

## **Why We Direct Care Workers Need – and Deserve – Respect and Recognition**

*Speech by Mark Cerna for the New Mexico Direct Caregivers 2009 Summit*

Hi. My name is Mark Cerna. I have worked for Better Way of Living for four years. I specialize with sex offenders and pedophiles as a direct support care staff to help them with day-to-day living.

I feel everyone deserves a second chance in life. When someone believes in you, it makes all the difference -- especially for the kind of people I work with.

But everyone needs respect and positive feedback to be our best selves, even us direct care workers.

A lot of people, including management, don't seem to see what we do even when they're looking right at us. They don't respect or appreciate what we bring to the job, or what we do every day to improve the lives of the people we work with.

We direct support workers know the difference we make every day to the people we work with. They change and progress because of things that we do. That's very rewarding, but it may not be enough to keep us motivated if the people we report to don't appreciate it.

When we're respected at work, we do our jobs a lot better. We want to go to work in the morning. We don't feel like we're just bodies, there to take up space.

When we're not respected, we can't do our jobs as well. We are often shut out of care planning meetings or other conversations about how our individuals are doing because people don't think we have anything to contribute. But we usually know more about the people we work with than anyone else does, so not having us in those conversations actually hurts our individuals.

As direct care workers, we're only human, and we make honest mistakes. A lot of the time, our managers punish us like we were children when we do something wrong. Instead, they should help us improve our ability to work with our individuals.

When we're not respected, our morale gets very low. That affects everyone around us – our families, our friends, and our individuals. We have very high depression rates in our field, and lack of respect is a big part of the reason. And when we're depressed, we're more likely not to care what happens. We just do what we have to do. We don't go over and above.

Lack of respect is also part of the reason why turnover rates are so high. We love what we do, but if we're not respected for it, we will eventually go someplace else.

A lack of respect from others can also eat away at your own self-respect, and that makes it hard to interact with our individuals in an emotionally strong and healthy way. We have to have compassion for the people we care for. We have to respect them, see their potential, and encourage them to do their best. When we are getting the respect we deserve, we have the best chance of being in the right place to improve the lives of the individuals we care for.

Public recognition is important too. We all like a pat on the back every so often. If our organizations are growing and doing well, we all want and deserve to get some credit for their success. When we get that

kind of credit and thanks, we feel more invested in our companies doing well and more inclined to support other people. We want to work harder.

Please give us the respect and recognition we deserve, so we can reach our full potential.