



Photo by Frank Romano, U.S. Department of Education

OUR COMMITMENT TO THE EMPOWERMENT OF INDIVIDUALS WITH DISABILITIES

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Empowerment is multidimensional. It means, among other things, having decision-making power, access to information, the opportunity to make meaningful choices, understanding of rights and responsibilities, a sense of hope, raised self-esteem and control over the direction of one's life. Since assuming my responsibilities as Commissioner of the Rehabilitation Services Administration, I have traveled a great deal, speaking at length about empowerment, a concept that I believe is absolutely fundamental to the future of our public rehabilitation program and our consumers. In the course of my conversations with colleagues in the rehabilitation field, I have encountered varying responses to this priority. Many professionals appear to be as committed as consumers themselves to the goal of consumer empowerment. Others, however, have been less enthusiastic, claiming that empowerment doesn't work or that empowerment of consumers poses a threat to the professional relationship and role of the vocational rehabilitation counselor in providing effective services.

This edition of *American Rehabilitation* brings together some recent perspectives on the empowerment of people with disabilities. It includes personal accounts from individuals with disabilities about empowering people and the events that have significantly shaped their lives. In addition, the implications of empowerment as it relates

to employment outcomes are explored from the professional point of view, with research data, facts and figures. And, to stimulate and provoke further thought and discussion, there are a few straight opinion pieces.

Admittedly, empowerment is not a totally new concept. It has guided recent amendments to the Rehabilitation Act and is a cornerstone of consumer advocacy. As we encounter and begin to embrace and value the process of empowerment, the nature of our professional roles and the way we conduct our business will inevitably change. Strength is implied in the word empowerment, and by empowering our consumers I believe we are strengthening our programs and efforts to secure high-quality employment and opportunity for persons with disabilities.

As you read this edition of *American Rehabilitation*, I hope that you will find some useful strategies and ideas that will be empowering to you and our many rehabilitation partners — consumers, professionals, educators, service providers and advocates — as we work to maximize opportunities and realize positive change in the lives of persons with disabilities.

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