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STRAIGHT TALK



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Let People with Disabilities Make an Impact

By Tia Nelis

When I attended the Children's Freedom Initiative celebration event in Atlanta this spring, I was in a room surrounded with Georgia's state agency leaders, advocates and people with disabilities who are determined to get the remaining 41 children out of institutions into inclusive communities.

It was an inspiring room with leaders who discussed what is being done to make Georgia a zero state – having no children in institutions.

But one of the things that I saw up there when the questions, "what could people with disabilities do?," "what could People First [of Georgia] do to support this?" or how could they be involved were asked, *nobody* answered the questions.

And I think it's really important that it's presented in a way that people can understand what they can contribute to make it happen.

I don't think a lot of people with disabilities understand the things that they can do to play a part in the matters that affect them. And if you don't have a strong advocacy group or support group backing some of those things and someone to explain what is going on, then they're not going to be involved.

It's important to say, "here, this is how you can help make this happen," or "here are some things that we can do to bring attention to that issue to your state legislative leaders." And, allowing action and advocacy to help make things happen for other places that are going through the same struggles for the disability community.

I live in Illinois, and we still have a lot of institutions open. We still have legislators that

have family members in those institutions and strong unions and Voice of the Retarded (VOR) in our backyard headquarters in Chicago.

It's important to say, "here, this is how you can help make this happen."

In Illinois, people are always talking about how people with disabilities should live in the community with the supports they need and not be dumped. There should be a plan to help support people. People get involved in rallies and work groups that involve people being in the community with supports they need not in institutions or a gated community. There are people moving out and getting supports.

Georgia should – yes – celebrate its accomplishments because that is going to keep it going and inspired to make strides for the disability community.

But, as the leaders in the disability community start to work on, "what do we do next?" they must engage the community and let people with disabilities make an impact in the decisions that will affect them, their families and caregivers.