

Improving the Quality of Life for Minorities with Disabilities

By Michelle Meadows

Closing the Gap, Disabilities • October/November 1999

Approximately 54 million Americans have some type of disability. Before the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) passed in 1990, people with disabilities struggled to gain equal access to education, employment, social services, and health care. But their fight continues. Today, there are 5.5 million people with disabilities who are uninsured. People with disabilities, especially those who are minorities, are more likely to be unemployed. And, there are many schools and public buildings around the nation that are still not ADA compliant.

In an effort to increase advocacy training and improve services for minorities with disabilities across the country, leaders of the National Urban League presented a proposal to Federal agencies at a meeting in Washington, DC, in October 1999.

The plan would call for Federal support to reach minorities with disabilities at all 115 affiliates of the League over the next six years. Founded in 1916, the National Urban League is a social service and civil rights organization with affiliates in 34 states and the District of Columbia. The League serves African Americans and other racial and ethnic minority groups.

Federal representatives at the National Urban League's recent meeting included the Social Security Administration, the National Institute on Disability and Rehabilitation Research (NIDRR), U.S. Department of Education, and agencies of the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services (HHS) including the Health Care Financing Administration, and the Administration for Children and Families (ACF).

Formalizing the commitment

The National Urban League passed a resolution in 1998 that formalized the organization's commitment to programming for minorities with disabilities. The move included designating the National Urban League of Nebraska as the National Technical Assistance Center and Information Clearinghouse for Minorities with Disabilities for the League. The National Urban League also formed a collaboration with the National Family for the Advancement of Minorities with Disabilities, a 300-member grassroots organization in Atlanta.

"What we're seeing is the evolution of the premier civil rights organization in this country as it becomes an advocate for people with disabilities," according to John McClain, PhD, associate vice chancellor for academic affairs and chief student affairs officer at the University of Nebraska Medical Center. Dr. McClain is also the evaluator of a three-year League grant from ACF's Administration for Developmental Disabilities. "The National Urban League is leading a movement that focuses on energizing minorities with disabilities and their families," he said.

"A big part of what we do involves educating minorities with disabilities about what they're entitled to under the law because many just don't know," said Fred Wright, vice president of operations for the Urban League of Ne-

braska and principal investigator of the ACF grant. "This involves both training our staff and empowering the people we serve."

Now in the second year of the ACF grant, the National Urban League of Nebraska has led disability training, education, and advocacy in Milwaukee and Madison, Wisconsin; Binghamton and Rochester, New York; and Omaha, Nebraska. The ACF funding supports outreach to 10 League affiliates over three years. Other funding sources are NIDRR and the President's Committee on the Employment of Persons with Disabilities.

The National Urban League is also in the second year of a grant from the HHS Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) on diabetes prevention and control for African Americans. This program plans to reach 16 League affiliates in three years. The prevalence of diabetes among African Americans is 70 percent higher than among whites, according to CDC. The prevalence among Hispanics is nearly double that of whites, and the prevalence of diabetes among American Indians/Alaska Natives is more than twice that of the total population. Left untreated, diabetes can lead to such complications as amputation, blindness, and organ failure.

Minorities with disabilities in the civil rights mission

Before 1998, the National Urban League addressed disability issues, but not in a systematic way, Dr. McClain said. Over time, leaders of the League realized that the issues it has addressed since its inception—education, employment, housing, and health—are directly connected with disability issues.

For example, the National Urban League has always been concerned with prenatal care, which can directly affect the likelihood of birth defects. Violence remains an important issue for the organization and is among the most common causes of injuries seen in emergency rooms. And AIDS, which continues to disproportionately affect minorities, is considered a disability under the ADA. In 1998, the Supreme Court decided that people infected with HIV can also be protected under the ADA.

Another key realization, McClain said, is that although minorities are well represented in the disability population, they are underrepresented in decision-making positions. The National Urban League is both improving services and increasing leadership roles for minorities with disabilities.

The League also works to eliminate discrimination against minorities with disabilities. "It's quite common for an African American child to be labeled mentally retarded, while a Euro American child with a similar profile is labeled to have a learning disability," McClain said. He notes that minority children make up roughly 15 percent of the school-aged population, but make up approximately 23 percent of the children in special education.

"When it comes to discrimination, there are a lot of similarities between people with disabilities and Blacks,"

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said Greg Smith, an African American with a disability who hosts “On a Roll,” a syndicated radio show that focuses on disability issues and airs in 18 markets across the country. “For example, if you look at the struggle of Blacks to achieve integration into public schools, people with disabilities are still struggling,” Smith said. “And even though people with disabilities have the right to vote, we don’t necessarily have the access to vote.”

When civil rights organizations strengthen linkages with other minority organizations and disability groups, we are in a better position to support everyone, McClain said. “We want to ensure the full involvement and inclusion of minorities with disabilities. And while the work of the National Urban League is clearly a grassroots effort, it would not have moved without Federal commitment.”

For more information, contact the National Urban League of Nebraska at 402-453-9730. For more information about the “On a Roll” radio show, tap into the web: <http://www.onarollradio.com> ❖

