

My name is Marie Hennessy. I am a self-advocate with a disability and I work at Mass Advocates Standing Strong (MASS) as a peer trainer. I have also served as a co-chair for the MASS Supported Decision-Making Task Force.

For individuals who may not be familiar with MASS, it is an organization run by self-advocates who are individuals with intellectual and developmental disabilities (IDD) and other persons with disabilities. We speak up for ourselves, make our own life choices with and without support, serve on the board, hold other leadership roles, and make important decisions within MASS.

In 2017 the MASS Supported Decision-Making (SDM) Task Force was created by self-advocates who provided testimonies in support of an SDM bill and have joined with other self-advocates and professionals working on the SDM bill. Many self-advocates throughout Massachusetts have participated in providing feedback to the work of the SDM Task Force, and support the passage of the SDM Bill.

One of the first of many opportunities when I made a choice to advocate for myself happened during my junior year in high school. When meeting with my guidance counselor he said that I should continue taking business classes because I was not a strong candidate for college and should not consider college in my future. After he finished speaking, I then said in a clear, strong voice that my plan is to go to college, as my career goal is to work in the human services field providing services to persons with disabilities. My guidance counselor said our meeting is over. We never met again. I then reached out to teachers at school who encouraged me to pursue college and also contacted persons at Mass Commission for the Blind who supported me, providing assistance in preparation for college.

At an early age, with the support of family and friends, I was given many opportunities learning how to speak up for myself, believing in myself, knowing my rights, asking for help when needed, and receiving support from persons I trust who believed in me. I continue taking responsibility for the life choices I make. I did accomplish one of my life goals and my dream came true. After receiving my bachelors and master's degree, I have continued working with persons with disabilities and have held various positions at nonprofit organizations.

I am sharing my experience as a self-advocate who, like many others who have testified, has also had the opportunities, encouragement, and determination, and I have always been able to make my own choices. We know and have worked with many other individuals with disabilities who have not had the same opportunities. Why has this continued to happen?

When thinking about how important it is to pass the SDM bills we must remember that there are many teens and adults with disabilities who may or may not have a guardian but are told when, how, and what to do, every day of their lives, and need to ask before making any choices independently. Many individuals do not know that they can use their voices or other communication methods to make everyday choices independently with support, such as: what to wear; what they would like to do for fun; developing friendships; work; getting involved in community activities; speaking up for themselves; living in a more independent living situation with supports if needed. People do not know that when communicating with doctors, nurses, case managers, service providers and other professionals they should be listened to and respected. They need to know that when they are making a final decision about something, they could make a choice using Supported Decision-Making as an option.

Though many self-advocates know how to speak up for ourselves, make decisions and exercise our own choices needed to achieve our goals and dreams, this can and will happen for many others when the SDM bills are passed.

Think about what it would be like if all of us had to live our lives like so many individuals with disabilities do every day!

In conclusion: Once the SDM bills are passed, persons with disabilities will have the opportunity to make their own life choices using Supported Decision-Making as an alternative to guardianship. With Supported Decision-Making they can lead happy, productive, and successful lives of their choosing!

Thank you.