The week of September 7-12, 2014 was Vermont Direct Support Professional Celebration Week. Green Mountain Self-Advocates, local developmental services agencies, and the VT Council of Developmental and Mental Health Services co-organized special events. There were local events across the state and one large statewide celebration on the State House Lawn on September 12, 2014. Around 175 people attended the Statewide celebration! Self-advocates beautifully decorate flags about their support staff and we displayed the flags around the State House gardens. Self-advocates from across the state spoke up about the important support staff in their life. We want to give a huge thank you sponsors who donated refreshments—Cold Hollow Cider, Hannafords, Price Chopper!
LGBT Group Presents at Voices and Choices Conference

By: David Frye

Great conference this year at the Killington Grand Hotel! There were 450 people with all kinds of disabilities who attended the 2014 Voices and Choices Conference put on by Green Mountain Self Advocates (GMSA), May 29th & 30th. GMSA is celebrating their 20th anniversary this year!

The Pride Center Lesbian, Gay, Bi-sexual and Transgender (LGBT) group for people with disabilities had a display table with information as well as a sign up sheet for people who are interested in joining a group or who would like a start a group in their area. We unveiled our brand new banner which group members designed with help from a graphic designer on what it should look like.

We did a workshop called LGBT People with Disabilities: Let’s All Have the Conversation! Group members worked hard for weeks to create and prepare the workshop format. There were 25 people who attended the workshop. We had to get more chairs from other conference rooms. We could have had more people but there wasn’t room! We prepared questions to get the discussion going.

We had a panel of group members who shared their stories and people were very supportive of the conversation we had about people with disabilities who are LGBT. People were eager to speak about LGBT issues. It was important for everyone to hear other people’s experiences and stories. There were a lot of questions and positive feedback.

Josh Queneville received the Self-Advocate of the Year award for our group. His work helped bring visibility to the disability group at last year’s Pride festival. Elizabeth Underwood, our UVM intern received Ally of the Year award for her support.

It was a great conference! It seem that Voices and Choices gets better every year.
Green Mountain Self-Advocates

The purpose of Green Mountain Self-Advocates is for people with developmental disabilities to take control over their own lives, make decisions, solve problems and speak for themselves. We educate and make the public aware of the strengths, rights, wants and needs of people with disabilities.

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Voice and Choices Conference
July 18, 2014 - In October 2013, the Administration on Intellectual and Developmental Disabilities awarded a three-year grant to the North East Advocates Together (NEAT) Peer to Peer Connections Technical Assistance Project as one of the Projects of National Significance. NEAT is one of three groups to receive this Technical Assistance Award. The other awardees are: Self-Advocates Becoming Empowered (SABE) and Autistic Self-Advocacy Network (ASAN).

The goal of the North East Advocates Together (NEAT) Peer to Peer Project is to build strong peer to peer connections between the Self-Advocacy groups in Maine, New Hampshire, New York, Vermont, Massachusetts and Rhode Island. Starting in October 2014, NEAT hopes to add Connecticut to the project as well.

This project supports self-advocates and teaches each other to organize self-advocacy activities and to share knowledge around building our regional self-advocacy organizations to be stronger. Each of the peers and self-advocacy organizations in the northeast region have so much experience and knowledge about self-advocacy. The foundation of this project is to have state self-advocacy organizations identify their organization’s needs and then match that organization up with another state in the region that is strong in that area. Peers will provide technical assistance to each other to strengthen needs and share information and resources. The creative part is that we largely use the internet to communicate and share information.

Together six Self-Advocacy Organizations of the northeastern United States came together to design this project. Peer leaders from each state have been elected to be on the NEAT Regional Advisory Committee. Each state has also identified someone from one of their state Developmental Disability Network programs to be an advisor on the Advisory Group. The group is responsible for directing the project and supporting the project’s Outreach and Administration Coordinators.

The NEAT Advisory Group has monthly meetings and one face to face meeting
per year. So far, each state has completed a needs assessment about their self-advocacy strengths and needs. 27 people from the group came together in Manchester, NH for two days in May 2014 and reviewed each other’s needs and strengths. The groups had “round-robin” style meetings with each other to talk about ways their strengths and needs match up. After these meetings, each state made a technical assistance plan to plan out how they will give technical assistance and how they will get technical assistance. People said that some of their favorite parts were, “Learning about what other states are doing to improve how their state organizations are running,” “Chatting with people I haven’t seen in a while,” and “Learning how other states are approaching their challenges which were often similar to ours.” We are now in the stage where states give technical assistance and will help each other learn new self-advocacy tools. Here are a few examples of the types of technical assistance states are going to give each other: how to connect to young adults through self-advocacy, Board Development, Improvement in technical operation and organization policies, website accessibility and using social media and technology better, school presentations, leadership development, and creating diverse and sustainable fundraising.

During the course of the project, states will learn about technology and new ways to connect with each other. The technology that we are learning right now include Doodle, Dropbox, Google Plus, Google Calendar, Google Hangout, GotoWebinar, GoToMeeting, and Facebook. We are also using these tools to help us stay connected. We are creating a website for NEAT that will have information about the project, project partners, resources about self-advocacy, and will be a place to keep all of the technical assistance tools we develop. For more information about NEAT, please contact: Hilary Clark, NEAT Project Outreach Coordinator (hilary@gmsavt.org) or Skye Peebles, NEAT Administrative Coordinator (skye@gmsavt.org).
Peer mentoring should be seen as a worthwhile resource and employment option. I know that sometimes people have doubts that people with a developmental disability are capable of offering the right kinds of peer supports. Some question if we have the needed knowledge and training. But I think that life experience often trumps “book knowledge” hands-down. That’s what peer support is all about.

One reason peer support works is because it is based on trust. The key is to match people together who have similar experiences. Trust is formed because the individuals involved face some of the same difficulties. The person acting as the mentor is seen as trustworthy because they can relate to what the other person is going through. People without disabilities may act as if they know or understand what we’re going through but it is important to get support from someone who has dealt with similar challenges. It adds an extra level of empathy and that is where stronger bonds are built.

Another reason to use peer mentors is because it gives us a chance to be gainfully employed and better integrated into our communities. It gives us a reason to be out and about and earn a living while we’re at it. We want more peers to be hired to work with peers and not always hiring people without disabilities to support us. It is something that we need to see more of because it is helping to further the goal of inclusion and promoting more equality.

The final reason to invest in peer mentoring is because it boosts confidence and self-worth. It builds an individuals trust in themselves because agency staff are saying, “Hey, we know you are capable of teaching skills to a peer.” You’re showing people, of all ages and all backgrounds that our personal skills and experiences can empower others, and in return, that empowers us. That is HUGE.

Today agency staff and self-advocates are working together to create the supports needed to make our vision of peer mentoring a reality. We deserve a round of applause for taking steps forward in our fight for equality and improving of our Green Mountain State!
On August 25th the Green Mountain Self-Advocates board gave Senator Anthony Pollina the “Ally of the Year award”. This was fun and enjoyable because Anthony is an ally who has always been there for us over the last several years. I like the advice that he gives to us about how making social change is hard but that in order to succeed in being change agents we need to continue to speak up! We must NEVER give into what keeps oppressed groups down! That’s the only way we are going to SUCCEED in fulfilling our mission for equal rights for all people, regardless of minority status or economic status. Since the day I met Anthony, I have always been impressed by his energy when it comes to social, economic, environmental, health and political issues! He reminds me of other champions for the aging, disability, and middle class communities! Anthony has supported Respect Language, People’s Budget and DD System of Care Plan legislation over the last 2 years. We are so lucky to have a wonderful ally who cares about us!

A heart-felt thank you from GMSA to the Council for funding this newsletter, Voices and Choices and our organization overall!

Shining a light On the Vermont Developmental Disabilities Council
What is your job like working for Northwest Counseling Support Services? What do you do every day?
My job varies from day to day. I do everything from peer support, core and planning committees, trainings, office work, team meetings, and a variety of other things. I attend clients ISA meetings as a mediator between the team; I help both the team and the client to figure out what will work. I help out with the Learning for Living class. I am getting trained in being a backup facilitator.

What kind of activities do you work on with peers at your job?
I attend ISA meetings. I do MAPS work. I am teaching my peer support group right now how to train people to use MAPS. MAPS is like person-centered planning. I work with peers on professional and peer boundaries. I work with them on supporting them with different struggles and strengths they might have. I help them work on speaking up for themselves so they can advocate..

What do you like about working with your peers?
I like that I am connected to peer to peer work and being a mentor to my peers and knowing that they have me available for support. I like knowing that they have someone to look up to and help them learn these skills along the way. Skills like advocating, being professional, working on growing to be a better person. I like it a lot.

What have you learned in this job?
I have learned a lot. I have learned how to be professional and personal with my job; knowing when I am working and when it is friendship. I have learned that I am capable and accountable for being put to high expectations. I am able to do office work and work on the life skills to go along with doing this job. I have grown with my boss teaching me and learned to take criticism and advice when needed. I have also learned how to work with other people in offices – how to communicate. I share an office and I have learned how to take a break and deep
What was the best day you ever had at your job?
Well, I applied for this job on my own. Taking the initiative to fill out the paperwork and interview with my boss was really great. When I found out I got this job it was so exciting!

What advice do you have for other self-advocates who would like this type of job?
Sometimes you have to assert and speak up for yourself that regardless of what town the job is in, work is really important – no matter where you live! You have to really work with your team to say, “These are my challenges and strengths. This job is really important to me and we need to find a way to get me there.” If I could find work, even if it is not where I live, it is important because it is a career in the field of my dreams.

Go to school! Get an education or do trainings! If you really want this type of job, you need to know the difference between professional and personal and you need to be able to mediate with others.

Be serious, if this is really something you want for a career you need to work hard and people will give you high expectations. It is a hard but rewarding job.
Today I live in two worlds at once. In the non-disability world, I can pass through security without setting off any alarms! But when I am with peers with disabilities, I feel I am with family. Since I’ve been involved with Green Mountain Self-Advocates, my disability pride continues to expand. Now, I am not afraid to express who I am and how I learn. I know who I am! I connect with people from both worlds who understand me. I can see what we have to do to get the two sides to move forward. The two halves can come together and become whole!

I have had to work twice as hard as someone without a disability. My take home message to “youth entering the real world” is to be persistent and believe in yourself. Surround yourself with good people no matter where you go and develop a strong work ethic. Dream Big! Set High Expectations! Reach for the Stars!
Life is good and getting better all the time. The best thing that ever happened to me was having an internship that taught me to believe in my ability instead of my disability. They showed me that there are many opportunities in the world for all different people with different ability and need levels. I have been working for Green Mountain Self-Advocates since I graduated high school and things just keep getting better each year. Believe in yourselves, you have a lot to offer.

I am Kris Medina and I want to say that my life is good and getting better. People that live placing these positive words thoughtfully in their life, live successfully. Success looks different to each person, but the positive mindset is always key. Anything that you want to achieve in your life you can. Walk this awesome earth with your head held high and pride close by.
Local Self-Advocacy Contacts

Advocates for Action
Call Tammy Maberry at 802-463-3532 ext. 3147. Meetings are 1st Wednesday in Bellows Falls.

Bennington Peer Support
Call Dawn Danner 802-442-5491 ext. 285. Meetings are the 3rd Thursday of every month in Bennington.

BSAC - Burlington Self-Advocacy Club
Call Jayne Weber 488-6500. Meetings are every other Friday in Burlington.

CAT - Capitol Advocates Together
Call Kaiya Andrews or Karen Topper at 249-6659. Meetings are the 2nd Thursday every month in Montpelier.

Champlain Voices
Call Emily Andersen 238-4540. Meetings are every Monday in Colchester.

Communication Alliance
Call Tracey Thresher or Rachel Perkins at 479-2502 ext. 557. Meetings are the 1st & 3rd Wednesdays in Barre.

COPS - Connections of Peer Support
Call Liz Peets or Bart Mair at 866-1833 ext. 102 or 113. Meetings are 1st Monday night of the month.

Families First Peer Group
Call Greg Masterson or Sara Salasin at 275-4919. Meetings on Tuesdays in Brattleboro.

Friends Helping Friends
Call Wendy Capobianco or Rachel MacMartin at 479-4076. Meetings are on 2nd Wednesday and 3rd Thursday evening of the month.

GATSA Getting Acquainted Through Self-Advocacy
Call Lori Cyr or Patti Mack at 888-5026 ext. 421. Meetings are every 1st or 3rd Mondays of the month.

LBGTQ - Support Groups for Self-Advocates Who are Gay
There are 3 groups supported by the Pride Center & GMSA that meet once a week. Meetings are in St. Albans, Burlington and St. Johnsbury. Call David at 503-2251.

Next Step Self-Advocates of St. Albans
Call Sydnee Boyd or Randy Lizotte at 782-3407. Meetings are the 2nd and 4th Fridays in St Albans.

Our Drop In Center
Call Stephanie DeCesare at 334-7310. They are their every day during the week in Newport.

RAMB - Rockin’ Advocates of Montpelier or Barre
Call Jen Olsen 476-4811 room 134. Meetings are Thursdays once a month in Barre.

RAPS - Randolph Area Peer Support
Call Susan Hawley at 728-4476. Meetings are twice a month on Tuesday in Randolph.

Self-Advocates Becoming Empowered of Rutland
Call Lisa Lynch or Tammy Lethridge at 775-1370. Meetings are on the 2nd Tuesday of the month in Rutland.

Speak Up Addison County
Call Rebecca Holbrook at 399-4798. Meetings three Thursdays in Middlebury.

SAVY - Self-Advocates Voices or You
Call Patty Grassette or Gina Brown at 888-2417. Meetings are on Friday twice a month.

Vermont Choices
Call Jacqueline Beer at 748-6350 ext. 1121. Meetings on Wednesdays in St. Johnsbury.

Windsor Self-Advocates
Call John Ducharme at 674-2678 ext. 7215 . Meetings on 2nd Monday in Windsor.