



Empowering Voices

Teaching Self-Advocacy &
Self-Empowerment Skills to Consumers

By the Access Center for Independent Living

Training Webinar | 6-Hour Workshop | CIL Staff

Training Overview

**6
Hours**

Duration

A 3-Day training format.
Presentation, optional
activities and open
discussions.

**CIL
Staff**

Audience

CIL staff members who
work with consumers to
live independently in the
community.

**6
Modules**

Structure

Progressive modules
building from
foundations to
leadership and action
planning.

Learning Objectives

By the end of this training, staff will be able to:

- 1** Explain self-advocacy and self-empowerment
- 2** Teach consumers to identify their rights and responsibilities
- 3** Help consumers recognize personal strengths and abilities
- 4** Support consumers in making informed choices
- 5** Teach effective communication and self-advocacy strategies
- 6** Assist consumers in developing self-directed goals
- 7** Foster confidence, leadership, and self-determination

A photograph of a person wearing a vibrant green, long-sleeved shirt, sitting at a light-colored wooden desk. Their hands, with red-painted fingernails, are positioned on the keyboard of a silver laptop. A large, semi-transparent blue rectangular box is superimposed over the center of the image, containing the text 'Your Facilitators' in a bold, dark blue font. To the left of this box is a solid purple square. In the top right corner, there are additional decorative elements: a blue rectangle and a purple rectangle. The background is a plain, light gray wall.

Your Facilitators

Barbara Butler-Thomas

Barbara Thomas is a disability advocate, youth transition professional, curriculum developer, and community leader with over 10 years of experience at the Access Center for Independent Living. She earned her Bachelor of Science in Rehabilitation Services from Wright State University and has dedicated her career to supporting youth and adults with disabilities. Barbara also serves on the Dayton Human Relations Council Board. Outside of her professional and community work, Barbara is an entrepreneur with an event planning and catering business. She wholeheartedly enjoys spending quality time with her husband and their four children, family, and friends.



Lisa Marn, M.Ed. WIP-C

Lisa Marn has a Bachelor's degree in Psychology and a Master's degree in Rehabilitation Counseling. Lisa had a 27-year career at a center for independent living. She now owns her own business called Benefits to Independence, LLC. She is a work incentives planner which helps those with disabilities understand what happens to their benefits when they go to work. She is also a consultant for Ohio Statewide Independent Living Council. Lisa lives in her own condo in Willoughby with her retired service dog, Tahiti, and cat, Rosie.



1

MODULE 1

The Independent Living Philosophy

Understanding the importance of CIL staff upholding the IL philosophy.

The Foundation of Our Work

The Independent Living Philosophy is based on the belief that:

People with disabilities are the experts on their own lives.

People with disabilities have the right to make choices and direct their own futures.

Disability does not diminish a person's value, rights, or potential.

Individuals should have the same opportunities, choices, and control as anyone else.

Key Principle:

Nothing About Us Without Us

Consumers should be active participants—not passive recipients.

The IL Philosophy for Consumers

We believe consumers:

- ✓ Are the experts in their own lives
- ✓ Have the right to make informed choices
- ✓ Should direct their own goals and services
- ✓ Have strengths, abilities, and potential
- ✓ Deserve equal opportunities to participate in their communities
- ✓ Benefit most when staff empower rather than rescue

Key Message:

Independent Living is about choice, control, and self-determination—not doing everything alone.

Why Staff Must Be Mindful

Good Intentions Can Create Dependence

Sometimes staff want to help so much that they accidentally :

- Speak for consumers
- Solve problems too quickly
- Make decisions on behalf of consumers
- Limit opportunities for growth

The Result:

Consumers may become dependent on staff instead of developing confidence in themselves.

The Support Continuum

Staff Reflection: *"Locate where I fall in my interaction with consumers."*

Doing For

Staff takes over the task of doing everything for consumer.

Example: "I'll make the call for you."

Doing With

Staff provides support while the consumer participates.

Example: "Let's make the call together."

Supporting From Behind

Consumer leads while staff provides encouragement.

Example: "You've practiced this and have done so well. I'll be here if you need support."

Rescuing vs. Coaching

We Are Not Rescuers | Our job is not to control outcomes.

We Are Coaches | Our job is to:

- Encourage
- Educate
- Support
- Build confidence
- Teach skills
- Promote choice

Be Mindful: *Staff should never speak to any consumer like a child. We also do not need to be constantly talking.*

The Goal: Help consumers become their own best advocates.

Move from **Doing For** → **Doing With** → **Supporting From Behind**

Dependence vs. Empowerment

When We Rescue

- Confidence decreases
- Dependence increases
- Skill development slows
- Consumers may doubt their abilities

When We Empower

- Confidence grows
- Skills increase
- Self-determination develops
- Independence expands

Ask Yourself

"Am I helping this person get by today, or equip them with skills to help themselves tomorrow?"

Understanding Disability Identity

People experience disability differently. Some individuals see disability as:

- An important part of who they are
- A culture and community
- A source of pride
- A lived experience that shapes perspective
- Others may still be exploring their identity.

Staff Role:

Respect how consumers define themselves.

Models of Disability

Staff Reflection: *How might these models change the way staff work with consumers?*

Medical Model

The problem is within the person.

"How do we fix the individual?"

Social Model

The problem is within barriers.

"How do we remove obstacles?"

IL Perspective

People with disabilities are capable when given equal opportunity and support.

Video Suggestions For Continued Learning On: IL Philosophy

- **The Independent Living Movement: A Brief History** (University/CIL-produced history videos) Search: *"Independent Living Movement history"*
- **Crip Camp (Trailer or Selected Clips)** Excellent for understanding disability culture and the roots of the disability rights movement.

[Crip Camp on Netflix](#)

- **Ed Roberts: The Father of Independent Living** Search: *"Ed Roberts Independent Living YouTube"*
- **Judith Heumann TED Talk: Our Fight for Disability Rights** Search: *"Judith Heumann TED disability rights"*
- **What Is the Social Model of Disability?** Search: *"Social Model of Disability animation"*

2

MODULE 2

Understanding Self-Advocacy & Self- Empowerment

Understanding what self-advocacy and self-empowerment mean and why they matter for consumers.

Two Essential Skills

*Self-advocacy and self-empowerment are closely connected but are **not the same**. They are both two important skills needed for independent living and self-determination.*

Self-Advocacy

The action of speaking up, making choices, expressing needs, and exercising your rights.

Self-Empowerment

The belief that you have value, choices, and the ability to influence your own life.

Understanding Self-Advocacy & Self-Empowerment

Before we can help consumers develop self-advocacy skills, we need to understand what drives those skills. A person may know how to advocate, but if they don't believe their voice matters, they may never speak up. Likewise, a person may feel confident but not know how to advocate effectively. Self-empowerment and self-advocacy work together to help individuals become more independent, confident, and self-determined.

Key Takeaway:

Self-Empowerment gives people the confidence to act.

Self-Advocacy gives people the tools to take action.

Understanding Oppression

What Is Oppression?

Oppression occurs when individuals or groups experience unequal treatment, exclusion, limited opportunities, discrimination, or loss of power because of their identity.

People with disabilities may experience oppression through:

- Low expectations
- Discrimination
- Exclusion from decision-making
- Segregation
- Overprotection
- Lack of access and accommodations
- Being treated as incapable

Understanding Oppression (cont.)

Oppression Can Occur Through:



Families

- Making decisions without the individual.
- Overprotecting or limiting opportunities.
- Assuming the person cannot be independent.



Professionals & Service Systems

- Speaking to family members instead of the consumer.
- Making decisions for consumers.
- Ignoring consumer preferences.
- Assuming incompetence.

Understanding Oppression (cont.)

Oppression Can Occur Through:



Society

- Physical and attitudinal barriers.
- Discrimination and stigma.
- Limited employment opportunities.
- Exclusion from community life.

Key Message:

Oppression often limits opportunities, voice, and self-determination—not ability.



Understanding Ableism

What Is Ableism?

Ableism is discrimination, prejudice, or unequal treatment toward people with disabilities based on the belief that people with disabilities are less capable, valuable, or worthy than nondisabled people.

Many individuals with disabilities have encountered ableism throughout their lives. Ableism can come from society, systems, professionals, families, and sometimes even from within ourselves. While often unintentional, low expectations, overprotection, and making decisions for consumers can reinforce ableism. As CIL staff, we must continually examine our own assumptions and presume competence, recognizing that consumers are the experts in their own lives.

Understanding Ableism (cont.)

Individual

Negative attitudes, stereotypes, or assumptions.

Examples:

- Assuming a person cannot make decisions.
- Speaking to a support person instead of the consumer.
- Assuming disability means inability.

Systemic

Policies, practices, or environments that create barriers.

Examples:

- Inaccessible buildings.
- Lack of accommodations.
- Excluding people with disabilities from leadership roles.

Understanding Ableism (cont.)

Internalized

When people with disabilities begin to believe negative messages about themselves.

Examples:

- "I can't do that."
- "Others know better than I do."
- "My opinion doesn't matter."

Staff Reflection:

How can staff unintentionally reinforce ableism while trying to help?

Key Message:

Low expectations are one of the most common forms of ableism.

People with disabilities should be presumed competent and supported in directing their own lives.

Recognizing Internalized Oppression

Many people with disabilities have spent years hearing messages such as:

- "You can't."
- "Let someone else do that."
- "You aren't capable."
- "You should be grateful for whatever you get."
- "Others know what is best for you."
- Over time, these messages may become internalized.

Quote:

"When you are fed garbage long enough, you develop a taste for it."

Recognizing Internalized Oppression (cont.)

Internalized Oppression May Look Like:

- "You decide for me."
- "I can't do that."
- Fear of making choices.
- Avoiding leadership opportunities.
- Believing one's voice does not matter.
- Accepting poor treatment or low expectations.
- Reluctance to advocate for rights.

Staff Reflection:

How can I help consumers replace limiting beliefs with empowerment and self-determination?

What Self-Advocacy Can Look Like

Speaking Up

Using your voice to express needs and wants

Making Choices

Exercising your right to decide for yourself

Finding Resources

Learning how to obtain information and support

Knowing Rights

Understanding your rights and responsibilities

Building Support

Creating networks and support systems

Self-Determination

Problem-solving and directing your own life



What Self-Empowerment Can Look Like

Confidence

Believing in your abilities and strengths

Goal Setting

Identifying and working toward personal goals

Decision-Making

Making informed choices about your life

Self-Worth

Recognizing your value and believing you matter

Independence

Taking responsibility and increasing self-reliance

Taking Initiative

Acting on opportunities and solving problems

Why Both Matter

When consumers develop both skills, they are more likely to:

- Make informed decisions
- Participate in planning meetings
- Advocate for accommodations
- Increase independence
- Set and achieve goals
- Build healthy relationships
- Improve employment and community outcomes

Common Barriers to Self-Advocacy

Staff Reflection: *"What is preventing my consumer from advocating for themselves?"*

Fear

Anxiety about consequences or rejection

Low Confidence

Doubting one's own ability to speak up

Past Experiences

Negative outcomes from prior attempts

Lack of Knowledge

Not knowing rights or available options

Learned Dependence

Years of others making decisions

Communication

Barriers to expressing needs effectively

Barriers to Self-Advocacy

Staff Reflection: *"How can I support my consumer with overcoming the identified barrier?"*

Fear

Anxiety about consequences or rejection

What it may look like:

- Fear of speaking up
- Fear of rejection or conflict
- Fear of making mistakes
- Fear of losing services or relationships

How staff can support:

- Create a safe, judgment-free environment.
- Validate the consumer's feelings without reinforcing the fear.
- Break advocacy tasks into small, manageable steps.
- Practice conversations through role-playing before real situations.
- Attend meetings as a support person when appropriate.
- Celebrate attempts, not just successful outcomes.
- Remind consumers that advocating for themselves is a right, not a problem.

Barriers to Self-Advocacy

Staff Reflection: *"How can I support my consumer with overcoming the identified barrier?"*

Past Experiences

Negative outcomes from positive attempts.

What it may look like:

- Distrust of professionals or systems.
- Belief that speaking up does not matter.
- Reluctance to participate in meetings or planning.
- Avoidance of advocacy opportunities.

How staff can support:

- Listen without judgment.
- Acknowledge the person's experiences and feelings.
- Avoid dismissing their concerns.
- Help identify positive advocacy experiences.
- Build trust through consistency and reliability.
- Empower the consumer to make choices about their level of participation.

Barriers to Self-Advocacy

Staff Reflection: *"How can I support my consumer with overcoming the identified barrier?"*

Learned Dependence

Years of others making decisions for them.

What it may look like:

- Waiting for others to solve problems.
- Assuming others know what is best.
- Lack of confidence in making choices.
- Overreliance on family members, staff, or caregivers.

How staff can support:

- Ask consumers what they want before offering solutions.
- Encourage independent decision-making.
- Offer choices rather than directions.
- Use a coaching approach instead of a rescuing approach.
- Allow consumers to experience natural consequences when safe.
- Gradually reduce support as skills increase.

Barriers to Self-Advocacy

Staff Reflection: *"How can I support my consumer with overcoming the identified barrier?"*

Low Confidence

Doubting one's own ability to speak up.
Lack of self-esteem.

What it may look like:

- "I can't do that."
- Looking to others to make decisions.
- Avoiding opportunities to lead or participate.
- Doubting personal strengths and abilities.

How staff can support:

- Focus on strengths rather than deficits.
- Help consumers identify past successes.
- Encourage decision-making in everyday situations.
- Provide positive and specific feedback.
- Allow consumers to take the lead whenever possible.
- Set achievable goals that build confidence over time.

Barriers to Self-Advocacy

Staff Reflection: *"How can I support my consumer with overcoming the identified barrier?"*

Lack of Knowledge

Not knowing rights or available options.

What it may look like:

- Not understanding rights and responsibilities.
- Uncertainty about available services.
- Difficulty navigating systems.
- Not knowing who to ask for help.

How staff can support:

- Teach disability rights and consumer rights.
- Explain available resources and services.
- Break information into manageable pieces.
- Use plain language and visual supports when needed.
- Encourage questions.
- Provide opportunities to practice newly learned skills.

Barriers to Self-Advocacy

Staff Reflection: *"How can I support my consumer with overcoming the identified barrier?"*

Communication

Barriers to expressing needs effectively.

What it may look like:

- Difficulty expressing needs and wants.
- Trouble understanding information.
- Anxiety during conversations.
- Limited communication methods.

How staff can support:

- Use clear language.
- Allow extra time for responses.
- Teach assertive communication skills.
- Practice self-advocacy scripts.
- Utilize communication aids and assistive technology when needed.
- Identify what way consumer communicates the best.
- Encourage multiple ways of communicating (verbal, written, visual, technology-assisted) if capable.

Advocate or Not?

Being presented with each scenario, ask yourself: "Is the person self-advocating? Why or why not?"

Requesting an accommodation at work

Choosing not to attend an IEP meeting

Asking questions at a doctor's office

Choosing to continue to live with your parents as an adult

Shifting the Narrative

**IT'S IMPORTANT THAT STAFF LEARN HOW TO SHIFT THE NARRATIVE
OF LIMITATIONS WITH THEIR CONSUMERS.**

Shifting the narrative from a focus on limitations to one of capabilities is vital to foster autonomy, build self-esteem, and promote true inclusion. It directly transforms internalized stigma into personal empowerment, enabling individuals to engage fully in society and the workforce.

Shifting the Narrative

FROM

"What can't you do?"

- Burdens
- Victims
- Dependent
- Incapable

TO

"What are you good at?"

- Capable
- Empowered
- Independent
- Resilient

ACTIVITY OPTION

Strength Discovery

Provide the "My Strengths" worksheet for consumers. Staff practice facilitating this exercise.

Personal Strengths

Talents

Skills

Interests

Accomplishments

Support Systems

Video Suggestions For Continued Learning On: Self-Advocacy & Self-Empowerment

- The Arc Self-Advocacy Series [The Arc National Official Website](#)
- "What Is Self-Advocacy?" by self-advocate organizations Search: *"What is self advocacy disability"*
- Haben Girma TED Talk Search: *"Haben Girma TED Talk"*
- Alice Wong discussing Disability Visibility Search: *"Alice Wong Disability Visibility YouTube"*
- The Power of Believing in Yourself (TED-Ed/TEDx) Great confidence-building supplement.

3

MODULE 3

Strategies for Supporting Consumer- Directed Independent Living Goals

Shifting from limitations to strengths with your consumers.

What Are Consumer-Directed Goals?

Consumer-directed goals are:

- Chosen by the consumer
- Important to the consumer
- Based on the consumer's vision for their life

Staff Role:

Support the goal, not control it.

Staff Reflection:
“Whose goal is it?”

Strategies When Supporting Consumer With Setting Goals

Staff can:

- ✓ Ask open-ended questions
- ✓ Help identify strengths
- ✓ Break large goals into smaller steps
- ✓ Explore options and resources
- ✓ Encourage informed decision-making
- ✓ Celebrate progress

Example:

Instead of - "You should get a job."

Ask - "What would meaningful employment look like to you?"

Supporting Choice & Control of Consumer

Ask:

What do you want?

What matters most to you?

What options do you see?

How can I support you?

Avoid:

Telling consumers what they should do

Assuming what is best

Making decisions for them

Special Note: When others are involved-- Know their role. Confirm authorization. Keep the consumer at the center. (We will discuss confidentiality and guardianship more in Module 4).

SMART Goal Setting

Consumer Goal Example: "I want to use public transportation independently."

S	Specific	Clearly define what you want to achieve
M	Measurable	How will you track progress?
A	Achievable	Is this realistic with available support?
R	Relevant	Does this matter to the consumer?
T	Time- Bound	What is the target date?

Staff: Practice coaching rather than directing.

Decision-Making Guidance

SCENARIO

"A consumer wants to pursue a goal that staff would not choose."

What is the staff role?

What is the consumer role?

How do we support without controlling?

Community Resource Navigation

Staff Must Know What Exists. To effectively support consumer growth, staff should continuously learn about community resources.

- Housing programs
- Transportation options
- Employment supports
- Benefits planning
- Recreation programs
- Peer support
- Civic engagement opportunities
- Volunteer opportunities
- Social groups
- Disability organizations
- Systemic Advocacy Issues and Advocacy Groups

Teaching Strategy:

Don't simply provide resources.

Teach consumers how to find resources themselves.

How Aware Am I About Resources?

When assisting consumers with their own journey toward independence, it is imperative that staff keep themselves up to date on the resources in their community; new programs, law changes, etc. Take a few subjects and think of what information you know about:

Housing

Transportation

**Peer Support
Groups**

**Community
Engagement
Opportunities**

**Law Changes and
Updates**

**Other Organizations
in the Community**

Video Suggestions For Continued Learning On: Goal Setting & Community Participation

- **SMART Goals Explained**
Search: *"SMART goals explained video"*
- **Person-Centered Planning Overview**
Search: *"Person Centered Planning disability video"*
- **Independent Living Skills Success Stories**
Search: *"Center for Independent Living success stories"*
- **Self-Determination and Choice Making**
Search: *"self determination disability"*
- **Nothing About Us Without Us**
Search: *"Nothing About Us Without Us disability rights"*

4

MODULE 4

Rights, Responsibilities & Choice

Consumers cannot advocate for rights they do not know they have. Make sure consumers understand disability rights, disability history, responsibilities, and informed decision-making.

The Story of Disability Rights

Why It Matters

Consumers need to understand the conditions before disability rights were established.

People with disabilities were often:

- Institutionalized
- Excluded from schools
- Denied employment
- Segregated from communities
- Viewed as incapable

Staff Discussion:

"How might years of exclusion affect a person's confidence and willingness to advocate?"

Why Disability History Matters

Why It Matters

Understanding Our History Builds Advocacy

Many consumers have never been taught:

- How disability rights were won
- Why accommodations exist
- Why Centers for Independent Living exist
- Why self-advocacy matters

Without understanding history, rights often feel like privileges instead of protections

Staff Role:

Help consumers understand that rights were earned through advocacy and leadership.

Important Dates To Cover

It is important for consumers to be made aware of important milestones in Disability Rights History.

1964--Civil Rights Act (disability not included)

1968--Architectural Barriers Act

1970--Urban Mass Transit Act

1973--Rehabilitation Act

1975--Developmental Disabilities Bill of Rights Act

1975--Education of All Handicapped Children Act

1978--Amendments to the Rehabilitation Act

Please Note: There are so many milestones, so you have the freedom to bring awareness to other dates and times. Even connecting different milestones to a consumer's current situation can be extremely helpful.

Important Dates To Cover (cont.)

It is important for consumers to be made aware of important milestones in Disability Rights History.

1983--Amendments to the Rehabilitation Act

1985--Mental Illness Bill of Rights Act

1988--Civil Rights Restoration Act

1988--Fair Housing Amendments Act

1990--Americans with Disabilities Act

1996--Telecommunications Act

1996--Air Carrier Access Act

Please Note: There are so many milestones, so you have the freedom to bring awareness to other dates and times. Even connecting different milestones in your particular area, to a consumer's current situation, can be extremely helpful.

Examples of Disability Leaders To Mention

It is important for consumers to be made aware of important leaders in Disability Rights History.

Ed Roberts - Father of Independent Living Movement

Judith “Judy” Heumann - Disability Rights Activism

Justin Dart Jr. - Americans with Disabilities Act

Joan Leon - Co-founded the World Institute on Disability with Ed and Judy

Wade Blank - Founded Atlantis and ADAPT

Max Starkloff, Charlie Carr, and Marca Bristo - founded the National Council on Independent Living (NCIL)

Justin Dart - Played a prominent role in the fight for passage of the Americans with Disabilities Act; seen by many as the spiritual leader of the movement today

Lex Frieden - Co-founder of Independent Living Research Utilization (IRLU); directed preparation of the original ADA legislation and its introduction in Congress.

Liz Savage and Pat Wright - "Mothers of the ADA"

Teaching Consumers About Their Rights

Why It Matters

Consumers cannot advocate for rights they do not know they have.

Understanding rights helps consumers:

- Make informed decisions
- Request accommodations
- Participate in their communities
- Address discrimination
- Build confidence and independence

Staff Role:

Educate, encourage, and empower consumers to understand and exercise their rights.

Rights Consumers Should Know

Education Rights

- Accommodations
- Equal access
- IEP participation

Employment Rights

- Reasonable accommodations
- Equal opportunity

Community Rights

- Transportation access
- Housing access
- Public access

Healthcare Rights

- Access & accessibility
- Accessible communication
- Equal treatment

What Is A Reasonable Accommodation?

A reasonable accommodation is a change that helps ensure equal access.

Examples:

Employment

- Modified schedule
- Written instructions
- Assistive technology

Education

- Extended testing time
- Note-taking assistance

Community

- Accessible transportation
- Communication supports

Staff Teaching Tip:

Help consumers practice requesting accommodations before they need them.

Rights & Independent Living

1

Independent Living Philosophy

People with disabilities are the best experts of their own needs

2

Consumer Control

Decisions about services and goals belong to the consumer

3

Equal Access

Full participation in community life as a fundamental right

4

Self-Advocacy Principles

The right to speak, choose, and direct one's own life

Discussion: What rights do consumers have? | What choices should belong to consumers? | How can staff unintentionally take power away?

Rights Come With Responsibilities

Consumers have the right to:

- ✓ Make choices

Consumers also have the responsibility to:

- ✓ Learn information
- ✓ Consider consequences
- ✓ Communicate respectfully
- ✓ Follow through on commitments
- ✓ Participate in decision-making

Staff Role:

Educate, encourage, and empower consumers to understand that along with having rights, they also have essential responsibilities.

Confidentiality, Boundaries & Release of Information

Consumer confidentiality is part of respecting consumer choice and control.

Family members, caregivers, providers, case managers, and other organizations may be important members of a consumer's support system—but involvement does not automatically mean they are entitled to information about the consumer.

Staff Role:

A supportive family member is not automatically an authorized person. Consumer choice and confidentiality still matter.

Confidentiality, Boundaries & Release of Information (continued)

Staff should:

- Protect the consumer's private and confidential information.
- Speak directly with the consumer whenever possible.
- Follow the CIL's Release of Information (ROI) procedures before sharing information with outside individuals or organizations.
- Make sure the consumer understands what information may be shared, with whom, and for what purpose.
- Share only information that is authorized and necessary.
- Maintain professional boundaries when family members or others request information.
- Document appropriate authorization according to CIL policy.

Staff Reflection: "Do I have the consumer's permission and proper authorization to include this person in the conversation?"

Guardianship & Consumer-Directed Services

When a Consumer Has a Guardian

Guardianship can affect how CIL staff communicate, obtain consent, share information, and make decisions with everyone involved.

Staff should:

- Determine whether a consumer has a legal guardian and understand the guardian's authorized role.
- Follow CIL policies regarding documentation and communication with the guardian.
- Understand that the scope of guardianship matters and should not simply be assumed.
- Include the guardian when legally required or appropriate.

Guardianship & Consumer-Directed Services (continued)

Staff should:

- Continue communicating directly with the consumer, not only the guardian.
- Encourage the consumer to express preferences, participate in planning, and develop self-advocacy skills to the greatest extent possible.
- Clarify roles when the consumer, guardian, family members, providers, and CIL staff are all involved.
- Maintain confidentiality and appropriate releases of information for other parties involved.

Key Message: *Guardianship may change who has legal authority for certain decisions, but it should not erase the consumer's voice.*

Staff Reflection: *"How can I respect the guardian's legal role while still maximizing the consumer's participation, voice, choice, and self-determination?"*

Trauma-Informed Care: Supporting Consumers with Compassion

What Is Trauma-Informed Care?

Trauma-informed care is an approach that recognizes that many individuals have experienced trauma and seeks to create environments that promote safety, trust, empowerment, and healing.

People with disabilities may have experienced trauma related to:

- Abuse, neglect, or exploitation
- Bullying or discrimination
- Institutionalization or segregation
- Medical trauma
- Loss of independence or control
- Repeated experiences of not being heard or believed

Trauma-Informed Staff Practices

As staff, we can support consumers by:

- ✓ Creating physical and emotional safety
- ✓ Providing choices whenever possible
- ✓ Explaining processes and expectations clearly
- ✓ Respecting consumer control and self-determination
- ✓ Listening without judgment
- ✓ Avoiding coercion, pressure, or intimidation
- ✓ Recognizing signs of trauma and responding with compassion

Key Question for Staff

"What happened to this person?" rather than **"What's wrong with this person?"**

Key Message : Trauma-informed care aligns with Independent Living Philosophy by honoring consumer choice, dignity, empowerment, and control.

Trauma-Informed Staff Practices

Trauma responses may look like:

- Distrust of professionals or systems
- Reluctance to participate in services
- Anxiety during meetings or appointments
- Difficulty making decisions
- Avoiding difficult conversations
- Strong emotional reactions
- Withdrawal or isolation
- Difficulty trusting others
- Hypervigilance or heightened fear responses

Remember:

Behaviors are often adaptive responses to past experiences. Understanding trauma can help staff respond with empathy and support rather than judgment.

Staff Response

- Remain calm and patient.
- Build trust over time.
- Offer choices and options.
- Move at the consumer's pace.
- Focus on strengths and resilience.
- Avoid re-traumatization.



Safety Is A Right

Every Consumer Has the Right To:

- ✓ Be treated with dignity and respect
- ✓ Feel safe in their home and community
- ✓ Set personal boundaries
- ✓ Say "no"
- ✓ Make decisions about their own life
- ✓ Report concerns without fear
- ✓ Be free from abuse, neglect, and exploitation

Staff Role:

Help consumers understand that safety is not a privilege—it is a right

Teaching Personal Boundaries

What Are Boundaries?

Boundaries are limits that help protect a person's:

- Physical safety
- Emotional well-being
- Personal space
- Time and energy
- Privacy
- Finances

Consumers Understanding Personal Boundaries

Examples of phrases that are great for consumers to know how to use:

"I don't want to discuss that."

"I need some personal space."

"I am not comfortable with that."

"No, thank you."

Staff Discussion:

Why might some consumers struggle to establish boundaries?

Teaching Consumers That “No” Is a Complete Sentence

Many consumers have spent years being told:

- What to do
- Where to go
- What decisions others think they should make

Self-advocacy includes the ability to say:

- ✓ No
- ✓ Not right now
- ✓ I need more information
- ✓ I need time to think
- ✓ I would like another option

Key Message: Consumers should understand that respectful disagreement is not disrespect.



Recognizing Exploitation

What Is Exploitation?

Exploitation occurs when someone takes advantage of another person for personal gain.

Examples include:

- Taking someone's money
- Manipulating someone's decisions
- Pressuring someone into unwanted activities
- Misusing personal information
- Taking advantage of trust

Staff Role:

Help consumers recognize warning signs and know where to seek help.

Warning Signs Of Exploitation

Consumers may experience:

- ▶ Pressure to give money
- ▶ Someone making decisions for them
- ▶ Threats or intimidation
- ▶ Isolation from supportive people
- ▶ Unwanted control over finances
- ▶ Being told they are incapable of making choices
- ▶ Feeling afraid to say no

Staff Discussion:

How might exploitation look different for different consumers?



Abuse Can Take Many Forms

Physical Abuse

- Causing physical harm

Emotional Abuse

- Threats, humiliation, intimidation

Financial Exploitation

- Misuse of money or resources

Sexual Abuse

- Any unwanted sexual contact or behavior

Neglect

- Failure to provide necessary care or support

Important Reminder:

Abuse can happen in families, relationships, workplaces, service systems, and communities.

Teaching Consumers How To Respond To Unsafe Situations

Encourage consumers to:

- ✓ Trust their instincts
- ✓ Set boundaries
- ✓ Seek support
- ✓ Document concerns
- ✓ Report abuse or exploitation
- ✓ Contact trusted professionals when needed

Practice Questions For Consumers:

Who could you call?

Who do you trust?

What would you do if someone crossed your boundaries?

When Abuse & Exploitation Is Suspected

Staff should know:

- Agency reporting procedures
- Mandated reporting requirements (if applicable, varying by state)
- How to document concerns
- How to connect consumers with appropriate resources (Ombudsman offices, Fair housing organizations, local Area Agencies on Aging, etc.)
- How to support consumer choice while maintaining safety obligations

Key Message:

Safety concerns should always be taken seriously

Emergency Preparedness Is Part of Independence

Being prepared for emergencies helps consumers maintain:

- ✓ Safety
- ✓ Independence
- ✓ Confidence
- ✓ Self-determination

Emergencies can happen at any time:

- Severe weather
- Power outages
- Medical emergencies
- Transportation disruptions
- Fires
- Community disasters

Staff Role

Help consumers think ahead and develop plans before an emergency occurs.

Does the Consumer Have an Emergency Plan?

Staff should encourage consumers to consider:

- Where would I go?
- Who would I contact?
- What medications do I need?
- What supports do I rely on?
- What transportation options do I have?
- What accommodations might I need?

Discussion:

Would my consumers know what to do if support systems were temporarily unavailable?

The Importance of Updated Emergency Contacts

Consumers should be encouraged and supported to regularly review:

- ✓ Emergency contacts
- ✓ Family supports
- ✓ Friends
- ✓ Service providers
- ✓ Medical contacts
- ✓ Transportation contacts

The Importance of Updated Emergency Contacts (cont.)

Coaching Questions To Ask Consumers:

- Is this phone number still correct?
- Is this person someone you trust?
- Does this person know they are your emergency contact?
- Do you have more than one emergency contact?

Key Message

An outdated emergency contact list may not be helpful during a crisis

Building a Personal Emergency Preparedness Plan

A simple preparedness plan to complete with consumers should include:

- Emergency Contacts
- Medications
- Medical Information
- Transportation Options
- Important Documents
- Backup Supports
- Communication Needs
- Emergency Supplies

Encourage consumers to keep the plan in an easily accessible location.

Emergency Preparedness Considerations for Disability Needs

Some consumers may need to plan for:

- Mobility equipment
- Service animals
- Medical devices
- Communication supports
- Medications
- Personal care assistance
- Backup power sources
- Accessible transportation

Staff Role

Help consumers identify needs and develop backup plans.

Staff Reflection: Emergency Planning

Think about one consumer you currently support.

Ask yourself:

- Do they have an emergency contact list?
- Is it updated?
- Do they have a preparedness plan?
- Would they know what to do during a community emergency?
- What support might they need to improve their preparedness?

Goal

Help consumers become active participants in their own safety planning.

Teaching Informed Choice

Choice ≠ Staff Approval

Always Remember:

Consumers have the right to make choices staff would not make.

Staff responsibility:

- Provide information
- Discuss risks
- Discuss benefits
- Explore alternatives
- Respect final decisions

Building Safe Decision-Making Skills

When faced with a difficult situation, encourage consumers to ask:

- Does this feel safe?
- Am I being pressured?
- Do I have all the information?
- Can I take more time to decide?
- Who can I talk to about this?
- What are my options?

Key Message

Empowerment includes making informed decisions while protecting your own safety and well-being.

Decision-Making Assistance

When teaching consumers to make choices, ask:

1. What are your options?
2. What are the benefits?
3. What are the risks?
4. What support do you need?
5. What could happen next?
6. What choice feels right to you?

Video Suggestions For Continued Learning On: Rights & Disability History

- **The 504 Sit-In Documentary Clips** Search: *"504 Sit In documentary"*
- **ADA Anniversary Videos** [ADA National Network Official Website](#)
- **Judith Heumann: Disability Rights History** Search: *"Judith Heumann 504 Sit-In"*
- **Understanding the ADA** [ADA National Network Learning Resources](#)
- **Olmstead Decision Explained** Search: *"Olmstead decision disability rights video"*

5

MODULE 5

Teaching Communication Skills

Helping consumers express needs clearly and confidently in real-life situations.



Why Communication Matters

Consumers often lose opportunities because they:

- Don't know what to say
- May feel intimidated
- Avoid difficult conversations
- May fear conflict
- Have limited communication experience

Communication is one of the most important self-advocacy skills.

Common Communication Styles

Passive

Example:

“I’ll just go along with it.”

Aggressive

Example:

“I demand this right now.”

Assertive

Example:

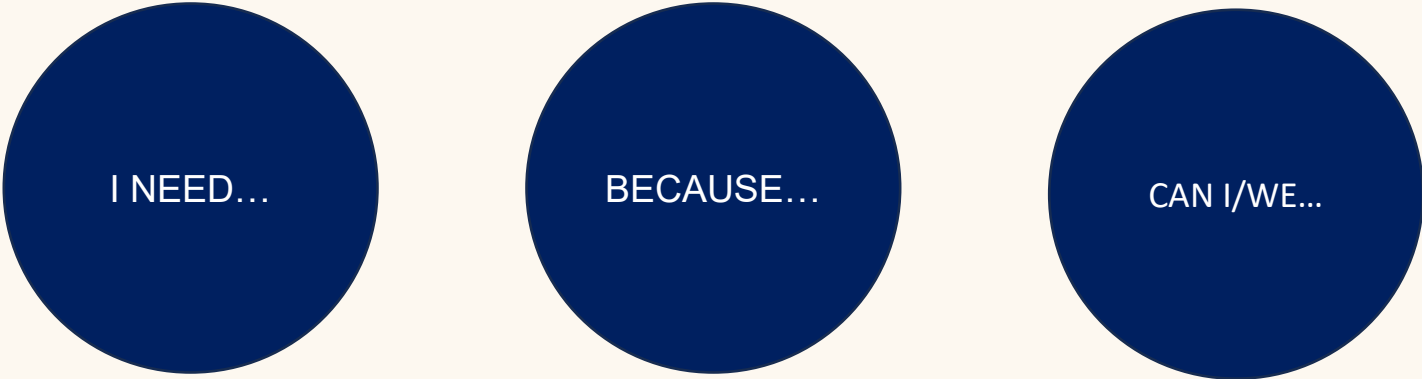
“I respectfully need this accommodation.”

Goal:

Teach assertiveness.

The Assertive Communication Formula

Teach consumers to say:



I NEED...

BECAUSE...

CAN I/WE...

Example:

"**I need** written instructions **because** I process information better when I can read it. **Can** those be emailed to me?"

Understanding Nonverbal Communication

Communication often includes:

- Tone
- Facial expressions
- Eye contact (when appropriate)
- Body language
- Listening

****Staff MUST understand to be cautious when teaching nonverbal communication. An individual's nonverbal body language can be affected by various disabilities. This needs to be clearly understood that not everyone can control their facial and body language, and this can cause additional oppression on individuals when addressed.***

Active Listening Skills

Teach consumers by first exemplifying the same skills:

- ✓ Listen without interrupting
- ✓ Ask clarifying questions
- ✓ Repeat information back
- ✓ Summarize understanding

Example:

"So what I'm hearing is..."

Conflict Resolution Focus Areas

Teach consumers to:

- Stay calm during overwhelming or frustrating situations

*Staff **MUST** approach this with patience and understanding. This can be very difficult for individuals and staff can easily take a controlling and chastising approach if we don't check ourselves. This can also be a trigger for some consumers.

- State concerns that they may have
- Explain how something is impacting them
- Request a solution to an issue
- Listen to responses of others
- Problem solve together with someone they disagree with

Communication & Accommodations

Staff should recognize:

- AAC devices
- Visual supports
- Written communication
- Speech-to-text technology
- Interpreters
- Support persons

Consumers may communicate differently without communicating less effectively.

Communication: Self-Advocacy Scripts

Tool for Staff: Explain to consumers that everyone communicates differently. The following examples are some tools they can use when advocating for themselves and interacting with others in the community.:

Doctor Appointment

"I have questions before making a decision."

Employer

"I need an accommodation to perform my job effectively."

Landlord

"Can you explain the application process again?"

Service Provider

"I would like to discuss other options."

The Self-Advocacy Formula

Teach consumers to clearly communicate:

1

What I Need

Identify the specific need
or issue

2

Why I Need It

Explain the reason and
context

3

My Requested Solution

Propose a clear, actionable
solution

EXAMPLE

"I need written instructions because I learn best when I can read information at my own pace."

Role Plays: Practicing Communication

Use the following topics and practice self-advocacy communication in real-world scenarios with consumer as needed:

Requesting accommodations

Talking with landlords

Talking with employers

Talking with doctors

Resolving conflicts

Saying “No”, respectfully

Speaking in meetings

Disagreeing with someone

Reporting a concern

Asking for clarification

The SELF Framework

Tool for Staff

S**Speak Up**

Encourage consumers to use their voice

E**Explore Options**

Help discover information and possibilities

L**Lead Your Life**

Support consumer-directed decision making

F**Follow Through**

Build accountability and sustained progress

Ask: What does the consumer want? | What information do they need? | What barriers exist? | How can I support without taking over?



Video Suggestions For Continued Learning On: Communication & Assertiveness

- **Assertive Communication Skills** Search: *"Assertive communication TEDx"*
- **Passive vs. Aggressive vs. Assertive Communication** Search: *"communication styles training video"*
- **Active Listening Skills** Search: *"active listening skills video"*
- **Conflict Resolution Skills** Search: *"conflict resolution workplace communication"*
- **AAC and Alternative Communication Overview** Search: *"AAC explained video"*

6

MODULE 6

Building Leadership & Self-Determination

The disability rights movement was built by people advocating for change

Leadership Skills to Teach

Speaking Up

Finding and using your voice in all settings

Problem Solving

Working through challenges with creative solutions

Listening

Understanding others' perspectives and needs

Confidence Building

Growing self-assurance through practice and success

Teamwork

Collaborating and supporting peers

Community Involvement

Engaging in civic life and advocacy efforts

Teaching Consumers To Lead Their Own Services

One of the most important leadership skills is directing your own supports.

Encourage consumers to:

- ✓ Participate in planning meetings
- ✓ Set their own goals
- ✓ Ask questions
- ✓ Express concerns
- ✓ Evaluate progress
- ✓ Identify support needs

Staff Role:

Support participation without taking over.

Leadership Opportunities Everywhere

Leadership development doesn't always require a formal leadership role.

Staff can encourage leadership when consumers:

- Lead portions of meetings
- Make phone calls independently
- Ask questions
- Share opinions
- Mentor peers
- Help plan activities
- Volunteer
- Participate in advocacy efforts
- Teach a skill to others

Remember:

Small leadership experiences often lead to bigger leadership opportunities.

Questions That Build Leadership

Instead of:

 "Here's what you should do."



Try:

 "What do you think would work?"

Instead of:

 "I'll handle that."



Try:

 "How would you like to approach this?"

Instead of:

 "Let me speak for you."



Try:

 "Would you like support speaking for yourself?"

Different Forms of Advocacy For Consumers To Know

Consumers can advocate in many different ways.

Self-Advocacy

Speaking up for your own needs, rights, choices, and goals.

Example:

Requesting an accommodation at work.

Individual Advocacy

Supporting another person in expressing their needs and rights.

Example:

A family member or staff person supporting someone during a meeting.

Different Forms of Advocacy For Consumers To Know (cont.)

Peer Advocacy

People with disabilities supporting and empowering one another.

Example:

A consumer mentoring another consumer.

Systems Advocacy

Working to improve policies, programs, services, or systems for many people.

Example:

Serving on advisory boards or advocating for community accessibility.

Legal Advocacy

Using laws and legal protections to address discrimination or protect rights.

Example:

Filing an ADA complaint.



Community Leadership Pathways

Help consumers explore opportunities such as:

Self-Advocacy Groups

- Local disability advocacy organizations
- Consumer advisory councils

Community Engagement

- Volunteer opportunities
- Faith communities
- Recreation groups

Civic Engagement

- Voting
- Public meetings
- Community boards

Peer Leadership

- Mentoring
- Speaking opportunities
- Support groups
- Leadership develops through participation.

Leadership Beyond Self

Consumers should be aware that leadership is not only advocating for themselves. Leadership and advocacy exist on a continuum, from advocating for yourself to changing systems for everyone.

Leadership can include:

- Helping peers
- Serving on advisory boards
- Educating others
- Participating in systems advocacy
- Improving programs and services
- Sharing lived experience to create change

Leadership Beyond Self (cont.)

Example 1:

Self-Advocacy:

"I need an accommodation."

Systems Advocacy:

"I want this building to become accessible for everyone."

Example 2:

Self-Advocacy

"I am requesting extra time on tests because of my disability."

Systems Advocacy

"I work with my school or college to improve disability accommodations for all students."

Leadership Beyond Self (cont.)

Example 3:

Self-Advocacy

"I ask my doctor's office to provide written instructions because that helps me understand my care."

Systems Advocacy

"I join a committee or advisory group to improve healthcare accessibility for all patients with disabilities."

Example 4:

Self-Advocacy

"I request an accessible entrance so I can attend an event."

Systems Advocacy

"I advocate for all public buildings in my community to become accessible."

Staff Reflection: Am I Building Leaders?

Ask yourself:

Do I encourage consumers to make decisions?

Do I create opportunities for consumers to lead?

Do I allow consumers to learn from experience?

Do I focus on strengths rather than limitations?

Do I support consumer-directed goals?

Do I connect consumers to opportunities in their communities?

Staff Discussion: Identifying Forms of Advocacy

Ask participants:

- Which forms of advocacy do your consumers already use?
- Which forms of advocacy would you like to help consumers develop?
- How can CIL staff support consumers in moving from self-advocacy to community leadership?

OPTIONAL STAFF ACTIVITY

Consumer Empowerment Action Plan

Each participant develops a plan for helping consumers:

WITHIN

30 Days

What will I teach?

WITHIN

60 Days

What opportunities will I
create?

WITHIN

90 Days

How will I measure
growth in self-
advocacy?



The Final Reflection

Ask yourself:

How will I empower rather than rescue?

How will I promote consumer choice and control?

What is one change I will make in my practice immediately?

Remember:

The goal is not to create dependence.

The goal is to support consumers in becoming confident, informed, self-directed members of their communities.

Encouragement To Staff

I would like to take this time to thank every CIL staff present for all that you do!

Please know that the work we do and every single one of our efforts to make sure our consumers remain independent in the community is not in vain. We do not control the consumers we assist, but we have the very special gift of encouraging them and leading them to their own greatness! Remember that we ourselves are leaders.

Video: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=0ITHly-bhJE>

Video Suggestions For Continued Learning On: Leadership & Advocacy

- **Haben Girma: Why Accessibility Matters** Search: *"Haben Girma accessibility TED"*
- **Stacey Milbern on Disability Justice** Search: *"Stacey Milbern disability justice"*
- **TED: Everyday Leadership** Search: *"everyday leadership TED Talk"*
- **Justin Dart Jr. and the ADA** Search: *"Justin Dart Jr ADA video"*
- **Disability Visibility Project Stories** [Disability Visibility Project](#)

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Thank You

Empowerment over dependency.
Voice over silence.
Choice over compliance.

"Nothing About Us Without Us"