

# Safeguards Letter

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## Power to Spend

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*There is a great deal of talk these days about ways to bring powerless people into "empowerment"--ways to make "choices" available to those (including people who have disabilities) who have never experienced many. It seems practically impossible to dip into the "fountains of knowledge" in the human service field--as those fountains are represented by conference programs, professional journals, or edited multi-authored books--without encountering presentations or articles (or presentations converted into articles) about empowerment or choice. I think that this is, in general, a healthy development. I just want those (including myself) who talk about such things to be as clear as they can be about what they are saying. In that vein, I'm going to fuss a bit about one aspect--a most important one, I think--of the choice/empowerment issue.*

*A few years ago, my friends Sandra Landis and John Winnenberg led a group of people into thinking and working carefully to try to bring about "the good life" for some adults with disabilities who lived in group homes in New Lexington, Ohio. A part of this work involved elevating to prominence the close relationship between people: a) "making choices" and b) having "disposable income" to use. At about the same time (early 1980's) I was studying the earnings of people with disabilities who worked in various "sheltered workshops" in southeastern Ohio. I was finding that people in those workshops were earning a mean annual wage (total earnings divided by the total number of workers) that was less than 10% of what it cost to keep people in the sheltered workshops.*

*Involvement in these activities--the New Lexington work and the earnings-study--should have made me appreciate the causal connection between income and choice. If one has little or no income, then one's choices must be limited, if not non-existent.*

*Recently, I tested this notion a bit by applying it to myself. I recorded, as best I could, the choices or decisions that I made in one day. It happened to be a Saturday in early October. I then reviewed my record and jotted down the relationship (if any) of each decision to the spending of money. Some of the things I chose or decided about on that day were:*

- 1. •To get up and read the Saturday morning newspaper at 8:00 a.m. The Chillicothe Gazette costs \$9.75 per month, for home-delivery six days a week.*
- 2. •What to have for breakfast. My choices were determined by a trip I had made to the local Big Bear supermarket the previous week--in my own, mostly paid-for automobile. At the market I wrote a check for about \$100.00 for two-weeks groceries.*

- 3.
4. •To go the hardware store or K-Mart for some "stuff" I needed for home-repair or home-improvement (on a home with a \$45,000+ mortgage we were able to get twelve years ago). This "stuff" included two brass porch lamps, some paint, and oil-base stain for the new front porch floor.
5. •To watch the Ohio State football game on television--ESPN cable, which is part of a "package" from the cable system that costs an extra \$10 or so each month.
6. •To rent a video ("Cinema Paradiso"--recommended) for Saturday evening, which meant another car trip (car loan, gasoline, insurance, etc.) and spending \$2.65 for the video.
7. •To order by long-distance phone (OK, it was an "800" number, but I still have to rent the use of the phone line) two pair of corduroys from L.L. Bean. The only way one can phone-order is by using a credit card, of which I have too many.

*Now, this is a pretty typical autumn Saturday for me--house repairs and OSU football, and I'm willing to believe that it would be typical of lots of my neighbors and fellow-citizens of this part of the world. I'm sure that I didn't recall, much less record, all of the decisions I made. But, of those I did remember and write down, most could not have occurred without my (easy) access to cash or to credit (the promise of future cash).*

*I remember that, some years ago, one way of explaining the "principle of normalization" included the idea that efforts be directed toward ensuring that people who have been socially devalued experience "life conditions at least as good" as those experienced by typical citizens. "Social role valorization" extended this idea, so that what is called for is the use of valued or desirable methods or tools in order to make more socially valued roles-in-life available to people. If I'm going to decide how someone else is going to be helped, a reliable guide to my decision-making is my sense of what I understand to be "good" or desirable for me. I think that it's "good" for me to have a major hand in choosing things that affect my life. I've built a case, above, that a large part of my power to make choices rests in my power to purchase.*

*To go back where I started, "choice" and "empowerment" are the things being most talked about these days. So, what is it that's important to do, if we really want people with disabilities (or other poor people) to gain a measure of real control over what happens to them? Providing people with information--about the choices that may be available to them--is important. Making sure that people who are inexperienced at choosing things have enough time to learn how to do so--that's vital. But, getting income to people may be the most important thing of all. And that has turned out to be a hard thing to do. Even the best "vocational" programs for people with severe disabilities that I know of have raised their ratio of workers' earnings to program costs only to about .33; in other words, the program*

*expends about three times as much money for operations as is earned by those who are helped by the program. John McKnight has reminded us that the world of "helping" others, financed by public funds, has become a zero-sum game in which "... the basic competition for the limited funds available for the 'disadvantaged' is between the human service system and cash income for labelled people."\* In such competition, we know who always wins. And yet, if we look at what we say we want for people (i.e., choice, empowerment) and we look at how we spend our Saturdays or many of the other days of our present lives, we will know that getting people money to spend could be the most helpful thing we could do.*

*A relevant cartoon appeared in the New Yorker a year or two ago. It pictures a man sitting in a chair in the office of a bank official. Presumably in response to the banker's question, the man observes: "I've heard a lot about money, and now I'd like to try some." It's certain, in this world of billboards, radio ads and TV commercials (and especially at this time of year) that people with disabilities and others who are poor have heard a lot about money.*