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UNH's Institute on Disability Takes Part in $2.3 Million Grant to Improve Supports for the Elderly and People With Disabilities and Long-Term Illnesses

DURHAM – The Institute on Disability at the University of New Hampshire will play a lead role in a $2.3 million grant called Facilitating Lifespan Excellence [FLEX], awarded to the New Hampshire Department of Health and Human Services from the Centers for Medicare and Medicaid Services.

The Institute on Disability is a full partner on the FLEX grant, and will work with a variety of statewide partners to initiate systems change and offer real choices for all New Hampshire residents with disabilities.

The grant was developed collaboratively by the disability and aging communities in the state. Its goal is to improve health and long-term care service systems and supports for people with disabilities and long-term illness to live in the community.

The project's strength is its collaborative spirit and the central role consumers, partners and employees have played in developing this grant, as well as the role each will play to achieve the project's goals.

The FLEX grant identifies several strengths and challenges in New Hampshire regarding community supports and independence for residents with disabilities and elders. Some of the challenges include long-term, intensive supports for elders and adults with disabilities or chronic illnesses; the New Hampshire guardianship statute, which while intended to protect individuals from exploitation, creates a barrier to self-directed services; public transportation systems; assistive technology; and supports for children.

The Real Choice Advisory Council met several times to address problems and generate solutions prior to submitting the grant. The council – appointed by Gov. Jeanne Shaheen and comprised of New Hampshire consumers of the elderly, disability and mental health systems – suggested the following solutions to long-term care reform:

- Expand community development strategies; strengthen communities to support their own.
- Reorganize the public transportation system.
- Develop new organizational models for direct-care workers, such as cooperatives, to allow for access to more money, control, benefits, and relationships with people with disabilities.
- Make assistive technology part of everyday life.
- Create a true volunteer community of all ages for people to share their gifts.
- Ensure that receiving services is not dependent on being poor.

Each of these problems, according to the FLEX proposal, can be tied to problems associated with policy, funding, flexibility, coordination and lack of consumer participation and choice. The FLEX grant will address these issues by drawing inspiration from New Hampshire's current strength – a growing dedication among many state and non-profit organizations to flexible, innovative and self-directed supports.

Dr. Jan Nisbet, director of The Institute on Disability, will serve a primary role with the Policy Resource Center and FLEX management team. These groups will work to ensure the project's goals are met and the Policy Resource Center will make recommendations for policy and regulatory reforms necessary to sustain change. Dr. Nisbet will also manage the project's administration and engage in training, dissemination and research activities.

Institute on Disability staff will also provide training and technical assistance related to self-directed services and systems change response activities. Training coordinator Janet Williamson and Systems Change coordinators Sonke Dornblut and Patty Cotton will take part in the project.

Joanne Dodge, a a Real Choice Advisory Council member, says the FLEX grant is important to explore and create better care options for the elderly, people with disabilities and long-term illnesses. "This is a common sense way of using money the state is already spending, but for better results."

Other organizations participating in the FLEX grant include the Governor's Task Force on Employment and Economic Opportunity, Granite State Independent Living, the Developmental Disabilities Council, the Institute for Health, Law and Ethics at Franklin Pierce Law Center, New Hampshire ATECH, Project Dollars and Sense, People First, Quality Partners, the State Committee on Aging, NH Community Loan Fund, and the New Hampshire Department of Health and Human Services.

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The Institute on Disability at the University of New Hampshire was established in 1987 with a mission to promote the full inclusion of people with disabilities into their communities.