Civic Engagement and
Disability: using advocacy
and technology to advance
the political participation of
people with disabilities

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Executive Summary

Background

Article 29 (Participation in Political and Public Life) of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities acknowledges the right of people with disabilities to participate in political and public life on an equal basis with others. Despite a strong history of civil and human rights for people with disabilities there continues to be significant barriers in accessing all aspects of the policymaking process. Disability policies have typically been developed on behalf of people with disabilities, rather than with their direct participation, and people with disabilities continue to have restricted opportunities to participate in public domains. Advocacy and technology are two core strategies used by the disability community to advance the rights of people with disabilities, and to increase participation in public domains. While there have been important successes, further understanding of how these strategies and tools empower people with disabilities to connect government is needed.

Methodology

The research aimed to develop and enhance civic knowledge and practices of people with disabilities. It undertook empirical qualitative analysis examining the role of various advocacy strategies and use of technologies to facilitate the full expression and needs of people with disabilities in policy debates. Specifically, it explored the following specific questions:

- How do people with disabilities engage with government; and what is the role of policy knowledge, technology and advocacy strategies in this engagement process?
- Why do people with disabilities to engage in policy debate; and what are the perceived barriers and facilitators to increasing civic participation?
- What is the role of augmentative and alternative communicate devices, accessible information technology in enabling and increasing access to government for people with disabilities?
- How do disability organizations build advocacy knowledge, enhance civic awareness and responsibility, and increase development of technology skills to enable people with disabilities to participate in policy debates?

To answer these questions, the researchers collaborated with four Chicago-based disability organizations to recruit people with disabilities and organization staff to join us in a participatory process to collect empirical data through multiple methods: community resource assessment involving informal interviews with key staff (n=3) and secondary analysis of organizational data (i.e. public meetings and advisory boards; training and education programs; textual and promotional materials; teleconferences, webinars and websites; social networking and listservs); civic engagement training, pre-post evaluation and focus groups with a broad range of adults with developmental, physical and sensory disabilities, including people who use augmentative and alternative communication devices (n=22); and interviews (n=8) with key stakeholders from disability organizations.

Results

After the training sessions, more participants reported understanding the policy process, including how they can become involved in making an impact in the decision making process. Participants also agreed that taking part in the training sessions strengthened their understanding and sense of efficacy related to civic engagement. Education and awareness raising were key strategies to encourage civic engagement in people with disabilities. The advocacy strategies cited as most successful for promoting empowerment and civic engagement included face-to-face meetings, letter writing/phone/e-mail campaigns, self-advocacy trainings, mentoring, and training in the use of technology. Major barriers included attitudinal obstacles such as lack of information about and receptiveness to the disability message, especially on the part of the government, and a lack of outreach to the disability community. Disability organizations were considered powerful facilitators for civic engagement, as was technology, provided people with disabilities could afford and use it. An individual summary of the three stages of data are presented below.

Community Resource Assessment: Disability organizations are a major facilitator to civic engagement and for application of the goals contained within Article 29 of the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities. The organizations in this research build advocacy knowledge through trainings, community education and organizing, technical assistance, and research publications. Advocacy is a core service for many of these organizations; advocacy efforts included education workshops, direct action, community outreach, and organizing interest

groups. Direct action such as face-to-face meetings with legislators were viewed as most effective, though some preferred to utilize technology to reach a larger number of decision makers more efficiently. The organizations tended to utilize technology and social networking to communicate with consumers, build awareness, and coordinate efforts. Some organizations provided technical training workshops and assistance to consumers to help develop their skills.

Training Evaluations: Although a post-evaluation was not conducted for PCIL, for the others, training was shown to have a positive impact before and after. For the six statements that were used across the evaluations the number of people who either strongly agreed or agreed with each statement increased following the training. The results suggest that the trainings were successful in teaching people with disabilities about becoming more involved in policy. Across all of the post-evaluations, only two of the responses disagreed (2.3%) with and three (3.5%) responses neither agreed or disagreed. This means that, in the end, over 94 per cent of the responses either agreed or strongly disagreed with the statements that the trainings covered. To summarize:

- After the training, more people understood the policy process, how to be involved and had the belief that they could make an impact.
- For people who agreed with the statements before the training, participating in the training strengthened their understanding.
- The trainings were an effective way to bring groups up to the same level of understanding.

Focus Groups and Interviews: Civic engagement was viewed as an essential for participation in civic society. Because policy knowledge was seen as key for effecting change, advocacy efforts focused on educating and empowering consumers, and raising awareness among the general public through media outreach. Staff emphasized the role of mentoring in empowerment and shared advocacy strategies they have found successful. Staff and participants largely viewed the government as unreceptive to their message and generally lacking in knowledge about disability policy. Many participants preferred to advocate in person, though the enormous potential benefits of using technology in advocacy were discussed. A lack of accessible online media, inability to afford technology, and limited technology skills were seen as major barriers to civic engagement. To summarize:

- Education and awareness raising were key for increasing policy knowledge and reducing feelings of apathy and disempowerment among people with disabilities.
- Successful advocacy strategies included in-person direct action, self-advocacy skills training, mentoring systems, and using technology for outreach.
- A lack of government accessibility, awareness of disability issues, and outreach to the disability community were seen as major obstacles to civic engagement.
- Technology was widely considered a useful tool, provided that people with disabilities had access and skills to use it.

Conclusion

The research provides important policy, advocacy and technology insights into the civic engagement experiences of people with disabilities and disability advocacy organizations. It draws on Article 29 of the CRPD to further our understanding of the effective tools and strategies so that people with disabilities can increase their involvement in public life. Increasing the political engagement of people with disabilities will ensure that new policies do not continue the cycles of oppression and marginalization historically experienced by this population. Parity of participation in civic engagement enables marginalized groups to be agents of social change. Through a community resource assessment, civic engagement trainings and empirical data gathered through pre-post evaluations, interviews and focus groups, this project identified key facilitators and barriers to developing and enhancing civic knowledge and practices of people with disabilities. The collaboration between individuals, disability advocates, researchers, scholars and service providers both with and without disabilities enabled an important participatory approach to research; thereby offering a unique and diverse perspective on an important public policy issue. The research provides individuals, advocates, disability organizations and policymakers a better understanding of how to increase, advance and support civic participation of all citizens. It is through advancing our understanding of the effective tools and strategies to increase involvement of people with disabilities, including adults who use augmentative and alternative communication devices, that we can ensure the rights of all citizens.