

A letter from a manager

(anonymity requested)

A time in my life when I had to look at something a little closer to make sense of it, was when I accepted my position as a group home manager. Residential Support Services' group homes are a place for developmentally delayed adults to live in and thrive. I previously worked in a dementia care facility which I had thought prepared me for the world of developmentally delayed individuals. Boy was I wrong! Some things, like basic care and the rights of these individuals, did in fact transfer to my new world. Providing an environment that promoted dignity and individualism were essentially the same. But what I absolutely was not prepared for were the behaviors and actions of these beautiful individuals.

The moment I realized I needed to investigate this amazing new world to better understand it was the very first week of my employment. I was sitting in the living room of my group home watching the clients and staff. My original goal was just to simply get to know everyone but what I saw profoundly changed my view of the clients and staff. What I saw was a level of communication that I had previously thought impossible. As I sat in that room hearing all these strange noises and watching these seemingly meaningless gestures, I realized my staff knew precisely what each client was trying to express. I was blown away. I thought to myself "These guys are no different than me! They just cannot verbalize what they want to express."

I wanted to communicate with my clients. I knew that. But with so many different "languages" how could I possibly learn all this while completing my duties? Time and effort were the only way. It was slow going at first. Real observation of the individuals and staff was one way I examined this new form of communication. I watched them all the time. Learning what different sounds or gestures meant for a particular individual and how the staff reacted to it. I also leaned heavily on my staff to explain an individual's ways of communication and then practiced it all the while examining how that individual reacted to what I was doing or saying. What I discovered was the voice of people that do not usually have a voice. I discovered a new world with new people and how to care for and empower those people.