

8-2002

## Civic Leadership by People with Disabilities

Tom Seekins Ph.D.

*University of Montana - Research and Training Center on Disability in Rural Communities*

Joyce Brusin

*University of Montana - Research and Training Center on Disability in Rural Communities*

Karen Rimel

*University of Montana - Research and Training Center on Disability in Rural Communities*

University of Montana Rural Institute

[scholarworks-reports@mso.umt.edu](mailto:scholarworks-reports@mso.umt.edu)

Let us know how access to this document benefits you.

Follow this and additional works at: [https://scholarworks.umt.edu/ruralinst\\_independent\\_living\\_community\\_participation](https://scholarworks.umt.edu/ruralinst_independent_living_community_participation)

 Part of the [Demography, Population, and Ecology Commons](#)

---

### Recommended Citation

Seekins, Tom Ph.D.; Brusin, Joyce; Rimel, Karen; and Rural Institute, University of Montana, "Civic Leadership by People with Disabilities" (2002). *Independent Living and Community Participation*. 21.

[https://scholarworks.umt.edu/ruralinst\\_independent\\_living\\_community\\_participation/21](https://scholarworks.umt.edu/ruralinst_independent_living_community_participation/21)

This Research Progress Report is brought to you for free and open access by the Rural Institute for Inclusive Communities at ScholarWorks at University of Montana. It has been accepted for inclusion in Independent Living and Community Participation by an authorized administrator of ScholarWorks at University of Montana. For more information, please contact [scholarworks@mail.lib.umt.edu](mailto:scholarworks@mail.lib.umt.edu).

**Civic Leadership by People with Disabilities**

**N**ow as perhaps never before, Americans are recognizing heroes in everyday life. From “the Greatest Generation” of World War II to the firefighters of the New York City Fire Department, we are recognizing the extraordinary contributions which citizens make to their communities and to our nation. People with disabilities are among the contributors. The World Health Organization’s new *International Classification of Function, Disability and Health* (ICIDH) recognizes the importance of their contributions – to themselves as well as their communities. It identifies participation in community life as a critically-important outcome and specifically highlights participation in civic and political affairs (ICIDH-2, 2001 Chapter 9 - Code d950).

Civic and political participation is the cornerstone of our Republic (deTocqueville, 1864). If representative democracy is to work, citizens must represent their values and those of their neighbors at every level. Significant values and interests frequently clash in the political arena, so this task isn’t easy – it requires fortitude and skill.

There are 2,308 non-metropolitan counties and 33,324 communities with populations of 10,000 or fewer in the United States. A typical *county* has at least three elected commissioners, and approximately five to seven standing committees focusing on roads, environment, buildings and codes, health and human services, and other concerns. Each committee has about five appointed citizen leaders. A typical *city* has three to five commissioners and a committee structure similar to that of a county. Using these numbers in combination with McNeil’s estimate (1993) that 8% of the U.S. adult population has a severe disability, we can estimate the number of rural Americans with disabilities involved in civic leadership (see table below). We estimate that 13,884 elected and 71,264 appointed civic leaders with disabilities serve rural communities.

**Estimated Number of Civic Leaders with Disabilities in Rural America**

	<b>Total Units</b>	<b>Members in Units</b>	<b>Estimated Leaders with Disabilities</b>
<b>County Commissions</b>	2,308	6,924	554
<b>County Committees</b>	11,540	57,700	4,616
<b>City Councils</b>	33,324	166,620	13,330
<b>City Committees</b>	166,620	833,310	66,648
<b>Total</b>	213,792	1,064,554	85,164

The National Institute on Disability and Rehabilitation Research (NIDRR) long-range plan calls for research into the societal roles assumed by people with disabilities. Our civic leadership research has a *strengths* orientation, which psychologists refer to as “positive psychology” (Seligman & Csikszentmihalyi, 2000). Designing research that asks positive questions about people with disabilities casts disability in a new light that can transform people’s perspectives about disability.

## Research Goal and Research Issues

The goal of this project is to explore civic leadership roles and opportunities for people with disabilities in rural communities. The often partisan nature of public debate in the political process presents challenges to conducting research in this area. As we study the processes, impacts, and consequences of others’ civic involvement, we must avoid becoming entangled in partisan issues. This isn’t a new concern for applied researchers, but it is particularly important in studying civic leadership.

## Next Steps

We have recently completed a series of interviews with elected and appointed leaders from around the U.S. and our analysis of this data will be used to develop a broader survey.

## References

ICIDH-2 (2001). International Classification of Functioning, Disability, and Health. Geneva, Switzerland: World Health Organization.

deTocqueville, A. (1864). Democracy in America. Cambridge, MA: Sever and Francis.

Seligman, M.E.P. & Csikszentmihalyi, M. (2000). Positive psychology: An introduction. American Psychologist, 55 (1), 5-14.

---

This work was supported by National Institute on Disability and Rehabilitation Research Grant #H133B70017-01. This report does not necessarily represent the policy of the U.S. Department of Education, nor should readers assume endorsement by the federal government.

---

This report was prepared by Tom Seekins, Joyce Brusin and Karen Rimel, © RTC: Rural 2002.

For more information, please contact:

**Tom Seekins, Director**

**Research & Training Center on Rural Rehabilitation Services**

The University of Montana Rural Institute, 52 Corbin Hall, Missoula, MT 59812-7056

(406) 243-5467 (V/TT) • (406) 243-2349 fax • (888) 268-2743 toll-free

ruraldoc@selway.umt.edu    <http://rtc.ruralinstitute.umt.edu>

