

## THE FOURTH OF JULY AND SUPPORTED DECISION-MAKING

This week our country is celebrating the document that inspired and ultimately led to the independence of the American colonies from Great Britain. The rejection of a monarchy with almost complete control over a people's lives, and the idea that a people should be able to make their own decisions about how they should be governed, constituted a major shift in world history. That document, the Declaration of Independence, was justified by its famous opening assertion that

***“all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable Rights, that among these are Life, Liberty and the pursuit of Happiness.”***

In the same way that these stirring words justify independence and self-governance for a whole body of people, (a “nation”), they also underlie the inherent, “inalienable” right of all individuals to make their own decisions about their lives and to be treated on an equal basis with others. People with disabilities are no less entitled to independence, or what Decision-Maker Jessica so powerfully calls “the right to be the architect of your own life” as anyone else. ([click here for Jessica's statement](#)).

But, of course, independence, whether for the citizens of a nation, or for any single individual, doesn't mean doing it entirely on your own. It involves relationships with others, and giving and receiving support to enable self-governance and the “pursuit of happiness.” Supported Decision-Making (SDM) as a practice and a principle is based on the belief that people with intellectual, developmental, cognitive and psychosocial disabilities are capable of, and have the right to make their own decisions with support, recognizing that support is a necessary component of independence. Our legislature has explicitly stated this understanding of SDM in our new SDMA statute ([click here for Mental Hygiene Law Art. 82](#)).

To assure not only the right to make one's own decisions, (including freedom from guardianship) but also equality and non-discrimination, SDMNY has developed a formalized process of facilitation leading to the creation of a Supported Decision-Making Agreement (SDMA) for people with intellectual and developmental disabilities. Our legislature has now officially recognized that practice, requiring legal recognition of decisions made by Decision-Makers with facilitated SDMAs.

The principles underlying this beloved July Fourth holiday– the rights to equality and self-governance/independence – are what guide our work and successes in achieving independence and equal treatment for people with intellectual and developmental disabilities. And that is definitely worth a celebration!