

Remarks for the UU Service

January 20, 2019

Good Morning everyone.

I am pleased and honored to have this opportunity to speak with you this morning about disability justice, environmental access, and what it means to build a new way that includes and supports people with disabilities to live in our community. My name is Andrew. I am a teacher, scholar, and advocate with a disability. I work for the Center for Self-advocacy in Buffalo. Self-advocacy is about people with disabilities being empowered, empowering themselves, and empowering others with disabilities like themselves to make choices about the things that effect their everyday lives including things like where and with whom they should live, how they spend their time, and even what they can eat, where they can shop, socialize, or worship. It is also about the needs, preferences, and perspectives of people with disabilities being valued, heard, respected, and supported. Self-advocates understand that many people with disabilities need extensive, full-time care and support. But self-advocates also recognize that just because someone may be dependent on others does not mean they are less human. Even those who cannot speak, toilet, or feed themselves still have feelings, thoughts, dreams, and desires that others around them should strive to honor even when it may be challenging to do so.

People with disabilities are often spoken about, spoken for, and spoken to but are rarely given the chance to speak for ourselves. Ableism, isolation, and discrimination compound the lack of choices for people with disabilities. The poverty rate for people with disabilities is more than double that of the general population. The unemployment rate in the disability community is around 70%. As in most states, if you have a developmental disability in New York, you likely won't receive a high school diploma but a certificate showing you completed your education plan which will not get you a job or prepare you to utilize the abilities you do have. If you get a job but don't have access to affordable, accessible transportation you will not be able to keep that job. If you have a job and transportation but no accessible, safe, or affordable home in which to live or the support staff you need to eat, dress, or toilet you cannot take advantage of the opportunities or resources that you do have.

The Reverend Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., whose life and legacy we commemorate this weekend, once said "Injustice anywhere is a threat to justice everywhere." He understood that justice could not be achieved for some and not others and that oppression is overlapping, multi-faceted, and intersectional. Those already oppressed by racism, sexism, and poverty are also disproportionately affected by disability and the consequences that flow from disability in a hyper-capitalistic, hyper-individualistic, white supremacist society. It is often assumed that disability is the cause of

unemployment, isolation, and poverty. But it is really a lack of imagination, a lack of investment in people with disabilities, and a lack of investment in meaningful alternatives to traditional educational and employment opportunities that are the problem. As Dr. King noted in *Where do We Go From Here?: Chaos or Community?*, the persistence of poverty means that “New forms of work that enhance the social good will have to be devised for those for whom traditional jobs are not available.” Dr. King said, “We are likely to find that the problems of housing and education, instead of preceding the elimination of poverty, will themselves be affected if poverty is first abolished.” These messages resonates strongly with people with disabilities who often don’t have access to appropriate housing, education, and transportation options in the first place. I’m here today because I’m convinced that we must not only re-imagine our society to make jobs, education, and housing more accessible, but also, because I believe economic justice and access to wealth and opportunity is essential for a more accessible society. We must invest much more in people and in meeting the needs of people and much less in bombs, real estate development, for-profit healthcare that is making us sick, transportation that is inaccessible to anyone who can’t drive or afford a car, and tax incentives that divert our money from the public good to private corporations and individuals who are already wealthy. The state of New York has said it is committed to greater inclusion in the community for people with

disabilities. But such inclusion will not happen if we do not pay the direct service providers who support those with disabilities a living wage or invest in jobs, housing, transportation, and educational options that will work for everyone and not just those who are nondisabled or who happen to meet a narrow, sometimes arbitrary, definition of normality, capability, or worthiness for inclusion in society.

As a teacher, scholar, advocate, and ally of self advocates, I feel strongly that every person has the right to express and define themselves. As an historian of disability in the United States, I know that far too often people with disabilities have been spoken about, spoken for, and spoken to but have rarely been given the chance to speak for themselves.

As the program coordinator for the Center for Self Advocacy here in Buffalo, I work every day with people with disabilities who feel frustrated by the limitations placed upon them by a society that simply doesn't value or recognize their differences or needs; a young man in a group home in Hamburg who—because of limited access to reliable, accessible, and affordable transportation—struggles to volunteer at his local animal shelter, attend peer support meetings at the LGBTQ Resource Center, or go to the public library; a young women in Amherst who, after finally mastering the bus route to and from her day program, was told by her family that she could not continue travel training; or another group home resident near

south Buffalo who wants the opportunity to choose where, and with whom, she lives.

The VOICE Buffalo taskforce on Accessibility (of which I am a member) has been advocating for an accessible office of the DDSO to be located in the City of Buffalo. The DDSO and DDRO offices currently serving Western New York are located at the site of the former West Seneca Developmental Center; a state institution deliberately built in isolation from the community decades ago. The site is more than 3 miles from the nearest public transportation point. As a postdoctoral research fellow at UB's Center for Disability Studies, I learned that many of the people who once lived at the West Seneca location experienced abuse, neglect, and isolation there. It is a telling irony that the self-advocacy movement in New York State was initiated in the 1970s by former residents of the infamous Willowbrook institution on Staten Island. Yet, despite great strides toward disability rights and inclusion, many former residents of the West Seneca institution must now receive services from the very site where they were once abused and isolated from the community. Local DDRO officials, as well as several legislators, recognize the need to change this and have supported our efforts to relocate DDSO offices in the community and will soon have a satellite office of the DDRO in Buffalo!

The inaccessibility and isolation of the DDS and DDRO offices is illustrative of larger challenges facing self-advocates. Transportation,

housing, education, and the chance to find meaningful work are all distinct—yet inter-related—challenges that we, self-advocates, legislators, allies, and families must work together to address.

I am one of the people who struggles to reach the DDSO office in the course of doing my job. The fact that the bus route to the DDSO was cut several years ago shows how important access to transportation is for people with disabilities. A recent report by the Partnership for Public Good revealed 60% of the jobs in our region are not accessible by public transit including paratransit which runs along the same routes as the public bus. Housing and transportation are the biggest barriers to community integration for people with disabilities.

Decades of civil rights activism by people with disabilities, pressure from Federal civil rights officials, and the ever-rising costs of care, have compelled greater inclusion in the community for people with disabilities. But such inclusion will not continue to advance if people with disabilities cannot easily access support services, jobs, and opportunities. It won't continue if people with disabilities do not have access to decision-makers and decision-making processes. And it won't continue without concerted efforts being made by people with disabilities, their families, and allies holding our state's leaders accountable for making our state more accessible; not just in terms of the environment, but also, in terms of how we think about, talk about, and treat people with disabilities. Supporting people with disabilities to be

themselves, to accept themselves, to be proud of themselves, to express themselves (however they are able to do that and in whatever ways they do that) will complement environmental access. Getting to a job or education program is one thing. But if the employer or teacher doesn't recognize that people with disabilities have something to offer or isn't willing to support their cognitive needs, then environmental access will not suffice. Therefore, we must recognize that even those who are considered to be the most disabled among us still have much to offer. They still have choices to make and voices to be heard even if they will never have a job or meet traditional standards of social and economic value. We can make our world a more accessible and welcoming place for everyone but access and disability justice are ongoing struggles. As disability activist and historian Hugh Gallagher has said, "Vigilance is not only the price of liberty, it is also the costs of an accessible bathroom."

Thank you.