Keywords: disability awareness, disability training, caregiver, support

Background
Caregivers’ beliefs about individuals with disabilities are likely to affect their actions as supporters. For example, if a caregiver believes that individuals with disabilities can work or live independently, they are more likely to help someone work toward that. Research suggests that learning about disabilities may be linked to an increase in positive attitudes toward individuals with disabilities (Hall, 2007).

Little research has been conducted on the effectiveness of disability training programs for support staff. Research on disabilities training across a range of other occupations (such as medical students, medical professionals, and educators) has been found to be effective. (Larsen, 2002; Hall, 2007; Bigby, 2009) Positive results were also seen in a study where disabled and nondisabled students were given disability awareness training that specifically helped them understand, put the information into context (Larsen, 2002).

The effectiveness of disability awareness training was demonstrated by Kemp and Mallinckrodt (1996). They showed that health professionals who had received disability awareness training performed diagnoses and prescribed treatment without attitude biases, while those without training were affected by attitude biases.

Objectives
1. Evaluate whether formal and informal caregivers of individuals with disabilities improve their knowledge through a disability awareness workshop.
2. Identify the factors that might contribute to changing opinions of disabled peoples’ capabilities.

Method
This research attempted to determine whether caregivers changed their understanding of what individuals with disabilities are able to do following a disability awareness workshop. Participants were given a survey before attending the workshop to establish a baseline, and then again afterwards to find out if there was a change in their knowledge.

The survey questions were modified from the Attitudes Towards Disabled Persons scale (Yuker, Block, & Young, 1970). They asked participants about the abilities of individuals with visual, hearing, and mobile impairments to conduct daily and recreational activities. In the follow-up survey, participants were also asked about the relevance and effectiveness of the workshop.

One hundred participants were invited to attend the workshop. Most of those were day support staff, residential support staff, or family members. Thirty-eight participants completed the survey before the workshop and thirty completed it following. The workshop was divided into two parts. In the first part, representatives with different disabilities presented to the group in various formats (for example, lectures, videos, and personal stories). In the second part, participants were divided into small groups.

Each group was able to attend sessions on visibility, deafness, hard of hearing, and mobility impairment. The sessions included demonstrations of disability aids, question and answer components, and experiential components, such as role playing to experience physical limitations. The goal of the workshop was to emphasize individual ability and the disabling effects of society.
Survey responses were converted to percentages for individual questions, and responses from the initial and follow-up surveys were compared. Responses were also analyzed according to the following demographic groups: residential staff, day staff, family members, and ‘others’. Responses to open-ended questions were analyzed for major themes.

Results
The analysis of the questionnaires indicates a positive attitude shift toward disabled people following the workshop. Workshop participants reported increasing their knowledge of disability, and wanting to change how they interact with individuals with disabilities. A positive shift in responses was observed in every demographic group. Family members increased their average response rating by 16.3%, day support staff by 22.1%, and residential staff by 32.4%. Participants identified as ‘other’ had the largest positive increase of 46.5%. Positive increases were seen in questions about sports and recreation, personal care, cooking and cleaning, and visual and hearing impairments.

The follow-up questionnaire asked what key message participants had learned from the workshop. Some of the responses included:

- “Focus on ability rather than disability.”
- “Empowerment is key to success.”
- “Every disability is capable with proper assists.”
- “There are different ways to communicate.”
- “Despite barriers people will find a way to communicate.”
- “Ask people how they would like to be helped.”
- “Where there is a will there is a way.”
- “I was inspired hearing people’s stories and jobs they do in the community and how they overcome challenge of us standing in their way.”
- “That more people need to attend workshops like this to fully understand what goes in the life of those with disabilities.”
- “To encourage individuals to let others know what they need.”

Conclusions
The follow-up questionnaires indicated that participants learned about the capabilities of individuals with disabilities, which suggests that the training helped improve participants’ attitudes about disability. The research suggests that sharing personal stories in a workshop format is a good way to raise people’s awareness of the capabilities of people with disabilities. This type of work may help change society’s perceptions of people with disabilities.

The results indicate that while the different participant groups all showed positive increases, each group responded to the training differently. The greatest improvement among caregivers was in the group of residential staff, with less change among day support staff and family members. However, family members had overall higher scores to begin with, so there was less room for improvement following the workshop. This indicates that family members had greater acceptance of individuals’ abilities before the disability awareness workshop. This parallels the findings of previous research that shows differences in positives attitudes between staff groups such as hospital and community (Bigby, Clement, Mansell, & Beadle-Brown, 2009; Timms, McHugh, O’Carroll, & James, 1997).

Future research should investigate whether changes to participant knowledge and attitudes following awareness training are maintained over time.

Lessons Learned
During this study, we learned about the importance of ensuring individuals with disabilities have opportunities to practice presentation skills. Learning to facilitate a group with minimal assistance helped to build their confidence in leading presentations. Using personal narratives was a successful way for our facilitators and participants to introduce topics.
The experience of disability through interactive sessions was important to help participants experience and understand what it is like to live with a disability. This experience provided insight into the sensation of impairment, as well as the social limitations individuals with disabilities often feel. This helped participants understand how they contribute to imposing limitations on others.

We also learned the importance of having a strong team to complete our research. Our 'disabled' facilitators were the real experts in this project, and we were able to present their strengths in the summary of this work.

The full report can be found at www.mentalhealthresearch.ca

References
Bigby, C., Clement, T., Mansell, J., & Beadle-Brown, J. (2009). “It’s pretty hard with our ones, they can’t talk, the more able bodies can participate”: Staff attitudes about the applicability of disability policies to people with severe and profound intellectual disabilities. *Journal of Intellectual Disability Research, 53*(4), 363–376.


About the Author: Adam Heighes has a BA in Psychology and Sociology, a post graduate diploma in Inclusive Education, and an MA in Integrated Studies specializing in Community Development and Education. His studies have focused on the inclusion of individuals with disabilities and marginalized groups in the greater community. He is also a parent of adult children with disabilities, and has spent a lifetime advocating for friends and relatives marginalized by society. In his professional life, Adam has worked for more than 22 years in disability services, education, and mental health in a variety of areas including advocacy, day and residential support, teaching, and day and residential program management. Adam has also served in several volunteer capacities supporting marginalized groups (individuals with disabilities, children, and the poor) in Alberta and Ontario. He has been a member of several organizations, including the Learning Disabilities Association, Calgary Learning Centre, parent and staff advisory groups, and school boards.