



## **Individuals with disabilities deserve opportunity to live independently**

*March is National Developmental Disabilities Awareness Month*

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In Georgia, funding and delivery of behavioral health services is overseen by the Department of Behavioral Health and Developmental Disabilities (DBHDD). While awareness of the first part of the agency's name, behavioral health – which refers to mental illness and substance use disorders – seems to be increasing, the second part of its name is equally important but less understood.

As with mental illness and substance use disorders, a lack of understanding may create a stigma around developmental disabilities. But also like behavioral health conditions, researchers have learned a great deal about disabilities and how individuals with them can enjoy the best quality of life possible.

The National Institute of Child Health and Human Development describes intellectual and developmental disabilities (IDDs) as disorders that are usually present at birth and negatively affect the course of an individual's physical, intellectual and/or emotional development. Often these conditions affect multiple body systems and can also impact such things as fine motor skills, speech and movement.

In addition, although there can be some distinction between intellectual disabilities and developmental disabilities, both share some common characteristics. Generally, IDDs are life-long conditions that can impact learning, understanding and social skills, as well as an individual's ability for self-care, mobility and independent living. Of course, the levels of impairment and ability, and the bodily systems affected, can and do vary greatly from one individual to the next.

IDDs share one more important characteristic with behavioral health disorders: with the right services and support, many individuals with IDDs can live independent lives in their communities. Some will wonder of course how truly independent an individual with low language comprehension or who is unable to walk can actually be. But what we mean by independent can be complex and is very much based on an individual's strengths and abilities.

For an example, think of an elderly parent or grandparent – someone who was active, social and engaged during most of his or her life, but is now aging and what we refer to as “slowing down.” Perhaps that person needs to start using a cane or walker, or even a wheelchair, in order to move around the house or maintain mobility outdoors. Maybe this parent is no longer able to balance a checkbook, so the adult child takes over that task. Can he or she still shop and cook? If not,

meals can be delivered. In each of these examples, some level of assistance is added in order for the parent to continue living independently.

So it is for individuals with IDD's – the difference being that individuals with disabilities have required assistance since they were young and into adulthood, rather than beginning to need it as they age. But as a result of having lived with a disability for years or decades, many individuals with disabilities are highly adept at using assistive technology or doing tasks in ways we might find astonishing.

Different devices and supports – such as ramps, chair lifts, personal care services and more – ensure that persons with disabilities have the specific supports they most need while helping them advance their individual strengths and abilities as much as possible.

Highland Rivers Health is one of many agencies in the area that provides services for individuals with IDD's, including day programs, community activities, residential assistance, respite care for parents and caregivers, supported employment and more. These and many other services and supports are designed to help individuals with disabilities live as independently and enjoy the best quality of life possible – something everyone deserves regardless of their circumstances.