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NEW OPINION SURVEY REVEALS MAJOR SHIFT IN PUBLIC ATTITUDES FAVORING FULL INTEGRATION OF PEOPLE WITH DEVELOPMENTAL DISABILITIES IN COMMUNITY, EDUCATION AND EMPLOYMENT

**Opinion research comparing current attitudes of Minnesotans with those reported
in similar survey 45 years ago shows substantial movement toward greater
inclusion of people with developmental disabilities in society**

The attitudes of the general public toward people with developmental disabilities and the roles they should play in society have changed dramatically over the past 45 years, with solid majorities favoring broader community integration, as reported in a just-completed opinion survey of Minnesota residents.

Conducted by MarketResponse International, the survey closely paralleled one done in 1962 that contained many of the same questions, said Managing Director Tom Pearson. "There has been great movement in public attitudes regarding people with developmental disabilities and their roles in the community, employment and education."

Pearson reported that in 2007, Minnesotans in general embraced the concepts of integrating and including people with developmental disabilities into the community and society at large. Based on a sample of 806 randomly selected heads of households in Minnesota, the telephone survey has a 3.5 percent margin of error at a 95 percent confidence level.

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The study was prepared for the Minnesota Governor's Council on Developmental Disabilities, with interviews conducted in January and February, 2007. Council Chair Shamus O'Meara said the survey dramatically illustrates how beliefs can evolve and transform over time.

“To fully understand these remarkable results one must remember that in 1962 a great many Minnesotans were living in state institutions, invisible to society,” said O'Meara. “Today we see that most state residents believe people with developmental disabilities should fully participate in the community.”

A prime example of the shift in attitudes concerns how people with developmental disabilities should receive care, with 77 percent of those responding agreeing that care should be from the immediate family, as compared to just 20 percent who responded in the 1962 survey that care should be received at home.

“While most Minnesotans believed that the immediate family is in the best position to provide care for a family member with a developmental disability, there was great support for the idea that the family cannot carry the responsibility alone,” said Pearson, the study director.

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Integration in the employment sector was strongly endorsed in the 2007 survey, with 60 percent agreeing strongly and 31 percent agreeing somewhat that with the right training people with developmental disabilities could be very productive workers. That is a combined 91 percent agreeing. Companies offering jobs were favored, with 85 percent of 2007 respondents saying they have a lot of respect for companies that employ people with developmental disabilities. Similar agreement came with the statement that “When society helps people with disabilities live to their highest potential, we’re all better off.”

A huge majority of Minnesotans are in favor of government and taxpayers providing a range of services and supports for people with developmental disabilities. Only 6 percent of survey respondents said they agreed with the statement that too much money is being spent on people with developmental disabilities.

In the survey, 90 percent of respondents, or more, expressed support for several government provided or financed services they consider important, including:

- Education, training and job skills
- Access to quality health care
- Protection from abuse
- Training and counseling for parents
- Advocacy training
- Research to learn about causes of developmental disabilities

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In looking at the changes in thinking reported over the 45 year time span, the executive director of the Governor's Council, Colleen Wieck, Ph.D., said there is no reason to believe such changes would not have been experienced beyond Minnesota's borders, as well. "The results of the study are certainly encouraging, but we now must move beyond integration, establishing the rights of people with developmental disabilities to participate in the community, to actual inclusion and full involvement."

The study determined that Minnesota residents were significantly stronger in the belief that people with developmental disabilities can learn to live normal lives, with 36 percent agreeing strongly and 47 percent agreeing somewhat, in contrast to the 4 percent and 60 percent respectively reported in 1962.

In summarizing some of the key findings of the opinion survey, Pearson said that in 2007, more than 90 percent of Minnesotans agreed, strongly or somewhat, that people with developmental disabilities should be:

- able to use public playgrounds and beaches
- able to attend movie theaters
- integrated into society as much as possible
- included in public places and social events
- encouraged to get out and be involved in the community
- treated at regular hospitals

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In viewing attitudes regarding integration and inclusion, the sentiment was not as clear cut in the area of education. When asked in 2007 whether everyone would be better off if school-aged children with developmental disabilities were taught together in the same classes as other children, 23 percent agreed strongly, 29 percent agreed somewhat, 12 percent said they neither agreed or disagreed, 23 percent disagreed somewhat and 14 percent disagreed strongly.

Further demonstrations of increased acceptance of people with developmental disabilities in the broader community came when two other aspects of life were raised. Asked to agree or disagree with the statement “It’s OK to exclude people with developmental disabilities from many public situations; they cannot be expected to fit in,” 55 percent of respondents disagreed strongly and an additional 23 percent disagreed somewhat. When survey respondents were asked to agree or disagree with the statement, “If a person with a developmental disability moved into my neighborhood, I’d be concerned,” 79 percent disagreed strongly and 13 percent disagreed somewhat, a total of 92 percent.

When asked whether people with developmental disabilities should be kept in an institution, just 1 percent of those responding in 2007 agreed strongly and 2 percent agreed somewhat, as compared to a total of 35 percent agreeing strongly or agreeing somewhat in 1962, when state institutions were common. Asked another way, 66 percent disagreed strongly or somewhat with the statement that “people with developmental disabilities should not be allowed to live on their own; they need to be closely monitored.”

The opinion research was commissioned by the Minnesota Governor’s Council on Developmental Disabilities, and co-sponsored by The Arc of Minnesota, The Autism Society of Minnesota, The Minnesota State Council on Disability, United Cerebral Palsy of Minnesota and Self-Advocates of Minnesota.

The survey findings were based on the responses of 806 randomly selected Minnesota heads of households, with either listed or unlisted telephone numbers, that reflects the distribution of Minnesotans in terms of age, race and income level. At the outset of the 20-minute interviews, respondents were told that the survey concerned services for people with developmental disabilities, described as an umbrella term that includes mental retardation, cerebral palsy, autism and epilepsy. Given a sample size of 800, one can say with 95 percent confidence that the error attributable to sampling could be as much as 3.5 percent in either direction, on proportional results, Pearson said.

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MarketResponse International is a Minneapolis-based opinion research organization with substantial experience in qualitative and quantitative research studies in a range of industries, including consumer and business products and services, health care, financial services, automotive and others, for clients in the U.S. and internationally.

The Minnesota Governor's Council on Developmental Disabilities, a unit of the Minnesota Department of Administration, works to assure that all people with such disabilities and their families receive the support they need for them to achieve greater independence and productivity, and to be fully included in the community.

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