

## Testimony on Supported Decision-Making & Healthcare Training Bill

Hello, my name is Jonathan Gardner. I serve as the co-chair of the Supported Decision-Making Coalition in Massachusetts. I am also a cancer survivor who happens to have autism, and I am the Official Ambassador for Operation House Call, a program that trains medical students to provide better care for people with autism and intellectual and developmental disabilities.

I first learned about Supported Decision-Making when I was 16. My parents had gone to workshops and brought it to me as an alternative to guardianship. It made sense right away. I wanted to stay in charge of my own life. SDM allows me to choose people I trust to help me think through my decisions, while I remain the decision-maker. It gives me dignity and the freedom to stay in control of my own life.

This matters to me because my school years were hard and traumatic. In second grade, my IEP was ignored, I was bullied, and when I became overwhelmed, I was restrained by teachers. I developed PTSD from those experiences. My mom finally pulled me out and homeschooled me. That gave me back both my choice and confidence. That's why SDM fits me so well in my life, I know what it's like to have no control, and I never want to go back to that.

When I choose supporters, I pick people who respect me and believe in me. My supporters help me in different parts of life, like healthcare, work, friendships, finances, even relationships. A good supporter listens, helps me understand my options, and supports me with pros and cons. Most of all, they help me feel safe and respected. With SDM, I always make the final decision.

The power of SDM became life-saving when I was diagnosed with Ewing's Sarcoma. Chemotherapy was brutal, and at one point I told my mom I wanted to give up. Instead of telling me I had no choice, she spoke to me as my supporter. Together with my doctors, we created a plan that cared for both my body and my mental health. Having that choice gave me the strength to keep fighting. Without SDM, I might have shut down or refused treatment. Instead, I survived, and I am here today.

That's why I am here speaking not just about SDM, but also about the healthcare training bill. No one should be dismissed, overlooked, or denied healthcare because they have a disability. I've lived through both autism and cancer, and I know how much it matters when providers take the time to listen, to respect me, and to include me in my care. Training healthcare providers to understand and work with people with disabilities is not optional, it's essential.

Supported Decision-Making and the healthcare training bill both come down to the same thing: dignity, respect, and the belief that every life matters. SDM is not meant to replace guardianship, it is simply another option. With the right supports, people like me, can make their own choices, lead their own lives, and even survive their hardest battles, just like I did.

Thank you.

