

Shirley Walker

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Pennsylvania Advocacy and Resources for Autism and Intellectual Disability (PAR) is a statewide, not-for-profit 501(c)(3) organization that supports providers of person-centered services for thousands of individuals with intellectual disabilities and autism across the state. While PAR's members range in size and scope, PAR unites them with a shared vision of creating a system that drives positive change and better the lives of people in the intellectual disability/autism community through the influence of political, economic, and social policy.

Advocacy for person-centeredness is not only seen as essential to those receiving services but also to those who are providing the services themselves. In recent years, PAR has committed to advocating for increased wages for Direct Support Professionals, which is seen as a critical component to recruitment, retention, and quality of service.

PAR's advocacy-focused mission is reinforced and strengthened by the leadership of its President and CEO, Shirley Walker. For Shirley, advocacy starts with and is strengthened by building a solid learning community that maintains a strong focus on mission and the people who benefit from it. She has carried this philosophy with her throughout her career, which has spanned several

industries, both in the private and public sectors. Her skill set is deep and varied, ranging from education and juvenile advocacy to business and management consulting. She also has a great love of music and a strong faith. Over the last 20 years, Shirley has brought her many talents, passion, and perspective to "PAR Leadership Through Education."

Shirley recognizes the complexities of the system within which PAR operates and does not shy away from the hard work it takes to achieve their mission. She sees advocacy as her biggest priority as well as her biggest challenge. By building PAR as a referral system, she hopes to educate providers, legislators, and the public to help make the intellectual disability/autism system more understandable, thereby clarifying what is needed and available for those seeking, providing, and funding services. Shirley's strategies for doing so include:

- Providing PAR members with weekly publications that provide education on system, service, and policy changes;
- Creating workgroup opportunities that help build a community of collaboration and support around common issues and goals; and
- Acting as a clearing house for state members to access information from national associations affiliated with the intellectual disability/autism system.
- In so doing, Shirley provides the opportunity for

consensus among the provider community that can help bring a unified message to legislators to effect change at the federal, state, and local levels. She brings a clear vision and passion for education from her many years as an educator and administrator to her role at PAR.

Leadership Through Focus

Shirley maintains that PAR's strength is in its focus, which she feels is essential to effective advocacy. This focus permeates the organization, starting with the values and vision communicated during orientation. The staff is then given a clearly defined scope of work that supports PAR's mission. To encourage continued innovation that helps them achieve that mission, Shirley strives to cultivate a team that includes a healthy mix of long-term knowledge and new perspective. By combining focus, innovation, and mission, PAR has helped intellectual disability/autism support services secure the sixth largest appropriation of more than 500 in Pennsylvania government, which constitutes a greater level of support than for all other service areas in the state.

Person-Centered Leadership

Shirley's leadership style embodies PAR's person-centered mission. She wants the people being supported by intellectual disability/autism services to feel valued and not pitied. She wants for their voices to be heard and for

their rights to be upheld. She also recognizes that the quality of the support they receive is dependent on consistent and reliable staffing. To that end, she has been a champion of addressing the Direct Support Professionals wage crisis facing the industry. Shirley sees that advocacy in this industry is multifaceted and deserves attention. Her leadership approach of using consensual processes of committees and workgroups ensures that the voices of PAR members and staff as well as those who receive intellectual disability/autism services and their families are heard when decisions need to be made and issues need to be brought to advocacy councils, lobbyists, and legislators. Shirley's commitment to collaboration strengthens PAR's mission and her vision for the future of PAR:

To conclude in Shirley's words, "...Growth toward even more highly effective advocacy toward a future where all individuals with intellectual disability or autism can get the services, they need... PAR's worthy mission is my mission."

To learn more about PAR and how you might be able to support their mission, visit <https://www.par.net>.