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## Self-advocate receives round of applause after speaking on Bill 77 in Ottawa

*Jennifer Harris an example of how people benefit from supported decision making*  
Wednesday, August 20, 2008 -- Jason Thompson

Ten years ago, if someone told Jennifer Harris she would be speaking about developmental services legislation before the provincial standing committee on social policy and advocating on behalf of people who have an intellectual disability, she never would have believed it.

However, on Aug. 8, Harris spoke about Bill 77, proposed legislation to repeal the existing Developmental Services Act, in Ottawa and was the only person to receive a round of applause at the conclusion of her presentation before the standing committee.

The committee is responsible for preparing any changes to the proposed legislation before it goes back to the legislature for a third reading.

Harris says she enjoyed speaking before the standing committee. She adds she's hoping her presentation will make a difference in the lives of people who will be impacted by the legislation by demonstrating to standing committee members what is possible if people are given the ability and are supported in making their own decisions in life.

When Harris left high school, she says her self-confidence was at an all time low because of her isolation and uncertain future, which she refers to as "the post-21 issue."

"In essence, it means we are largely abandoned by society, without opportunities for post-secondary education and with few opportunities to live as contributing citizens," Harris told the standing committee.

In 1998, Harris began accessing supports and services through LiveWorkPlay, an Ottawa-area affiliate of Community Living Ontario and has been making strides towards independence and community inclusion ever since.

Keenan Wellar, president and CEO of LiveWorkPlay, who accompanied Harris at the standing committee hearings in Ottawa, says it's amazing to see how far she has come.

"When Jennifer first came to us 10 years ago, she had zero self-advocacy skills to the point of breaking down in tears if you refused to make a choice for her," Wellar says. "To have gone from that, to making this kind presentation and also having input into how we presented and what was said . . . it took a lot of work."

As a result of her involvement with LiveWorkPlay and learning about self-advocacy, Harris says she now understands that she has both the right and the responsibility to take greater control of her own life.

"In recent years I have also been contributing to LiveWorkPlay as a volunteer and self-advocacy spokesperson, and as a voting member of the corporation," Harris says.

"This meant taking risks, such as participating in pilot projects related to employment and housing, through which I sometimes made progress, only to fall back later. But I kept going."

Click [here](#) to view a video of Harris' presentation before the standing committee.

*If you have feedback on this article, please contact the newsroom at 800-294-0051 or e-mail [jason\(at\)axiomnews.ca](mailto:jason(at)axiomnews.ca).*

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