



Supported Decision Making or Guardianship?

Take a second and imagine this: you and your partner have been dating for years and have decided you're ready to start your lives together. He buys a beautiful ring and asks you to marry him! You'd just say yes, right? Not if you're under guardianship. You can say yes, but your guardian must give you permission to be engaged, to be married.

This is a true story of a young woman with Citizen Advocacy Athens-Clarke (CAAC). She has been under guardianship since she was 17 years old (but not in Athens-Clarke). An advocate recruited by CAAC a few years ago for other advocacy in her life is now beginning the steps to have her guardianship removed so she can make her own decisions in her own life, officially, for the first time.

Unfortunately, full-fledged guardianship giving all decision-making authority to a guardian is not an uncommon happening in the lives of people with disabilities. It is regularly assumed that they cannot care for themselves, live independently, or make their own decisions.

When that is the case, a relative or the state, may be appointed guardian with the power to decide where the person will live, who their medical providers will be, and what treatment they will receive, and whether or not they're able to work. As you can see, our traditional ideas of how to keep people safe from harm can be highly constricting. Supported Decision Making offers another approach which can make a huge difference in a person's life.

Supported Decision Making allows people with disabilities to make choices about their own lives with the support of a team of people, people who they trust and choose to be part of that team. Supported Decision Making is an alternative to guardianship, one which family members and their loved one with a disability might try with or without oversight or review by a court. A guardian makes decisions *for* someone with a disability. Using Supported Decision Making, the person is able to make their own decisions *with* the advice of others instead of having someone decide things for them. Supported Decision Making involves straightforward, clearly written agreements stating the types of decisions which will be made in a supported manner, and who will be consulted in making which decisions. It encourages self-determination, autonomy and control, and fosters independence. It can be the best way to keep people safe *and* to enable them to live rich, full lives. Everyone uses Supported Decision Making in their lives. We talk with family and friends, ask opinions of colleagues and classmates, or mentors before we make decisions. These decisions can be as trivial as deciding whether to buy a certain dress, or go on that date, or as important as buying a house, going back to school or getting married.

We all have a trusted network of friends and family to consult when necessary. People with disabilities may need more assistance making decisions about living arrangements, health care, relationships and financial matters, but they don't necessarily need a guardian to make those decisions for them. With a similar trusted group of people around them, a person with a disability can engage in the same process we do: asking questions, considering differing opinions, and ultimately, making the decision themselves. People in their network would be selected by the person with a disability. They can be family members, advocates, teachers, friends, or Citizen Advocacy Board members. Ultimately, the people in the group should be able and willing to respect and honor the preferences of their friend with a disability, whatever decision they make. Including the decision to marry the one they love.

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My Work with Citizen Advocacy Athens-Clarke

My work with Citizen Advocacy really began in the Winter of 2016 when I found out that the Governor of Georgia (GA) cut the state's contribution towards our budget. Through some miscommunication, Citizen Advocacy offices statewide lost all of their state funding. Some offices closed. With other Citizen Advocacy leaders like Tom Kohler in Savannah, I scheduled conference calls to restore our funding. We met with our legislative delegation. Representative Spencer Frye, in particular, provided strategy as the budget wound through the various Committees. Rufus Addison, Katina Clay, coordinators and Board members from other Citizen Advocacy organizations met in Atlanta with the Commissioner of the GA Dept. of Community Affairs to try and get support. We faced a grim outlook because of the difficulty in shoehorning money in the budget after the Governor removed it.



Every Sunday night throughout the winter, board members statewide regrouped over the phone and caught up on the week's progress and pitfalls. I could hear the passion across the phone line as folks struggled to keep their offices open. Luckily, the Citizen Advocacy Athens-Clarke (CAAC) office had sufficient reserve funds to weather the storm.

Advocates went to the Gold Dome and legislators listened. The money was restored. We were successful because of our unique mission and organizational structure. We made a compelling case. Research has proven time and again that citizen advocates, people who freely enter into an unpaid relationship with a protégé, provide the most effective advocacy for people with developmental disabilities. Freely given relationships also mean our organization is resilient.

We are able to leverage each contribution to support a host of unpaid volunteers who, in some cases, advocate for their protégé, while supported by our organization for decades. Why are our advocates so dedicated? We find they get as much fulfillment, if not more, from the relationship as the protégés. Serving this organization opens my eyes to the needs of our community's most vulnerable citizens. I was recently sworn in as a County Commissioner, so I am thankful for the opportunity to continue serving Citizen Advocacy. My work here informs the policy goals I hope to enact as Commissioner. Please join me and support the great work of Citizen Advocacy Athens-Clarke.

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