

Developmental Disabilities Awareness Month and the Importance of Self-Direction

Thirty years ago, President Ronald Reagan deemed March to be Developmental Disabilities Awareness Month. Awareness months are an important advocacy tool, as they provide opportunities to reflect on progress and continue meaningful conversations about the future. For many people with developmental disabilities, ensuring these discussions take place can be the difference between being invisible and living as full citizens in their communities.

Developmental disabilities awareness is something near and dear to me, not only as the president of TMG by Magellan Health—supporting the largest self-directed long-term services and supports program of its kind in the country—but also because of my graduate work. During my practicum, I worked on the South side of Chicago, assisting low-income families who had children with developmental disabilities. Too often, these families, many of them single mothers, struggled to find the necessary services to help their children live as independently and inclusively as possible. The isolation the children experienced was heartbreaking.

Fortunately, in the 20 years since then, I've seen wonderful strides in the resources available for people with developmental disabilities, as well as greater expectations for community inclusion. Self-direction has played a crucial role in this progress. With self-direction, individuals choose not only the services they receive and who provides them, but also how they live their lives. This means people have control over things many of us take for granted: living where and with whom we want; making our own schedule; having meaningful, lasting relationships; pursuing our hobbies and passions; and

finding meaningful work or volunteer opportunities. There's been an amazing nationwide movement towards self-direction, which is not only a best practice, but also the cornerstone of TMG's work in Wisconsin's innovative IRIS (Include, Respect, I Self-Direct) program.

While there's been great progress in raising expectations and increasing opportunities and resources for individuals with developmental disabilities, there's still much to overcome on the path towards greater acceptance and inclusion. Thankfully, as community inclusion and self-direction are becoming more commonplace, society increasingly recognizes the contributions that people with developmental disabilities can make. As a leader in helping individuals create healthy, vibrant lives, Magellan Health is at the forefront of self-direction with its Wisconsin program, and is building a strong self-direction component in its new managed long-term services and supports (MLTSS) program, Magellan Complete Care of Virginia.

So as you make your way through March, take time to think about the people in your life and in your community and how we can all support one another. Learn how to be a better advocate for individuals with disabilities at sites such as [ACL.gov](https://acl.gov) and [NACDD.org](https://nacdd.org), and read stories of self-direction in TMG's [*The Path Ahead*](#). Encourage and support inclusion and independence whenever you can. But mostly, take the time to get to know people for who they are and appreciate their individual gifts and talents.