



Aging with Special Needs and Enjoying the Golden Years

People with disabilities, both physical and intellectual, have the right to retire and enjoy their “golden years”. With better healthcare and community support, people with special needs are living longer and more productive lives than any other time in history. Proper planning by family members and health care providers and getting support from community resources can help individuals with special needs retire in comfort and dignity.

Like the general population of seniors, a person with special needs should have the option to retire from his life in the workforce. If the individual is living in a group home or community integrated living facility, he or she may be required to continue to attend his or her day training, based upon state Medicaid guidelines, thus denying the individual his right to retire. A family member or advocate may need to reach out to community services to find resources that actively teach individuals with special needs how to retire. However, many times an individual with a developmental disability may not look forward to or understand the possibility of retirement. He may be fearful of the loss of socialization and friendships, isolation, boredom, and of course, the economic loss. Working with an agency or community service such as the Association for Aging with Developmental Disabilities (AADD; www.agingwithdd.org) may help with assisting a person with disabilities in re-defining himself as a retired individual.

Enlisting the help of a Certified Elder Law attorney to create a Special Needs Trust (SNT) will also help the process of transitioning a person with special needs to retired life. Advocates, trustees, and family members appointed to support the person with special needs will need to include the individual’s right to retire in the planning. SNTs can include funds for travel, enrichment, social opportunities, and specific goals for recreation and physical exercise for an individual with disabilities. Think of the SNT as a custom design for a retired special needs individual.

Statistics of life span expectancy vary depending on the type of disability, but across the board, people with disabilities are living healthier and longer lives. The challenges faced with supporting individuals with special needs are changing across the spectrum for elder care and disability service providers. As individuals with special needs age, so do their caregivers. With many individuals with disabilities outliving their parents, the responsibility of care rests on family members, appointed guardians, and community services. It is important that there be a system of care with good communication between elder care providers and disability service providers. For example, when planning meetings are held regarding a special needs client, knowledge of medical conditions, nutrition, treatments, and transportation need to be reviewed with the information available regarding disability day services and programs so that the individual can have

the best care possible. Nursing home administrators and other elder care personnel need to work hand in hand with disability service providers.

The United States Department of Health and Human Services has an informative website to help assure elder rights protection. The Administration on Aging (www.aoa.gov) has a program called, The Aging and Disability Resource Centers Program, whose primary goal is to “support state efforts to streamline access to long-

term services and support options for older adults and individuals with disabilities”. An additional resource is The Rehabilitation Research and Training Center on Aging with Physical Disabilities. You can access their website t: <http://agerrtc.washington.edu/>. Aging with a disability can be done with grace and comfort with the coordination and planning of family members, community services, and health care professionals. Individuals with special needs can live long, productive lives well into retirement.

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