



## **The Beginning**

With a dedication to and a focus on the importance of people with disabilities and their families as valued members of the community, Vision for Equality (VFE), was established in 1996. The organization's core values celebrate the life and importance of people with disabilities. VFE seeks to bring people to full empowerment and to advance the ideal of services that highlight accountability, quality and equal availability for all. In its work, VFE strives toward standards which emphasize that services to people with disabilities be person-centered, self-determined and outcomes-based.

At the present time, VFE includes the following programs:

- Embreeville Consumer and Family Satisfaction Teams
- Advocacy
- Independent Monitoring for Quality
- Money Follows the Person
- PA Waiting List Campaign
- Latino Services
- PA Training Partnership for People with Disabilities and Families
- SE Region Training and Outreach
- Self Advocates United as 1
- Mentors for Self-Determination
- Philadelphia Parent Support Groups
- Preventing HIV/AIDS Network
- Quality First Collaborative
- Independent Investigations

## **Consumer and Family Satisfaction Teams**

Vision for Equality was created when the City of Philadelphia awarded a contract to fulfill a provision in the Embreeville Settlement, a federal court agreement that mandated the closing of a major state institution. VFE agreed to train and provide Consumer and Family Satisfaction Teams to monitor people who had left Embreeville State Center and moved into the community. The landmark agreement specified that the teams would be composed of people with disabilities and their families. This was a type of oversight that had not occurred before, making VFE one of the first agencies in the country to develop programs that have families and self-advocates directly monitoring services.

Team reports have provided feedback from people who have left an institution about their level of satisfaction with the services they receive. The Embreeville Class Members and their allies, through the teams, have given service providers valuable information and a clearer understanding of what recipients of services – the customers

– really want. Through this input, they and their supporters define “what makes the difference.”

VFE’s years of successful work with the Embreeville Plaintiffs set the stage to extend this important “*customer*” perspective to the larger community of people with disabilities and to gain their insight on our service delivery system. This groundbreaking work set the stage for statewide monitoring by the major stakeholders, the people and their families, to provide an “independent” view of the system.

### **Advocacy**

Vision for EQuality Advocacy Services include advocating, monitoring, and taking action to assure the rights of people receiving services are protected, and that people are treated with dignity and respect. Advocates, who act as an impartial source of assistance, lend support to people with disabilities, their families and other allies through individual as well as systems advocacy. They support people and their families at meetings, provide information and referral services, and in general give direct support to people to access services of high quality. The agency provides problem resolution and direct advocacy where needed.

Vision for EQuality addressed Health Care Advocacy needs that arose from the Health Choices System, created under Medicaid through a grant from the Pew Foundation. Peer Counselors were trained as monitors to assist people to understand this system and obtain access to it. Until that time, families had nowhere to turn when health care issues arose for their sons and daughters. VFE prides itself in the fact that as an agency it took the lead in this endeavor, empowering people to advocate for themselves.

### **The Waiting List Campaign**

The PA Waiting List Campaign began when Vision for EQuality recognized the need for statewide advocacy and system change to end waiting lists for over 20,000 people with intellectual disabilities. The leadership and focus of this successful program driven by Vision for EQuality has led to state recognition, studies and funding. Many people with Intellectual disabilities have been waiting years for community services and supports. The wait causes great personal pain to individuals and caregivers who often experience financial and social loss. High school students have graduated to sit at home. Families must often stop working to become the caregiver. In addition, many of those waiting have parents that are 80 to 90 years old who have had little or no relief from their life-long duties; others have health difficulties that make continued caregiving next to impossible.

In 2007, the PA State Legislature passed a budget that included funding for over 3,500 people on waiting lists; all of them were in Emergency situations. They had elderly caregivers and were in need of immediate supports. The House of Representatives established a joint legislative Resolution Committee to study and make recommendations to address this issue. The efforts of The PA Waiting List Campaign have also succeeded in getting the allocation of funding for 800 high school students each year, so that every graduate will have the opportunity to continue life in the

community. This endeavor requires ongoing attention and may take many years to reach its goal. Additionally, the Waiting List Campaign educates people across the state in how to organize efforts in their area.

### **HIV/AIDS Prevention Training**

VFE's program, Preventing HIV/AIDS Network (PHAN), provides the only HIV/AIDS Prevention training for people with intellectual disabilities in the Southeastern Region of Pennsylvania. This training, developed and led by Vision for EQuality's staff, centered on prevention and risk reduction, is specifically designed to recognize and meet the needs of people who have different learning styles and learn at different rates. The Aids Activities Coordinating Office in the City of Philadelphia certifies the Vision trainers, who present the program with great sensitivity. They work on dispelling myths and imparting the facts. The number of people trained has increased to more than 200 each year. Hundreds of people with disabilities are safer as a result of these important trainings.

### **Independent Monitoring for Quality**

In 1999, Vision for EQuality, because of its reputation and expertise, was chosen as one of the agencies in thirteen Pennsylvania counties to pilot Independent Monitoring for Quality (IM4Q), a program created to look at residential services for people in the Intellectual Disability System. This concept is based on the State of Pennsylvania's recognition of the significance of consumer and family involvement that was successfully realized initially under the auspices of Vision for EQuality when the Consumer and Family Satisfaction Teams were formed in 1996.

IM4Q is now state-wide. Teams from Vision for EQuality visit over 2,300 people in a three-year period. This program has given the agency further visibility. People with disabilities and their families are the monitors who assess satisfaction and look at quality assurance issues. Results of the surveys are reported directly to the state. VFE works with the County Office of Intellectual disAbility Services to seek resolution of issues that are discovered on these visits.

IM4Q has given a "voice" to the people regarding their perception of service delivery and their satisfaction. It has also served as a valuable tool to learn more about what people want from system services, and has created effective means for service providers to receive this feedback. This concept, spearheaded by Vision for EQuality, has been so successful it is now being heralded by the Federal Government as a significant need in the development of a quality management framework for all states accessing Federal Waiver funds.

### **Training**

A part of Vision for EQuality's mission is to bring information as well as opportunity to people with disabilities and their families, giving them the tools necessary to be in charge of their own lives. The Training Department was established to support people in their attempt to understand the service delivery system and the processes needed to

assist families in securing appropriate supports. Vision for EQuality is a driving force in providing educational opportunities for the Intellectual Disability System through the PA Training Partnership for People with Disabilities and Families so that people learn more about current and life-long issues. Trainings are also provided to staff, families, agencies and Supports Coordinators on the importance of families in the lives of people with disabilities, the history of the Intellectual Disability System and the role families played in shaping services for people in this country, as well as understanding the Intellectual Disability system in Pennsylvania.

### **Mentors For Self Determination**

In 2005, Mentors for Self Determination joined Vision for EQuality as a member of the PA Training Partnership for people with disabilities and families to train in the central region of the state and provide Family Connections statewide.

Mentors for Self Determination are continuing to fulfill their Mission of providing current accurate information to self advocates and families by providing trainings and Family Connections, sharing information on their Website: [www.mentors4sd.org](http://www.mentors4sd.org), Mentors List-serve, on Face book, by being available to families for one on one Mentoring and also providing group information sharing sessions. Mentor trainers attend train the trainer sessions provided by the PA Training Partnership to receive current accurate information to share with self advocates and families. They participate on many state wide groups including the Office of Developmental Programs Planning Advisory Committee as well as being active members and supporters of the work of the PA Waiting List Campaign.

### **Self Advocates United as 1**

Self Advocates United as 1 (SAU1) is a group of people with intellectual disabilities united to help other people with intellectual disabilities. The Board of Directors and members are people from all over the state of Pennsylvania. The mission of SAU1 is to “support self-advocacy of people with disabilities for positive impact in our communities and in people’s lives.” Members believe that there is power in uniting and working together to help one another. To that end, they meet with other people to help them learn how to advocate for themselves and others and unite to make change. Members are active on local, regional and statewide committees where they work to improve the system and the community. This program has been very well received across the State.

SAU1 Trainers are presenters for the Pennsylvania Training Partnership for people with disabilities and families. SAU1 is a unique training program FOR people with disabilities BY people with disabilities. They develop curricula with facilitators and provide training across Pennsylvania on topics important to people with disabilities.

SAU1 is funded in part by a grant from the Pennsylvania Developmental Disabilities Council and supported by Vision for EQuality, Inc. Training funding comes through the Pennsylvania Training Partnership for People with Disabilities and Families.

### **Latino Services**

In 2007, the Latino Training Project began with the intent to offer training to Spanish-speaking families. The program has grown by leaps and bounds since then due to the tremendous unmet needs that exist in addressing the Latino community. Spanish speaking families, through Vision's support, now have access to information and resources in their language. They acquire the knowledge and the tools to better advocate for their family members and to ask for the programs and supports that are available. When they need an advocate, they are accompanied by someone who can explain what is going on in their own language. Families are able to go to a support group conducted in Spanish. Latino Services has initiated and led many trainings not just in Philadelphia and the surrounding area, but also across the state, including Erie and Pittsburgh. They have translated Pennsylvania support and services materials. Latino Services also offers Spanish translation and interpretation services.

### **Philadelphia Parent Support Groups**

The Philadelphia Parent Support Groups are grass roots groups organized by families for families of people who receive Intellectual Disability Services. Members, who meet in their neighborhood, share and network with one another to become better informed about resources in the community and around the state. Vision for EQuality offers technical support to the existing groups, connects potential new members to a group in their neighborhood, and provides technical assistance, trainings and mailings of information to members in each group. The Planning Advisory Committee which is made up of representatives from each of the neighborhood groups, has been successful in meeting with local, state and federal officials to present issues from the perspective of families.

### **Money Follows the Person**

Money Follows the Person (MFP) is a program that encourages states to look at ways to facilitate the transition of individuals who have been placed in nursing homes into the community. The program allows elderly and disabled adults ages 18 and older to receive support services in their own home, as an alternative to nursing home placement. By providing in home care, case management, and other supports, Medicaid can help these individuals to pay for various home and community based supports services that they need. Participants in MFP must be in a nursing home for 3 months prior to transitioning into the community.

Initially participants in the MFP Program are interviewed just prior to discharge from the nursing home. The second interview takes place at their residence eleven months after transition and the last interview twenty-four months after transition. The information collected gauges the success of the transition and also identifies any unmet needs of the individual.

**Investigation Services**

Vision for EQuality has two certified investigators who are qualified disability specialists and family members. For a minimal fee our investigators offer an independent approach to investigations of serious incidents such as abuse, neglect and exploitation. Families, self-advocates and providers of service can request and obtain investigations, assuring conflict-free results.

**Quality First Collaborative**

Building upon the model of the Consumer and Family Satisfaction Teams, Vision for EQuality established Quality First Collaborative, a private monitoring service that supports people individually where they live and interviews them to assess the quality of their everyday lives. The program began visiting people supported in Life Sharing in Berks County and is now in Lehigh County. Providers of service are beginning to adopt this conflict-free model as a way to independently measure their services and to proactively apply the results to their Quality Enhancement Plans.

In growing from one program to many, Vision for EQuality has never lost sight of its mission: "To assist and empower people with disabilities and their families to seek quality and satisfaction in their lives as well as equal access to supports and services." The focus is always on people with disabilities and their families as valued members of our community and the service system.