

LEND Disability Policy Specialists: A six agency collaboration to develop People with Disabilities into professional policy advocates

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A Need for Disability Voices

The Nebraska Unicameral system offers citizens increased access to lawmakers and the legislative process. However, there was no consistent presence of disability advocates at the capitol when policies were being developed and debated.

People with disabilities needed training and mentoring to become effective disability policy advocates. Learning objectives included:

- Analyze laws and legislation
- Understand the legislative process
- Develop relationships with lawmakers
- Collaborate with other disability organizations and other organizations with shared interests
- Prepare and deliver testimony
- Mentoring other people with disabilities to advocate for themselves.



Disability Policy Specialists Jennifer James and Erin Phillips with LEND Self-Advocate Faculty, Mary Angus, as they prepare to deliver testimony on legislation that would raise Medicaid income caps for people with disabilities.

Policy Advocacy in Action

A Disability Policy Specialist and a People First of Nebraska member attended the Disability Policy Seminar in Washington, D.C. for the first time and spoke with an aide to Congressman Fortenberry and Senators Fisher and Sasse about voting rights and employment barriers for people with disabilities.



Fortenberry and Senators Fisher and Sasse about voting rights and employment barriers for people with disabilities.



Disability Policy Specialist were invited speakers at the 2019 Women's March on a very cold day in Lincoln, Nebraska. They spoke impromptu about physical barriers encountered by people with disabilities when they were faced with inaccessible steps to the speaker's podium.



They also educated the march about the penalties people with disabilities experience if they choose to marry.

Our Successes

- Disability Advocates testified at many more committee hearings regarding legislation affecting their lives.
- Disability Policy Specialists developed relationships with elected officials, disability organizations, and other groups with shared interests.
- LB 15, which requires private insurers to pay for two hearing aides for a child, if needed (previously only paid for one)
- LB147, a restraint and seclusion bill prioritized by a all our Disability Policy Specialists, was pulled out of committee.
- Disability Policy Specialists served on the Olmstead Advisory Committee increased the profile of People First of Nebraska and the LEND program with other disability organizations in the state.
- Disability Policy Day and Disability Pride Day at the capitol attracted over 80 self and family advocates, who attended presentations and visited their elected officials.
- A Disability Policy Specialist was hired by one of the partner agencies for a permanent position.
- Disaster Response for Nebraskans with disabilities was assessed following the catastrophic spring floods across Nebraska



Disability Policy Specialist Olivia Versaw (r) worked with Senator Carol Blood (l) to educate Senators on LB 15, insurance coverage for children's hearing aides.

Collaboration Makes it Happen

The success of this program lies in the strong partnerships between several disability organizations in Nebraska:

People First of Nebraska provides financial support for 2 Disability Policy Specialists from the ranks of their membership, including mileage. This funding is made possible through a grant from the **Nebraska Developmental Disabilities Council**. People First of Nebraska also selects priority legislation for the legislative session.

Nebraska LEND provides FTE of their Training Director and Self-Advocate Faculty to coordinate the program and supervise the trainees. A sub-contract with **Disability Rights Nebraska** provides supervision and funding for 2 additional Disability Policy Specialists, both of whom are college students with disabilities.

Additional mentoring is provided by the Executive Directors of **The Arc of Nebraska** and the **Nebraska Statewide Independent Living Council**. These agencies also provide in-kind office space for the trainees.

The Disability Policy Specialist Program

Disability Policy Specialists are recruited from the membership of People First of Nebraska and among students with disabilities attending colleges in the area.

The program begins in mid-December. Trainees learn how to read and analyze legislation, research the impact of similar legislation in other states, and learn about the unique legislative process in Nebraska. At the beginning of the legislative session in January, they learn how to develop relationships as they visit with legislators and their aides, write and deliver testimony in committee hearings, and meet with other disability organizations to coordinate strategies. They present and recommend priority legislation to People First of Nebraska and track progress on prioritized legislation. Disability Policy Specialists practice public speaking by developing and presenting to other organizations. They help coordinate events like Nebraska Disability Policy Day and mentor others with disabilities to become policy advocates as well.

The LEND program has developed a set of competencies for trainees that include activities and experiences to meet those competencies. Trainees complete pre-training self-assessments and develop personal and professional goals for themselves and their team. They also complete post-training assessments to evaluate their growth as disability policy advocates. Most Disability Policy Specialists complete this long-term traineeship (320 hours) over two legislative sessions.

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