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PROMISING PRACTICES



Igniting the power of self-advocacy

By Julie Peters, communications director, and Alicia Munson, public policy and advocacy associate, Opportunity Partners.

Four years ago, Minnesota nonprofit disability organization Opportunity Partners (www.opportunities.org) launched the Committee of Advocacy and Leadership (COAL) to empower people served by the organization to stand up for themselves and ensure that their voices are heard.

Opportunity Partners serves 2,000 people with disabilities each year through programs that help them live, learn, and work more independently. As an organization receiving 80 percent of its funding from government sources, it is critical that employees are seated at the right tables to advocate for disability services. Although the organization had established a public policy initiative and designated staff to advocate on behalf of disability policy issues, before the establishment of COAL, it hadn't developed an effective way to consistently involve the people it serves (self-advocates) in these important efforts.

The establishment of COAL aimed to "ignite in others the power of advocacy." The group currently has more than 50 members, is participant-led, and is supported by several employees dedicated to public policy efforts. For individuals with disabilities, a population that has been systematically disenfranchised throughout history, self-advocacy is the foundation for success in all areas of their lives and has a positive impact on the community. Everyone at Opportunity Partners, from executive leadership to direct support professionals, values the mantra "nothing about us without

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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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Issues are categorized by topic: Business Practices, Community Services, and Employment Services.

us,” and strives to ensure that it is reflected in the services provided and the issues the organization advocates for.



COAL members and Opportunity Partners staff gathered on the steps of the Minnesota State Capitol in 2014 as part of a rally for a 5 percent rate increase for home and community-based services.

Together with staff allies, COAL members have organized meetings about legislative advocacy, accessible voting, healthy relationships, anti-smoking campaigns, anti-bullying efforts, and much more. COAL has also been active in the community by volunteering at Meals on Wheels; holding an annual food drive; organizing fundraisers, such as car washes; and attending conferences, including the national [Self-Advocates Becoming Empowered \(SABE\)](#) conference in Oklahoma City.

Brad Kellar, a self-advocate and COAL member, stated, “COAL has impacted my life because it has empowered me to have the confidence to stand up for what I believe in. People with disabilities are equal to everyone else, and it is time that we have our own voice. I believe in helping all people with disabilities, and COAL has helped everyone find their own voice.”

COAL and Opportunity Partners’ most notable effort in 2014 was their involvement in a statewide, nonpartisan coalition of advocates and providers called the 5% Campaign, which called for a 5 percent rate increase for home and community-based services after years of budget cuts. The rate increase, which was passed by the Minnesota legislature and signed into law by Governor Mark Dayton, helped reduce staff turnover and improve quality of care.

A recent [CARF International](#) survey report awarded exemplary recognition to Opportunity Partners for COAL, stating, “Opportunity Partners is commended for the support of



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[COAL] and in the level of advocacy to which it has risen.”
The Arc of Minnesota has also recognized these efforts by presenting a prestigious award to Opportunity Partners for its advocacy work.

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