Brown Bag Discussion: Communicating Disability's Bigger Picture

Center for Persons With Disabilities

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It’s happened to all of us in the disability field. A stranger asks what we do, and we struggle for a concise answer.

That’s before we even touch on the bigger question: Why?

During the CPD’s Brown Bag luncheon last week, Training and Development Specialist Jeff Sheen led a discussion that focused on finding and communicating a good response to the question: What is your job?

“This is bigger than your project,” he said. “This is bigger than your role in your project. You are an integral part in improving the quality of life for individuals with disabilities and their families.”

For many of the people in the room, work at the Center for Persons with Disabilities started like any other means to earn a paycheck: with a job search. And for a lot of us, it grew into something more. Work in the disability field kindled a passion for social justice. It awakened a hope for starting a meaningful discussion about disability without watching the audience walk out or tune out.

Sometimes the hardest part of the conversation is just getting the public to show up.

The truth is that people with disabilities are part of an equal-opportunity minority, Jeff said. Anybody can join, any time, in the blink of an eye. We are all potential members.

But the public doesn’t often view disability that way. Instead disability is seen as something that only happens to other, unfortunate people. And those who work in the disability field may seem to be saint-like service providers. It’s a view that makes many of the people around the table uncomfortable. The word “condescending” came up more than once.

So how should people at the CPD communicate a bigger picture to the people who ask about their jobs? Jeff urged his listeners to incorporate two values. The first is that disability is a normal part of life. The next is that people with disabilities don’t need to be fixed—but sometimes their environment does.

So much of the work done at the CPD revolves around working toward independence and quality of life. It involves working with people of all ages and their families. It includes services, supports and research that will make people’s lives easier, more independent, better.

So the next time somebody asks you what you do, consider talking about more than how you spend your time. Tell them why you do what you do.

Jeff showed the video below at the end of his presentation. In it, Center for the Study and Advancement of Disability Policy director Bobby Silverstein reviews the history of disability law—and the existence of discriminatory laws that were once on the books. Though policy has changed, the attitudes sometimes remain.