

LEGAL RIGHTS AND ASSISTANCE

Persons with spinal cord injuries are entitled to the same rights as all other citizens in the United States. Federal statutes support the legal rights of people with disabilities in many areas including education, transportation, accessibility, medical services, vocational rehabilitation and social security benefits. Each state also has its own statutory extension of legal rights of persons with disabilities through a variety of state laws.

The Office of Protection and Advocacy for Persons with Disabilities (P&A) was established in 1977 to promote the rights of children and adults with disabilities. The Office:

- Provides information on disability rights and services;
- Advocates for people with disabilities who have been discriminated against or who are experiencing difficulty securing relevant supports and services;
- Provides legal assistance within existing resources;
- Investigates complaints of abuse and neglect of adults with mental retardation and psychiatric disabilities;
- Provides training and technical assistance; and
- Supports the development of community advocacy groups.

In an effort to educate individuals about their rights and to give people resource information, P&A has available number of informational help booklets. Some of the areas covered include:

- Supplemental Security Income
- Social Security Disability Income
- Connecticut Fair Housing Laws
- Building Accessibility
- Planes, Trains and Automobiles
- Accessible Parking
- Your Rights to Vocational Rehabilitation
- How to File a Complaint with the Commission on Human Rights and Opportunities
- Access to Your Medical Records
- Disability Resources
- The American with Disabilities Act

Individuals may obtain copies of these booklets by contacting:

The Office of Protection and Advocacy for Persons with Disabilities
State of Connecticut
60-B Weston Street Hartford, Connecticut 06120-1551
(860) 297-4300 (Voice) (860) 297-4380 (TTY)
1-800-842-7303 (V/TTY in CT only) (860) 566-8714 (Fax)

Web Site: www.ct.gov/opapd
E-Mail: OPA-Information@po.state.ct.us

Being Your Own Advocate

In addition to advocacy efforts being made by the National Spinal Cord Injury Association, CT Chapter and The Office of Protection and Advocacy, self-advocacy is crucial. As noted in a P&A publication *Claiming Citizenship* written in 1982: “One of the important lessons learned from the civil rights history of persons with disabilities is that only people with disabilities themselves can really understand what is meant by their rights and be motivated purely by the need to attain them. Without strong and vocal representation by people with disabilities, the disability rights movement is particularly susceptible to being sidetracked by well-meaning reformers. The urgency of the movement at the present time (1982) cannot be overstated. As competing interest groups vie to survive the balancing of the federal budget, the civil rights of people with disabilities continue to be severely threatened. Furthermore, not just funding, but the laws themselves are in danger of extinction or, at the least, modification that would significantly weaken their effect.”

With P&A’s permission the “How To’s of self advocacy” are as follows:

Know your rights - In daily exchanges with people it is your own standards of respect that govern when you feel you must assert yourself or correct someone’s misconception about you. In more formal situations such as trying to get services or even dealing with a public employee such as a bus driver, it helps, and at times is essential, to know your rights. Some recent legislation has strengthened the position of people with disabilities but the laws are only effective if the people they are meant to protect know about them. Who else will bring attention to their violation? Publications such as those listed above available through P&A can be a good place to start to learn more about your rights.

Learn how to deal with bureaucracies - Remember that employees of government agencies are public servants, paid by your taxes to provide the services you seek. They are not doing you a favor. Try not to be intimidated or feel you need to apologize be prepared and learn the steps to escalate your efforts if need be. Assertiveness lessons might come in handy in addition to patience and persistence.

Join or organize an advocacy group - A collective effort can have greater impact than a single individual. This is especially true when advocating for the rights of people with disabilities. It pays to have an organization ready to take on an issue before it becomes a disaster, and to serve as a “watchdog” meanwhile, so that relevant agencies watch their step a little more carefully.

NSCIA, CT Chapter has an active Advocacy Committee, which is always looking for new members.

Get the legislature to respond - Every citizen should know who his or her elected representatives are and vote. You can find out who your state Senator and Representative is by calling your local town hall. Federal Senators and Congressmen are listed in the blue pages of your telephone book under “United State Government.” When there is a bill pending (state or federal) that you support or oppose or an issue you are concerned about, write, telegram or phone your elected official. Get a group to write. You can also make an impact through personal contact, especially with a group of people behind you. If you don’t how the legislative process in Connecticut works--make it your business to find out

Use the media - Never underestimate the “power of the press.” The media, including newspapers, radio and television can be an effective device either for publicizing a particular issue or gaining publicity for a group’s activities. Positive portrayals of people with disabilities are particularly important. Approaches can include press releases, features, community affairs programs and public service announcements. As we continue to see increased cuts in services increased public awareness of the needs of people with disabilities will be even more critical.

Legal Advice

Several attorneys in Connecticut have been involved in legal issues relevant to individuals with disabilities such as home care and durable medical equipment. Contact: Statewide Legal Services of Connecticut at 425 Main St, fourth floor, Middletown, CT 06457, (800) 453-3320 (telephone) or (860) 344-1918 (fax) for a referral to your local legal assistance office. For individuals on Medicare there is also: The Center for Medicare Advocacy at P.O. Box 350, Willamantic, CT 06226 (mailing address) or 11 Ledgebrook Dr., Mansfield, CT 06250 (physical address), (800) 262-4414 (telephone) or (860) 456-2614 (fax).

Additional Resources

One may also contact the following organization with questions and/or concerns:

Commission On Persons With Disabilities
Room 301, 27 West Main Street
New Britian, Ct 06051
860-826-3366