Centers for independent living and transition-age youth: Empowerment and self-determination

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Abstract. A primary function of centers for independent living is to empower individuals with disabilities and to support greater independence. These functions overlap with the purpose of transition planning for youth with disabilities, and it is increasingly evident that CILs can play an important role in such transition services. This article discusses the potential role of CILs in transition services for youth with disabilities, particularly in promoting self-determination, and provides an example of a program that CILs could replicate to achieve such outcomes.

Keywords: Centers for independent living, transition services, adolescents, self-determination, empowerment

1. Introduction

Centers for independent living (CILs) have long been in the business of providing community-based support services to people with disabilities [13]. However, the provision of transition services to youth and young adults has, mostly, been the responsibility of school systems. Lattin and Wehmeyer [5] documented that CILs can and, increasingly, do serve an important role in supporting youth with disabilities to transition from secondary education to adulthood. In a national survey, Lattin and Wehmeyer found that CILs provided an array of transition-related supports, including job training and coaching, benefits advocacy, transportation training, and training to empower youth and promote self-determination. It is this latter role that is the focus of this article.

Despite the potentially important role CILs might play in supporting the transition of youth with disabilities, Lattin and Wehmeyer found that fewer than half of CILs had any focus on this population and most had only minimal contact with youth. This is likely a function of the fact that transition services are the responsibility of public schools. It is also the case that CILs and public schools have, historically, operated under differing philosophies. The independent living movement emerged from a strong empowerment and self-determination emphasis, while education has historically been aligned with medical models and/or a deficits-reduction focus.

However, the seeds for more meaningful collaboration between CILs and school districts were sown in 1990 when Congress reauthorized the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA), the federal legislation that mandates a free appropriate public education for all children with disabilities. IDEA required, for the first time, that needed transition services be addressed in every student’s Individualized Educational Program (IEP) when they reached the age of 16. The intent of the transition mandate was to ensure that all students received educational programming that adequately prepared them for adulthood.