

## Choice

Choice – it’s talked about all the time, occasionally used as an excuse to justify bad outcomes, rarely well understood or agreed upon. At once very simple and extremely complex, choice is our ability to determine the structure of our lives. Let’s say that again: *Choice is our ability to determine the structure of our lives.* Exercising choice allows us to feel we are in control of our destiny. Feeling in control allows us to feel content that our life is our own. The importance of choice in our life cannot be understated.

### Quality in Practice

Choice includes everyday decisions like what to wear, what and when to eat, how to spend our time, and what time to go to bed and get up every day. It also includes life-defining decisions like where to live, whom to live with, whether to marry, how to express our sexuality, which career to pursue and who our friends are. Choice has something to do with everything we do every day.

Many of us believe that our choices are limited. But the reality – for those of us who do not depend on the human service system for our support – is truly that life is full of endless choice. We may have to live with consequences, or the outcomes of different choices, but in reality we have an enormous amount of choice.

Most of us absolutely take for granted that everyday decisions are ours to make alone. Our spouses, children, friends or colleagues may offer their judgments about our choices (“I love that shirt!” “Why do you cut your hair THAT way?” “That color looks great on you!”), but the choice remains ours and we know it. As adults, we may struggle with major life decisions – who and when to marry, what job to take, whether or not to pursue a college education, what car to rent or buy, what neighborhood to live in – but again, *we* make the choice. Often we understand that in order to do *this*, we give up *that*. Our choices may be limited by the amount of money we have or our education or how much time we are willing to devote to something. Yet we still have many, many options to choose from.

For people who depend on the human service system for support, choice is severely limited and often for the convenience of the system. Most of us working in the system don’t even realize the choices we take away from people.

Many people living within the system have everyday decisions made for them as a matter of course:

- the menu is decided by someone else
- bedtimes and wake-up times are the same for everyone
- staff grab clothes for people to wear in the morning
- a nurse decides whether we shower or bathe
- in the morning or at night, the radio or TV station is tuned by one person even though there are six people in hearing/viewing range.

We sometimes make attempts to increase choice for people by asking them to choose between a few things – like which type of cereal they want, since cereal is on the menu that morning. But most people wake up having an endless array of choices for breakfast – whatever is in their house (breakfast food or not), whatever any restaurant has to offer, what a friend or family member might have at their house that we can persuade them to make for us, something from the vending machine at work, or nothing at all. And these everyday decisions are the easier ones to remedy – we just have to be more aware of them and make an effort to assure that we offer more and more options to people everyday until people really are controlling their daily activities.

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## *Choice (continued)*

Life-defining decisions are certainly just as important, or perhaps more so. However, it is much harder to offer real choice in meaningful ways. Our system is often not arranged in a way that choice can be offered or honored.

Organizations can do a lot to assure that people have as much input into major decisions as possible, even if full control is not possible.

For example:

- Including people served in choosing which house to lease or buy
- Creating a house-mate selection tool that fully includes people who may end up living together
- Refusing to have adults share bedrooms with anyone they are not intimate with
- Arranging supports so that people can practice their own spirituality in whatever way makes sense for them
- Supporting people's right to express their sexuality

Organizations can certainly increase a person's involvement in these important decisions until we can make fundamental changes in our service system.

Ultimately, our service system must be arranged so that people with disability are supported to have the same range of choices available to any other person. This is the only possibility that makes any sense. There are plenty of good examples of organizations supporting people in real lives, making all their own decisions. Organizations can choose to not develop any more services that limit people's choices in favor of creating supports that offer real choice to every new person they serve. Most states now have some type of self-directed waiver option that organizations can choose to utilize.

The choice is up to each of us.