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PROMISING PRACTICES



Dedication and determination lead to empowerment for self-advocates

[Bridgewell](#) is a private, nonprofit human service organization that provides support to people with disabilities and other life challenges in eastern Massachusetts. In 2011, several persons receiving services at Bridgewell were active members of the statewide advocacy group called [Massachusetts Advocates Standing Strong](#). Through the group, these self-advocates learned about the success of local advocacy programs throughout the state. With the support of Bridgewell's leadership team, including Bridgewell's President and CEO Robert Stearns, they started their own local advocacy program called Bridgewell Advocates.

Bridgewell Advocates was established to educate and energize individuals about self-advocacy and to provide members of Bridgewell's community a place to come together and express themselves. It is a group made up of diverse self-advocates and supporters that meets monthly to discuss current topics influencing the lives of individuals with disabilities. Working together to promote self-determination, and inspired by the values of dignity and respect, members are empowered to make educated choices that improve and enrich their lives.

One benefit of Bridgewell Advocates is that the group facilitates participation in a variety of self-empowerment education and training resources. Various agencies run by the state of Massachusetts offer training programs designed to

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Volume 10, Issue 6
July 2015

About the ECS Promising Practices newsletter series

An organization receiving exemplary recognition in its CARF survey report stands out because of its professional and strategic response to a service or business need. CARF presents these ECS Promising Practices articles to encourage dialogue among service providers and to offer examples of creative solutions for improving service quality.

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teach specific types of self-advocacy skills. Members of Bridgewell Advocates have been educated on self-advocacy through the [Massachusetts Self-Advocacy Leadership Series](#), which is offered by the state government. This ten-week leadership series is a training that “seeks to help people improve their skills in the areas of decision-making and leadership.” Other trainings that members and support staff have completed include the [Awareness and Action training program](#), which teaches how to recognize and report abuse; the [Explore-Prepare-Act training program](#), which teaches how to prepare for, search for, and secure a job; and the [IMPACT ability training program](#), which teaches self-defense.

Using the education and empowerment offered by the program, Bridgewell Advocates members have thrived using their voices to advocate for equality. Members have presented at statewide conferences discussing their personal struggles of living with disabilities and have taught abuse prevention classes with the Awareness and Action program. Members participate in other associations that encourage and embrace individuality, such as the Massachusetts Department of Developmental Services’ Diversity Committee and the state chapter of the Rainbow Alliance, which supports persons identifying as gay, lesbian, bisexual, or transgender. In addition to these local and state-level legislative and social advocacy efforts, Bridgewell Advocates members are also involved at the national level through a group called [Self Advocates Becoming Empowered](#).

Brian Corbett, a member of Bridgewell Advocates, describes his involvement by saying, “It’s been a positive experience. I am not just a member of a group, but I am somebody who belongs. I am able to receive help and help others. I am able to find out what is going on in the community and how I can get involved. Being a part of Bridgewell Advocates has shown me my potential and helped me to use my voice to advocate for myself.”



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Brian Corbett at the 2015 National Self Advocates Becoming Empowered Conference in Oklahoma City, Oklahoma.

Another member, Elmer Marshall, discusses the recent election for governor of Massachusetts. "If I wasn't an active self-advocate, I would not have known that I could attend the Candidate for Governor's Forum on Health and Human Services. I went into the forum thinking I knew who I was going to vote for. When I left, my mind was changed. You have to educate yourself, because no one else is going to do it for you."



Elmer Marshall with former Massachusetts Governor Deval Patrick.

Finally, Bridgewell Advocates member Dianna Lopilato describes what a self-advocate is. "We are people. We are just like everyone else. We have our own thoughts and beliefs. We stand up for ourselves and help others to learn to do the same. We control our own lives by making our own decisions and take responsibility for the choices we make. We are always learning and growing. We just need a little help

sometimes, like everyone else.”

A recent [CARF](#) survey report noted the Bridgewell Advocates program for exemplary conformance stating, “The organization has an outstanding self-advocate program that includes self-determination and the individuals served advocating for transportation, health and safety, and job issues. Individuals actively participate in their communities, developing skills and a sense of empowerment. Self-advocates are active with legislative and citizen advisory boards.”

For more information about Bridgewell Advocates, visit www.bridgewell.org, or contact Kelli Hyland, assistant director of quality assurance and advocacy facilitator, at (339) 883-2125.

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