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I have worked in the human services field since 1999. I have been a licensed social worker since 2012. From 2001 to 2020 I worked with with children and families as direct support, targeted case management and behavioral health home coordinator. In 2020, I continued as a case manager, switching to a new population, adults with developmental disabilities.

My first experience working with Disability Rights of Maine (DRM) was in 2008, with a child receiving Child Development Services (CDS). I helped the family with referring for an advocate to help ensure their young daughter, diagnosed with autism, would receive an appropriate level of early intervention. DRM helped to ensure CDS followed their legal obligation to this child. I recall that instance specifically because it was my first interaction with the agency and because the advocate was down to earth and informal when meeting with the family in their home, but professional and highly competent when interacting with CDS. Over the years, I worked with DRM to help other children access FAPE (Fair and Appropriate Education) in their local schools. I learned early on that DRM would always work to have children be in the least restrictive placement; which is critical for most children. They need to be in their community, not bussed an hour or more away in order to access education. While many of my interactions were with schools, I also had a couple that were related to residential placements. I worked with a teenager who was placed out of state and DRM worked with the team to help create a placement within the state of Maine. This allowed the family to have more frequent contact and also provided the person with a safer and more suitable place to live. I have also reached out to DRM for my own son. He was struggling with chronic mental health issues and placed in an in state residential program. He had two lengthy ED stays, the second for 40 days during COVID. As a parent, even as a parent with a wealth of knowledge about the system, I was overwhelmed and often felt hopeless and helpless. The DRM advocates who worked with my family helped to get him moved to a psychiatric bed and assisted with ensuring his transition back to the residential program could happen so he could finally return home. He did come home.

I now work with adults with Developmental Disabilities, specifically an intellectual disability and/or autism. I have a great relationship with my districts DRM advocate. I have this relationship with her because I work with her so often. Over the 5 years I have worked in this position, I have had DRM assist with helping to explain rights to consumers and their guardians, when there is a rights violation, DRM often works with the entire team to develop a plan to address the issue and reduce recurrence. I have some clients who invite the advocate to their yearly planning meeting. At one of these meetings, the advocate listened to the client and helped him realize he could push himself to learn more and increase his independence. A year and a half after that team meeting, he went to the county probate court and asked the judge to remove him from under guardianship. He describes this as one of the best days of his life. While he and his team did the work, I believe that the DRM advocate planted the seed that he could do more and had more abilities that he realized.

Persons with disabilities are often dismissed in our society. They are overlooked, made fun of, not listened to, and often believed to not offer any value to our society. I believe that we all have value, disabled or not. I believe that the role of Disability Rights Maine is one of the most valuable resources in protecting the rights and dignity of this population who are frequently dismissed