

“SAME STRUGGLE, DIFFERENT DIFFERENCE: CIVIL RIGHTS POLICY FORUM”

FORUM SUMMARY PAPER - March 29, 2005 – Washington, DC

The National Council on Disability (NCD)¹ initiated a collaborative agreement with the American Association of People with Disabilities (AAPD)² to organize a groundbreaking public policy forum. As stated in their cooperative agreement, the entities portend that immediate benefits would include the creation of greater knowledge and understanding of the areas where the disability policy agenda and the broader civil rights agenda are in alignment.

On March 29, 2005 generous support from the Leadership Conference on Civil Rights (LCCR) and AARP made possible a one-day public policy forum that brought together advocates and policy experts from the disability and broader civil rights communities across the country. AARP was the gracious host for the day, offering meeting space, refreshments, and staff support for the forum logistics. More than 90 individuals from 47 civil rights and disability rights organizations attended the forum and participated in one of three working groups focused on selected topics. Preparation for this event began some seven months earlier in 2004.

Forum Planning

Bringing disability and broader civil rights representatives together at the national public policy level was an idea planted during a face-to-face visionary session of NCD’s Cultural Diversity Advisory Committee (CDAC) in July 2002. Preliminary input from CDAC was also folded into the overall purpose of the forum and focused on creating a meaningful opportunity for policy experts from the disability and broader civil rights communities to share information and public policy priorities, and to determine opportunities for working together on common agendas.

In preparation for the forum, a series of teleconferences were conducted with CDAC members to obtain grassroots input regarding potential forum topics, participants and agenda. A dialogue opportunity was arranged during the November 30, 2004 NCD quarterly meeting where members were joined by key individuals on LCCR task forces who were invited as presenters to share information about the top public policy priorities of LCCR and individual civil rights

organizations. Among the presenters were Karen Narasaki from the National Asian Pacific American Legal Consortium (NAPALC) and Chairperson, LCCR Compliance/Enforcement Committee; Raul Gonzalez of the National Council of La Raza and David Goldberg, LCCR staff member representing the LCCR Education task force; and Jocelyn Frye of the National Partnership for Women and Families representing the LCCR Welfare and Employment task forces. Dialogue was co-facilitated by CDAC members Glenn Fujiura, Ph.D. and Darrell Simmons, J.D. Resulting from this dialogue opportunity were potential broad topics around education, employment, and civil rights enforcement issues. Subsequent to the November meeting, the three areas to be explored during a one-day public policy forum were narrowed and aligned with forum workgroups as follows: Educational Excellence and Equity, Creating and Rewarding Diversity-Friendly Workplaces, and Restoring Civil Rights Legislation.

One-Day Policy Forum

A specific goal of the forum was to encourage greater collaboration and communication among disability advocates and the broader civil rights coalition on the priority issues that would surface during the forum. An underlying supposition was that by working together, disability advocates and civil rights leaders and advocates can achieve greater results than through strictly separate efforts on behalf of their constituencies. Briefly, the structure of the day followed that of a morning plenary session, breakout group sessions, a working lunch, return to groups, and afternoon reporting out of priorities to the full body of participants.

Morning Plenary session: Welcome and opening remarks were given by Andrew Imparato, President and CEO of AAPD and Milton Aponte, J.D., NCD Council member and Liaison to CDAC who spoke on behalf of Lex Frieden, NCD's Chairperson. A highlight of the morning session was the address by Wade Henderson, Executive Director of LCCR. In his remarks, Mr. Henderson commended the participants for recognizing that "Disability rights issues are civil rights issues, and civil and human rights pertain to us all. If we work together in this modern civil rights movement, we will continue advances in ways that we can look back with pride."

Breakout sessions: Facilitators were Glenn Fujiura, Ph.D. (University of Illinois at Chicago), Darrell Simmons, J.D. (University of Texas, M.D. Anderson Cancer Center), and Elaine Mbionwu, CCHP (National Re-Entry Resource & Training Center, Atlanta, Georgia).

Working Lunch: This session featured Dr. Theda Zawaiza, Chief of Staff for Congressman Major Owens (New York's Eleventh District) who expressed an appreciation for the work being done at the forum. In addition to acknowledging potential for historical contributions through an endeavor like the forum, she fielded questions about legislative activities on Capitol Hill. Dr. Zawaiza also spoke favorably about the possible impact of assembled advocates and their organizations coming together as a unified voice to protect the rights of all Americans.

Group Reports: Representatives for each breakout group reported key issues that emerged from the small group sessions. A number of important areas for future collaboration were identified as public policy priorities.

Civil Rights Restoration:

The workgroup sought to address the erosion of disability and civil rights legislation in federal courts, as well as the erosion of the passion, understanding and support of civil rights in our society. Toward that end, participants identified ways/methods to address the erosion of disability and civil rights legislation in federal courts; acknowledge, expose and address the concerted, well-funded efforts to roll back civil rights; build an understanding and support of civil rights beyond the civil rights and disability rights advocacy circles; and build and mobilize passion for civil rights within ourselves, our communities, and the general public.

Diversity-Friendly Workplace:

This workgroup identified four main priority areas, addressing each through strategic action plans that focused on policy recommendations, advocacy efforts, and litigation.

- 1) Healthcare reform, including support of the *Healthy Families Act*, and advocating for a minimum of seven sick days to care for oneself or one's family members;

- 2) Education/training reform, including enforcement of existing laws.
- 3) Workplace reform, such as demonstrating support of the existing laws; encouraging government to award points to contract bidders with evidence of progressive workplace strategies; and developing Section 508 guidance for the private-sector;
- 4) Attitudinal reform through media campaigns and rewarding companies for best practices with respect to progressive and inclusive workplace strategies.

Educational Excellence & Equity:

The workgroup identified the *No Child Left Behind Act* (NCLB) as a top priority for collaboration between civil rights and disability rights communities. Together, the participants agreed upon the importance of advocating for the proper enforcement of NCLB and to do so immediately through sign-on letters. They also identified a need to publish a compilation of case studies that demonstrate the positive impact of NCLB as advocates fight to enhance the benefits of the legislation for diverse groups like students of color, students with disabilities and others.

What Happens Next and How to Get Involved

Hopefully, the forum highlighted the intersection of topics and issues that affect and that are important to both the disability rights and civil rights communities, and the priorities can be the impetus for future collaborative efforts hosted by a number of the forum participants. Forum planners and participants also hope that various entities will cultivate stronger partnerships through civil rights and disability rights coalitions so that all constituencies can be better served.

In fact, organizations and advocates are encouraged to get involved in the work of coalitions representing the interests of the disability community as well as the broader civil rights communities. Information is available on opportunities for use by people who may wish to join the coalitions, sign up for their listservs, or learn of other ways to work with these groups on

common agendas. The notes from each of the discussion groups, a list of participating organizations, and a list of resources will be made available on the AAPD and NCD websites:

www.aapd-dc.org and <http://www.ncd.gov/newsroom/advisory/cultural/cultural.htm>

ORGANIZATIONS PARTICIPATING IN THE FORUM:

American Association of People with Disabilities (AAPD)
AARP
ADA Watch/National Coalition for Disability Rights
American Foundation for the Blind (AFB)
AFL-CIO
American Council of the Blind
Bazelon Center for Mental Health Law
Capital Area ADAPT
Citizens' Commission on Civil Rights
Cochran Firm
Conference of Educational Administrators of Schools and Programs for the Deaf (CEASD)
Cornell University, Employment & Disability Institute
The Arc/UCP Disability Policy Collaboration
DREDF
Easter Seals
Endeppendence Center, Inc. (South Hampton Roads-VA)
ENDependence Center of Northern Virginia, Inc.
Epilepsy Foundation
Lawyers' Committee for Civil Rights Under Law
Leadership Conference on Civil Rights (LCCR)
Legal Aid Society - Employment Center
Legal Momentum
Mexican American Legal Defense and Educational Fund (MADEF)
National Asian Pacific American Legal Consortium
National Association of Protection and Advocacy Systems (NAPAS)
National Association of the Deaf (NAD)
National Campaign to Restore Civil Rights
National Council of La Raza
National Council on Disability (NCD)
National Council on Independent Living (NCIL)
National Organization for Women (NOW)
National Organization on Disability (NOD)
National Partnership for Women and Families
National Spinal Cord Injury Association
National Women's Law Center
NCD Cultural Diversity Advisory Committee
NCD Youth Advisory Committee
New York Lawyers for the Public Interest

Paralyzed Veterans of America (PVA)
Powers Pyles Sutter & Verville, PC
Rocky Mountain Technical Assistance & Consulting Center
Service Employees International Union (SEIU)
Statewide Parent Advocacy Network, New Jersey
Ticket To Work Advisory Panel
United Spinal Association
VSA Arts
Washington Partners

¹ NCD, an independent federal agency whose mission is to advise the President and Congress on public policy issues affecting people with disabilities has a strong track record in civil rights and a longstanding interest in the unique needs of children and adults with disabilities from diverse cultural backgrounds.

² AAPD, the largest cross-disability membership organization in the U.S., works in collaboration with other disability and civil rights organizations on policies that impact people with disabilities. AAPD is also a member of the Leadership Conference on Civil Rights Executive Committee.