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### Abstract

The author describes a campaign in New York to get the state authorities to redirect the US\$200 million which goes into sheltered employment to go to supported work instead. The campaign was intensified when members heard that a new sheltered workshop was being built in spite of policies which favoured the trend toward supported employment. **Keyword: Employment**

# Sheltered Workshops. "Build it, and we won't come!"

By Maria Dibble, Executive Director  
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New York is in a process shared by people nation-wide. We want our state legislature to transition over \$200 million spent on sheltered employment annually to supported work. Currently, supported work funding is less than 10 percent of that for workshops. Our local community gave our independent living center a chance to focus attention on the issue and generate statewide momentum. In the process we've learned some lessons that may help others.

**Lesson #1: Uncover the old-boy network.** We first heard last June that the local agency and the rural Tioga County Community Services Board planned to open a new workshop in April 1993. The state Mental Retardation/Developmental Disabilities (OMRDD) commissioner had publicly favoured downsizing and eventual closure of workshops, but had agreed to fund this "last" one. The county, local agency, and the state senator who



Educating the media: Four state-wide groups rally at the Tioga County Courthouse.

persuaded her to do this knew they must slip the workshop over the transom just as the forces of change close the door. So they tried to keep it quiet until it was too late and

almost succeeded. We're deeply involved in the county and it was supposed to be an open planning process, but the workshop was a surprise to us. Their "community

survey" reached only a few parents with adult children already in workshops in other counties; there are no people with disabilities on the committee. The agency told us, the media, and OMRDD that the project is a multi-purpose facility with day treatment, supported work and family services as well as a workshop. We have blueprints and letters proving that the bid specifications and drawings can't accommodate anything but a factory. After we publicised our opposition, they began periodically releasing new plans, each showing more people in supported employment, and fewer in sheltered work, than the last. The changes seemed to be for public consumption only; they hadn't asked the state agency, which funds supported work, if the projections would hold water. We raised these issues with the OMRDD commissioner, who delayed the project for almost a year.

**Lesson #2: Educate the media.**

Media coverage had portrayed the local agency as just another group "helping the disabled." We tried to introduce balance with a press conference featuring people with disabilities speaking against workshops. The media didn't show or quote them; they present only workshop "clients" saying they liked their work, while portraying us as radicals. Fortunately an editor saw a profitable controversy; he let us present our views unedited in a "point-counterpoint" feature opposite the agency director. We took a moral position: supported employment works; segregation is immoral and unnecessary. Now the media covers both sides.

**Lesson #3 Divide the opposition.**

The committee parents believe their

children are too disabled to ever get real jobs. Workshop placement shows how mild their disabilities are - New Yorkers with severe disabilities don't go to workshops. We brought in TASH member **Lou Brown** from the University of Wisconsin with his slide show on supported work for people with severe intellectual disabilities. Parents in the audience saw that their children weren't as "disabled" as Brown's success stories. Though the parents are still resistant, some now lean toward supported work. And local OMRDD and voc rehab people now plan to beef up supported employment.

**Lesson #4: Project widespread moral outrage.**

Four statewide groups rallied against the workshop and for supported employment at the

Tioga County courthouse. Our signs said, "If you build it, we won't come." One speaker, in a workshop for eight years, stopped listening to "experts", left, and got his Masters degree. A parent said she once believed "professionals" who said her child was incapable, but now knows "that was a lie!" We got our best press coverage to date and raised awareness among local people, including a county legislator who now questions the project seriously. We also began a statewide postcard campaign aimed at the key state senator. The cards quote him advocating supported work and ask him to cancel the workshop and redirect funds to supported employment.

**Lesson #5: Don't quit.** It hasn't been easy. We're telling people that

what they thought was charitable is damaging and wrong. They aren't taking it well; some of us have been threatened. Yet we're clearly having an effect. The workshop is delayed until 1994. More delays may result in rescinding of project funds. The senator, though still backing the workshop (it's in his district), says, "it's time" to put more money into supported work. It's criminal that none of our laws - ADA, Rehab Act, state laws - prevent the forced segregation of so many people. Let's end segregation now. If you can help, call me at (607) 724-2111.