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The SWOT Team (Seeking Ways Out Together), a self-advocacy group comprising individuals with developmental disabilities, formed in 1994 to prepare people living at North Princeton Developmental Center for the institution's closure in 1998. The team's 17 members, 11 of whom lived in institutional settings, initially focused on visiting North Princeton to help residents prepare to move into the community.

Although they still visit developmental centers, the SWOT Team has broadened its scope. In the past two years, the team has done significant things that have brought national—and even international—recognition.

In July 2005, they met with a delegation of People First from Japan. A national group, Self Advocacy Becoming Empowered (SABE), made the partnership possible.

"People First is a self-advocacy steering committee in Japan," said Kate Blisard, founder and coordinator of the SWOT Team. "Their members came to meet self-advocates in New Jersey, Pennsylvania and New York. They are part of the United Nations' Conference on Persons with Disabilities that will take place in 2008. I hope that the SWOT Team will be presenting there. The institutions in Japan are horrendous, so the SWOT Team is

giving them instruction on how to advocate.

"The Japanese people were so interesting and generous and brought wonderful silk scarves and fans as gifts. All had developmental disabilities and brought their staff advisors, who supported them. The staff was wonderful. We talked about it for a week afterward. They were so eager to learn. The chair of their group, a person with a disability, spoke English. Two staff people

to jail, because the police couldn't figure out how to get them there in their highly specialized wheelchairs. Bob has cerebral palsy and uses voice activation. He and Roy Carbone were with ADAPT when they blocked the Senate office. Being an ADAPT member, you learn so many things and meet so many cool people."

In March 2006, Roy Carbone and Ken Houser of the SWOT Team, along with Anita Clavering of NJ

The SWOT Team: *Celebrating 13 Years*

by Maryann B. Hunsberger

also spoke English, so they translated. Nobody on our side spoke Japanese," said Blisard.

In August of 2005, New Jersey ADAPT formed. ADAPT is an advocacy group that fights for the rights of people with disabilities to live in the community with adequate supports. SWOT Team members who chose to become ADAPT members attended a three-day training. The next month they went to an ADAPT protest in Washington, D.C.

"The purpose was to get a law called MiCassa passed so money would follow the person for services in the community," Blisard said. "The police arrested some people. Bob Fessel and Roy Carbone didn't go

ADAPT, traveled to Nashville to testify about the lack of Medicaid reform in Tennessee. "Their governor didn't want to use community waivers to keep people in the community, so they were going into nursing homes."

The SWOT Team went to Maryland that April to present at a conference on self-advocacy for the Maryland Council on Developmental Disabilities. They talked about how to use various advocacy methods to help free individuals from institutions. These methods include self-advocacy, systems advocacy and street advocacy (also known as activist advocacy).

Since the summer of 2006, the

team has been learning more about Medicaid reform, deinstitutionalization and saving the government money through community living. The members regularly receive training on different disability-related issues to keep them up to date. They attend workshops and complete homework assignments as part of their training.

"Their trainings help them to have a knowledge base to help people in institutions who want to

them," said Blisard.

The NJ Council on Developmental Disabilities, through the Progressive Center for Independent Living (an independent living center in Mercer and Hunterdon counties), commissioned the SWOT Team to provide voter education and registration for residents at New Lisbon Developmental Center. This project ran from September to the end of November in 2006.

"The SWOT Team, along with

people with disabilities to be voters. They did follow up surveys after the election," said Blisard.

The SWOT Team has a grant from the People's Support Network to visit with residents of New Lisbon and Vineland developmental centers who hope to move to the community. They will be doing this for the next year.

The team recently attended a seminar taught by Pennsylvania ADAPT to learn more about the

concept of money following the individual so people with developmental disabilities can stay in the community. A partnership of New Jersey social services groups and government entities applied for this grant through the state Medicaid office.

"New Jersey didn't get this grant, but they are reapplying, so we can do it in our state," Blisard said.

The SWOT Team recently signed onto a petition to address the conditions of developmental centers in New Jersey. The members also hold fundraisers to help support the projects they do.

Three SWOT Team members participated in making a video, *Stolen Lives, Promises Broken*. At least 100 people with disabilities

talked in the film about their lives in developmental centers and nursing homes.

The SWOT Team continues to have meetings and plan future activities. They have received awards for their work and hope to provide models for other states. They celebrate their thirteenth anniversary this year. **P&F**



Kate Blisard confers with Jeff Bruce of the People's Support Network. (From *People with Disabilities* magazine, Vol.8, No.1, February 1998)

leave," according to Blisard.

September 2006 brought another trip to Washington, D.C. with NJ ADAPT to do more street advocacy. The team members protested at the nation's capitol about national housing issues for people with disabilities.

"When working to get people out of institutions, we need to find affordable housing solutions for

some Monday Morning members, acted as the trainers for this voter education. They used the SWOT Team as a source because of their work and the reputation the SWOT Team and the People's Support Network have. Luke Koppisch from the DD Council provided the training to the SWOT Team members. They did voter education and staff education concerning the rights of