identify where each staff person is located as well as where fire exits are. MAC also provides problem-solving templates and visual reminders for workplace challenges, such as how to prepare for and participate in staff meetings, how to use unfamiliar software applications, and how to use an internal calendar system to reserve meeting rooms.

"All these changes to our office design and structure help our entire staff, not just the fellows," explained Julia Landau. "Learning not to have more than one person talk at a time, not to talk over each other in staff meetings--that helps everybody!"

PEER MENTORSHIP WITH LEGAL INTERNS

Law students and fellows are paired for the entire year of the fellowship, and attend weekly mentoring sessions together. The mentor-mentee pairs might also talk together about specific clients MAC is representing, or attend meetings together at the State House.

At their weekly meetings, the pairs discuss how to handle stressful work situations such as multiple demands from multiple people. They also talk about special education or legal issues that are being discussed in the office, processing information in client files, and preparing for public presentations.

ONE MENTOR COMMENTED:

Working with the fellows has been an incredible opportunity for me both personally and professionally. My work at MAC this year has been focused on transition, so it has been especially meaningful to have the chance to get to know young people with disabilities on a personal level.

In law school, I devoted myself to gaining experiences in child advocacy, but I did not often get the chance to spend time with youth themselves. I did not have much personal experience with children or youth with disabilities.

Getting to spend time with the fellows outside the context of advocacy in a legal case provided very helpful perspective for the work that I did. I learned from each of them—Harry, Lumene, and Val—by discussing the struggles they faced and the successes they had. Through their insight, I've been better able to advocate for my transition-age clients.

ANOTHER LAW STUDENT SAID:

I learned that Harry enjoys working at MAC and learning more advocacy skills and that he has a real passion for advocating on behalf of himself and others with autism. He is excited to do more work at the State House and to do more advocacy trainings.

It was really nice sharing with him and learning how he experiences work and advocacy. I was able to share some of my experiences advocating for people in different fields and talked a bit about the clients we have at MAC. I feel like I learned a lot about Harry and also learned about special ed programming and advocacy.

PREPARATION FOR ADVOCACY

The young adults start their fellowship by reading orientation material developed by staff. This material familiarizes the fellows to MAC, and to learning expectations, job responsibilities, and office procedures. They also get information about how a bill becomes a law, the special education process, and more.

To prepare the fellows to serve as trainers for MAC's advocacy workshops, staff developed step-by-step instructions with graphics as well as modeling to teach the fellows to create and rehearse their own presentations. Additional time was provided to the fellows to share their drafts with colleagues to solicit feedback. Through this process, they learn to accept and incorporate feedback into their presentations.

To promote the fellows' independent travel to meetings and trainings, which in some cases involved using several modes of public transportation, the supervisor also built into the fellows' work routine additional time to research public transportation options. Together, they mapped out not only how they would travel to a training or meeting, but also how much time they should allow for the commute.

To enhance fellows' participation in staff meetings, MAC staff helped them preview the meeting agenda and get ready to make contributions. In addition, at the request of one of the fellows, staff agreed to adjust the pace of the meetings, as well as take turns speaking. This allowed the fellows to better track the conversations and decisions (another example of universal design strategies that supported more active participation of all staff).

Daily journaling enables the fellows to review their development of advocacy and workplace soft skills. It helps improve their writing skills, and provides a basis for problem solving and supervision.

While the individual strengths and needs of each fellow differ, project staff are learning what issues to anticipate with fellows who have intellectual disabilities and/or autism, and worked with ICI to develop strategies and supports for organizations that are interested in launching a fellowship.

INDEPENDENCE AND SELF-MONITORING

To increase the fellows' work independence, the supervisor developed templates to email a daily task list to them. As a result, fellows have established semi-independent work routines that resemble those of their MAC peers. These task lists are clear and direct, and include directions about who at the office can offer additional instructions for specific tasks.

AS VAL MACIVER PUT IT:

I learned when to advocate and when it's not needed. For example, at first I had checked in with my supervisor a lot but eventually I learned that I didn't always need to check with her before starting a new task because I felt prepared. Basically, I'm working on becoming more aware of when I actually need help versus when I just want things to be restated to make me less anxious.

CONCLUSION

Want to learn more about the Young Adult Leaders Fellowship? Visit our website, where our fellows have pages describing their experiences:

<http://massadvocates.org/youngadultleadersfellowship/>

We also have resources for organizations that want to start a similar program.

Contact Catherine Mayes:

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For more information

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The Young Adult Leaders Fellowship has been a partnership between the Institute for Community Inclusion and Massachusetts Advocates for Children since its inception in 2012 as a demonstration project. It has been funded in part by Autism Speaks, the Cordelia Foundation, the Gould Charitable Foundation, the Kenrose Kitchen Table Foundation, the Mary B. Dunn Charitable Trust, and an anonymous donor.

Massachusetts Advocates for Children would like to thank Maria Paiewonsky of the ICI for her assistance with this brief and her enormous contributions to the Young Adult Leaders Fellowship Program.

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