

You First Podcast - Episode 9: What is the Client Assistance Program?

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Keith Casebonne: Welcome back to another episode of "You First," brought to you by Disability Rights Florida. I'm Keith Casebonne and thanks for joining me today. As always, the purpose of You First is to discuss the rights of individuals with disabilities, putting your rights first.

Today on You First we're going to do something a little different. We don't usually discuss programs that we directly offer here at Disability Rights Florida, but today we're going to do just that.

I think there's a good chance you have not heard of the Client Assistance Program or CAP for short, and if you have heard of it, you might have been put off by the somewhat vague name.

What clients are helped by CAP?

Today, we're going to talk a little more in detail about this program and how, we, at Disability Rights Florida might be able to use CAP to provide you with direct assistance.

To tell us much more about the Client Assistance Program are our guests, Janniell Vazquez and Howard Bell, two advocates from Disability Rights Florida who regularly assist clients with captivated issues. Hi, Janniell and Howard. Thanks so much for joining us today.

Janniell Vazquez: Thank you for having us.

Howard Bell: Good afternoon.

Keith: Let's just get started. What is the Client Assistance Program?

Howard: Well, I'll start with that one. What I can tell you is that the program is under the Rehabilitation Services and Administration. It is a [inaudible 1:42] program. It really is designed to provide services to persons with disabilities, to advise and inform them of their rights as it pertains to Florida's Vocational Rehabilitation programs.

The Client Assistance Program was establishing in the early 1980s, about 1984. The governors in each state gets to designate what private entity or public entity, for that matter, would actually operate the Client Assistance Program. For 30 plus years, Disability Rights formerly the [inaudible 2:20] Center has been that agency that houses the Client Assistance Program.

The program is authorized, under the Rehab Act of 73, section 112 and provide a variety of services, again, to assist individuals with disabilities, being able to take advantage of the services offered by the vocational programs.

There are two such programs in Florida.

Keith: What are those two programs?

Howard: It is the Division of Vocational Rehabilitation and the Division of Blind Services. Not every state has those two entities as separate entities but that is that way in Florida.

That is the case in Florida's [inaudible 3:06] on assistance program is a separate independent, unrelated to either the agency, therefore really a third party. They're to assist clients and understanding their rights, obtaining services, and that sort of thing.

Janniell: I'll go ahead and elaborate a little bit on that, too. The Client Assistance Program also assists clients of the Centers for Independent Living throughout Florida. If somebody is a client of the CIL, Centers for Independent Living, VR, which is Vocational Rehabilitation, or DBS which is Division of Blind Services.

Our advocates and attorneys can assist them with their cases, if they're having trouble accessing services from the different agencies, if they're facing denial services, if there's a problem with the communication of their counselor, if they have a hearing coming up.

They will need to call our agency for assistance. They could do that by contacting intake. We have our phone number. We also have an online intake form that they could submit. We have our services available in English, in Spanish, and in Creole.

If anybody is a client of VR, or CIL, or DBS, and they're having trouble with their case, or obtaining services, or they feel like their rights are being denied, they could give us a call and speak to our intake team.

The phone number that they would call is 800-342-0823.

Howard: Keith, one other thing that we should add is that the Client Assistance Program is authorized under title one of the ADA for employment, to provide some advice and information, when a consumer with a disability believes that they are being subjected to some form of discrimination by an employer.

A lot of what we do there is really advice and add in information. If you notice, the Equal Employment Opportunity Commission is really the federal entity that investigates employment discrimination concerns.

Keith: We know the first step to becoming eligible to receive assistance from the Client Assistance Program is to be a client of one of those two programs, or a Center for Independent Living.

Janniell: Or an applicant, actually.

Keith: Or an applicant. Good point. That's the first step. Is there any other requirements? Are there any other specifics to being eligible? What issues could possibly trigger someone to call us for assistance?

Howard: Let me take that first and you add some comments. Whenever we think about consumer eligibility for CAP services, the primary thing to understand is that our services are intended to be provided to people who have disabilities.

When you think about the various ways that an individual contacts the Client Assistance Program, those ways can be from almost any source. It can be a family member, a doctor's office, an employer. It can even be the state agency Vocational Rehabilitation Division of Blind Services, other state agencies, such as APD, Department of Education. Our clients can come from just about anywhere.

Again, our services are designed for the individual with a disability. While they may be referred by someone, and let's say that person doesn't have a disability, our services can only be provided to the individual with a disability. That's a big part of the eligibility criteria that the person has to have at this stage.

Keith: Right. Of course.

Janniell: Keith, your question was what would a circumstance create that would cause somebody to give us a call and to seek services from us?

Keith: Yeah. For what reasons would someone who's a client of one of those agencies call us? Give us some examples of what could happen that would cause a dispute that perhaps we would get involved in and help them settle.

Janniell: I've had cases from everywhere where there's a client of DBS, Division of Blind Services, and they're having trouble obtaining an interpreter for a meeting. They may be presented with material and due to their disability, they cannot access that material.

We would intervene, communicate with the counselor, make sure that the counselor's aware of this individual's needs, and then make sure that they get the interpreter available for them for any meetings, or any interviews that that person may have.

The whole purpose of VR and DBS is to help people with disabilities prepare for retain and gain employment. Sometimes counselors do have a very high caseload, so the consumer may not be receiving a callback from their counselor.

There may be a breakdown in communication, so then they would contact our agency. We would reach out to the counselor and to the consumer and re-establish that communication.

Sometimes the consumer requests a different counselor, or is requesting to transfer their case to a different office. I had a case where an individual was a client of VR and DBS for about seven years. Sometimes, when they're dually-eligible for both agencies, things get lost in translation.

One agency is providing services and the other agency is providing a different set of services, but there's not really a cohesive plan as to how to move this person forward toward their employment goal.

We are the negotiator, the mediator, as far as investigating a case, seeing where the holes are, and how we could help re-establish that communication and get the individual the services that they need, so that they can obtain employment.

Keith: I know another thing that CAP directly helps with are transition aide students. Can you all tell us a little bit more about, first of all, what that means to be a transition aide student, and what types of services we might provide to assist them?

Janniell: Another service that our agency provides is advocating on behalf of children and students when they're in grade school. We help with their IEPs, which is an Individual Education Plan.

Sometimes that gets confused with IPEs, our clients of VR and DBS. Those are Individual Plan for Employment. Our agency assist with advocating on behalf of the services or accommodations that the students receive in school.

A transition IEP is to help make sure that the services these students need in place from high school to the real world, so if they are deciding to go to post-secondary education, go to a four-year college, go to a trade school, we would make sure that these services are placed on their transition plans.

VR also, Vocational Rehabilitation, has a part in that process because they can provide some of the transition services to these students as far as assisting with tuition, or different transition services that is individualized to each student. The age range is about 16 to 22.

Usually, we recommend for the students with IEPs in school, and even clients with 504 Plans, for them to contact VR when they start planning for transition.

The students don't have to be graduated in order to receive services from VR. VR can be invited and should be invited to attend the IMT meetings so they can plan for each student's individual transition plan from high school to employment.

Keith: It sounds like that helps to avoid there from being any gaps between graduation and beginning a job, starting early, so it makes a lot of sense. That's really great.

Janniell: Exactly.

Howard: [inaudible 12:08] comment to that Keith. When it comes to transition of pre-employment services, again, CAP's job is to step in when there's gaps that the regulations should make basically be seamless and students are yet on between those gaps.

That's one of the reasons that they will be contacting CAP and have adequacy, also information to explain what different things mean, what are students of disability, for example, what are accommodations, explain [inaudible 14:41] services and benefits. All those kinds of things are a part of what the Client Assistance Program can provide for the consumers that it serves.

Janniell: It sounds like you have a client who's in an IEP meeting and they could be consumers themselves, they're clients themselves of various agencies of VR, they could be receiving

services from the school and then also be a client of APD, the Agency for Persons with Disabilities.

We just want to make sure that everybody's at the table and doing their part in the planning, so that there is a smooth transition from high school into the real world so they don't fall within the cracks.

Keith: Got you.

Howard: That's great points, the idea of everyone being at the table. People oftentimes, when you consider the various disabilities that we encounter in providing classes and programs services, one of the emphasis is self-advocacy skills. We like to help our consumers develop that self-advocacy skill, if you will.

Sometimes, given a disability, the potential for being able to develop that self-advocacy skill is not great from one client to the next. Client Assistance Program can be there at the table to make sure that the client's concerns, needs, wants, etc., are also being considered, very much like what Janniell was just explaining.

Keith: Very good. As CAP advocates, if you could give advice to a VR or a DBS consumer, what would it be? What is something that you would want them to know if they're either going into the process of becoming a client of VR or DBS or they're already clients having issues? What are some advice that you could give them, steps they could take to better the services they're receiving?

Janniell: That's something that I would piggyback off of what Howard is saying as far as learning how to advocate for yourself, being aware of what you're signing, reading your documents, educating yourself on your rights.

Definitely, that's what we could help with, but sometimes, it'll help the situation of the consumer if they know what they're eligible for offhand. Just know that if you're ever a client of VR, or DBS, or the CIL, and you are having an experience where you feel that your services are being denied, you could definitely give us a call and have us advocate for you.

Also, you could request to speak to your counselor or supervisor. That is the way to self-advocate. You could request a change of counselor that way. Also, make sure that you adhere to all the timeframes and timelines that they're providing if the service is denied, usually have a set amount of days, possibly for VR, I know it's 21 days.

By then, you have to get your appeal in or to contact us. Ultimately, just make sure that you're aware of the timeframes and timelines and your rights. If you ever have a question about what your rights are, if you feel that they are being denied, then immediately, as soon as possible, give us a call so that we could investigate the situation, and then determine how to proceed.

Howard: To that same point, Keith, for me, I'd just would like for a lot of the consumer base and their family members too, to, if they can, take more initiative to be familiar and informed about the framework of the Vocational Rehabilitation programs.

That also includes the CILs, and those kinds of things, understand that these programs are primarily grant programs, that we are federal state funded, that they operate on the federal state laws and regulations, but that the agencies, as well as the consumers, both have their own individual right.

If that is the case, which quite oftentimes are [inaudible 16:54] anyway, are reviewable online. I really encourage our consumers to pay attention to paperwork that they sign, understand documents that are presented to them, and if they don't understand them, insist that they are provided with an explanation that they can really appreciate, and that they not hesitate to contact the Client Assistance Program to hear from a third party, if you will, to just validate and verify what they've heard.

If they have any real concerns and they feel that they are in dispute or disagreement, we can advise a suggestion, contact Client Assistance Program.

As Janniell said, if you need to get involved with representing the consumer, to help resolve the dispute, to help the client in any service that they need, that's what we're here for, and we're very accessible, easy to work with, definitely give us a call.

Keith: Excellent advice. Any other success stories or successful outcomes that you all can share with us, a little bit about some other CAP related cases and stories?

Howard: If I can start, I know Janniell [inaudible 18:16] already. I can tell you that we're always looking for, not only individual case about concerns or disputes, we're also looking to resolve those issues that might have a systemic element to it.

In that regard, I've been working on cases of students who are between post-secondary education, with educational vocational orientation, yet they are basically being denied the service they're requesting, which is assistance of tuition or transfer information, things of that nature.

We've been working hard with the consumers, working hard with division staff, working hard with the educational training facilities to find a result of disputes. That's really exciting and very rewarding. A lot of this has to do with, how can consumers receive services from the private and sometimes out of state schools.

That's been very rewarding. We're seeing a lot of that happening currently.

Janniell: Right. I've had actual counselors from VR contact me directly on behalf of their consumers, because it can really be beneficial to have a fresh set of eyes on this problem, because you could be working on a case with a client for so long and you get bogged down as the counselor, and you just can't really figure out how to repair the communication or how to help this individual.

By contacting the Client Assistance Program, either by the counselor or the consumer, and having us look at the case from a different perspective, it often solves a lot of problems. We just offer different solutions, problem solving skills.

We've had a lot of success for re-establishing the communication and getting the cases re-opened, or getting the plans implemented, and the services provided.

Keith: Very good. It sounds like the biggest takeaway from this discussion is certainly that if you're a client of VR, DBS, or CIL, or a transition aide student, we can help. The best thing is do you have questions or issues along the way to contact us directly.

Janniell: Correct. Yes, sir.

Keith: Very good. Janniell and Howard, thank you both so much for joining us and telling our listeners about the Client Assistance Program here at Disability Rights Florida. I really appreciate it.

Janniell: Thank you. Thank you for having us.

Howard: Thank you for having us, Keith. Enjoyed it very much.

Keith: Excellent. We enjoyed having you all here. The You First podcast is produced by Disability Rights Florida, a not for profit corporation, working to protect in advance the rights of Floridians with disabilities through advocacy and education.

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You can also call us at 1-800-342-0823. Thank you again everyone for listening to the You First podcast or reading the transcript online. Please email any feedback about the show to podcast@disabilityrightsflorida.org.

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