

Independent living means... Senada Halilčević

My name is Senada Halilčević.
I come from Croatia.

I spent most of my life in various institutions.
Institution was my world.
But living in institution cannot be called living.
Living in institution means separation from other people and humiliation.
The thing that bothered me and made me angry the most
was that I did not have the freedom
to make my decisions and choose my way of living.
I needed a lot of time and support to achieve my independence.

Many persons with intellectual disabilities still depend on institutions,
support services and parents.
Self-advocates complain that support services and staff
still have much control over them.
They often do not respect self-advocates' opinions and wishes.
This is because the old ways of thinking common for institutions
are still present in support services.

Although the process of transformation of institutions in
support services for living in the community is a positive step ahead,
we must be very careful.
Instead of big institutions we could end up
with thousands of little "flats and apartments"
that are going to be in the community but
where people still would not have the freedom of making choices.

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We fully support definition of institution from People First of Canada and Canadian Association for Community Living where they say that institution is any place in which people who have been labeled as having an intellectual disability are isolated, segregated and/or congregated. An institution is any place in which people do not have, or are not allowed to exercise, control over their lives and their day to day decisions.

An institution is not defined merely by its size.
That is why I have a feeling that we often forget
the true meaning and goal of the Article 19.
That is not mere relocation of people to apartments,
houses or supported housing programs.

The true meaning of Article 19 is not just any kind of community living.
The true meaning of the Article 19 is independent living and
being included in the community.
That is the only authentic community living and the only one we could
support.

The true meaning of the Article 19 is making really inclusive and supportive
environment for independent living of all people with disabilities.

I want to say loudly what it means to live independently and be included in
the community for us self-advocates:

Independent living means...

- to choose your own life path and the way of living
- to have freedom and support to change the place where you live
- to make decisions without pressure from others
- to freely say your opinion without being punished
- to have opportunity for good education, employment and payed work
- to have freedom of managing your own money
- to have access to regular public services used by all other citizens

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- to be protected from all types of violence
- to have a freedom to do mistakes

It is very important to empower and support independence of people with intellectual disabilities in relation to support services and experts.

I am fully aware that the road to full independence is very hard.

It requires complete change of thinking and the way society and experts treat persons with intellectual disabilities.

We are equal and free citizens and
we want the society to treat us that way.