

## Editorial about the International Conference on Self-Determination By Tom Watkins

### **Those with disabilities deserve same freedom to choose as everyone**

Freedom. Throughout world history, people have fought and died for the choice to live free.

A movement to bring the basic concepts of choice, freedom and authority to people with disabilities, called "self-determination," is taking hold in Michigan.

Tom Nerney, founder and executive director of the Center for Self-determination ([www.self-determination.com](http://www.self-determination.com)) believes "everyone deserves to exercise freedoms guaranteed to citizens by the Constitution and the Bill of Rights and basic human dignity."

Nerney proclaims that, "Self-determination is at its heart about the restoration of full citizenship to all individuals with disabilities."

People with disabilities are still in a struggle for their basic freedoms. Over the years, often with their supposed best interests at heart, family members, governments and caregivers have stripped people with disabilities of their freedom and often their dignity.

I recall visiting the famous psychiatrist Karl Menninger's Mental Health Museum in Topeka, Kan., in the late 1970s and seeing "ice tanks" where people with mental illness were dunked to shock them, along with electric shock treatment and other inhumanities, all instituted in the name of "helping." What struck me was the fact that these devices were not meant to be cruel, but rather represented the enlightened thought process at the time to "help."

#### **WHO BENEFITS**

State institutions for people with mental illness and developmental disabilities were often built to be "out of sight, out of mind" as places of refuge for the "patient" and families alike.

Michigan's history of meeting the needs of persons with mental illness is not a pretty picture. In recent history, we have led the nation in moving persons with developmental disabilities out of large, barren state institutions into better community settings. However, too many people with developmental disabilities and mental illness across the nation and the globe have often been given life sentences of confinement and of not making their own decisions about the direction of their lives.

Consider what your life would be like if you never left the dorm room where someone decided what you would eat, the hours you could eat, who you could visit and with whom you were forced to live.

Sound horrible? That is the existence for far too many people trapped for life in group homes that often exist to meet the needs of the system - not the people with disabilities.

Community Living Services ([www.comlivserv.com](http://www.comlivserv.com)) is a mission-driven support organization serving nearly 3,000 people with disabilities in community settings throughout Wayne and Oakland counties.

Andre Robinson, a community development assistant at CLS, says, "Self-determination for people like me with disabilities is about freedom - pure and simple. Freedom to decide how to live your life."

Andre, who has cerebral palsy and uses a wheelchair, continued, "Yeah, I need support with some aspects of my daily life; don't you? We need to stop funding the 'system' and so-called professionals and start funding people with disabilities - to meet their needs."

## **A TAB?**

A friend with a disability once called me a TAB. What is a TAB, I asked? "Temporarily Able Bodied," he replied. He asked if I became disabled, would I want to be "placed" in a group home with no input into what my life would be like from that moment on? "Well, neither do I," he replied.

"The purpose of self-determination is to make it possible for individuals to craft personally meaningful lives in the communities they choose," echoes Jim Dehem, the CEO of Community Living Services.

This isn't about a cry for more public money for people with disabilities, Nerney asserts: "In fact, if anything, people are given authority to control what supports they want and need in their lives - and our research shows that many want less intervention, not more, in their lives."

Imagine, greater freedom and better support for the same or fewer taxpayer resources.

Now, that is public policy that should be supported by the political left and right. The fact that it is not shows how powerful the professional interests are in running the system and maintaining the status quo that keeps people with disabilities trapped, often in child-like conditions, for their entire lives. For eons, freedom-seeking people the world over have been longing and fighting to wrest power and control from those who have it.

The freedom struggle continues.

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Tom Watkins is a business and educational consultant. He served as Michigan's state mental health director from 1986-90 and Michigan's state superintendent of schools from 2001-05. He welcomes reader comment at [tdwatkins@aol.com](mailto:tdwatkins@aol.com). The Center for Self Determination is presenting the International Conference on Self-determination May 27-29, 2008, at the Detroit Marriott (Renaissance Center). The meetings will feature leaders from across disability and aging service organizations and relate the efforts being made across the world to make freedom a reality for individuals with disabilities. You can find more information and register at [www.self-determination.com](http://www.self-determination.com).