

LBDP Guest Hour_ Disability Rights Maryland

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SPEAKERS

Maryland State Library Agency LBDP, Audrey Sellars, Ashley Biggs, Sarah Miller

M Maryland State Library Agency LBDP 00:01

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A Ashley Biggs 00:21

Hi, everyone, thank you so much for being here with me today. This is LBDP Guest hour and I'm very excited because it is Disability Rights month and I wanted to introduce two amazing speakers today I've got Sarah Miller and Audrey Sellars from Disability Rights Maryland's would you guys like to say hello, hello.

S Sarah Miller 00:42

My name is Sarah Miller. I've been working with disability rants, Maryland for almost three years, I have been working with people with disabilities. Since I was 18. I'm very passionate about advocating for people with disabilities. This is

A Audrey Sellars 00:59

Audrey I am Audrey Sellars, I'm an advocate on the community inclusion team at Disability Rights Maryland. I have multiple disabilities myself, and I'm deeply invested in disability rights. Prior to joining disability rights, Maryland three years ago, I managed core services at a local Center for Independent Living accessible resources for independence. In my free time I like to play wheelchair rugby travel and read. Thanks for having me.

A Ashley Biggs 01:30

Thanks guys so much for being here. So my first question is kind of a gimme, because you have so nicely displayed on your website but tell us what is Disability Rights Maryland when was it established? So



Disability Rights Maryland is a PMA, which is a protection advocacy agency, and we're dedicated to protecting the rights for individuals with disabilities. These agencies are statewide and we are also a nonprofit law firm. And DRM was developed in 1993.



Ashley Biggs 02:03

Very cool, very cool. Can you give us a little bit of that history? I mean, 93 that's, you know, that's a long time ago.



So for most of the 20th century, people with disabilities were either locked away in institutions or isolated at home with no services, not even an education. People with disabilities were often abused, neglected and forgotten. So in 1973, ABC News exposed those horrendous living conditions, and inhumane treatment of people with developmental and intellectual disabilities living inside New York's Willowbrook school. This, this expo is a shock to the nation. The nation was outraged. And in response, Congress created a system of protection and advocacy, or PNA agencies to protect and advocate for the rights of people with disabilities. So each state and territory has a PNA agency, including Maryland and together all of the PNA is formed the National Disability Rights Network. Disability rights, Maryland was formerly known as Maryland Disability Law Center has been the PNA agency in Maryland for decades.



Ashley Biggs 03:13

Wow. So it evolved from just a law center into an advocacy group?



Audrey Sellars 03:18

is so we were formerly called Maryland Disability Law Center. It's just a different name. So we are the same organization as we were before, under a different title. Gotcha.



Ashley Biggs 03:32

Well, I want to hear those success stories. Can you tell me one? Yeah,



so I will start us off on the macro scale and Sarah both will take things on a on a more individual case by case basis. So this year, DRM took a position on a total of 91 bills. Among this past sessions. Legislative wins are the passage of several bills. So one bill established a program to help families with limited financial resources, access lawyers, advocates and education consultants, for a variety of special education matters. Another bill created the correctional ombudsman program to protect people in state correctional facilities. And a third bill mandated and impartial analysis of MTA is mobility link service to better improve that service. Sara, I know that you have had quite a few case successes. Do you mind sharing?

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Sarah Miller 04:32

Yes. So I'm an advocate on the housing team and on the housing team. We have assisted a lot of clients with cases involving illegal evictions. We've educated and supported clients and knowing their tenant rights and subsidized housing programs, which includes vouchers and public housing. We've provided reasonable accommodation requests or reasonable modification requests that were needed in a unit specifically further disability and housing and other programs. And we want to make sure that housing to other programs should be compliant with the Fair Housing Act, Section 504 and ADA to make sure that these programs are not discriminating against individuals with disabilities. Well,

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Ashley Biggs 05:18

you guys kind of touched on this, maybe you can expand. What kind of help does DRM provide?



So we're an advocacy for individuals and systemic advocacy. But um, DRM provides free legal services of technical technical assistance to Marylanders of any age with all types of disabilities, including developmental, intellectual, psychiatric, physical, sensory learning, or traumatic brain injury, Injury who live in facilities in the community or who are homeless.

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Ashley Biggs 05:49

I bet you that's a big population.

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Sarah Miller 05:52

Yes, yes, it is. Well, how do you how do people get help from DRM, so there is a specific number that you can call, it's 410-727-6352, extension zero, and an intake specialist will be connected with you. Depending on your case, they will either send a referral or send your case to an appropriate team that there are different teams, part of disability rights Maryland's we work with mental health, housing, education, community inclusion, development, disabilities and health care, and victims of crime. DRM is not always able to take take cases but will provide referrals or other assistance as needed.

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Ashley Biggs 06:45

So I explored your website because you have so much information to offer and I came across your 2024 advocacy plan. Can you tell us a little bit about what that is? Sure.



So in determining the focus of our advocacy work, DRM engages the community, soliciting ideas and opinions from people with disabilities, their families and other advocates about the matters that are most essential. For a legal organization like ours with limited resources to address we've been conducting listening sessions actually across the state to gather input for future priority setting. The Advocacy Services Plan is the product of all of this community input. So the plan delineates the advocacy services that will take precedence in the allocation of our resources. So we will advocate for people with disabilities within this scope of work described in our advocacy services plan as our resources permit. The decision to accept individual cases for representation that's all informed by the plan. Our work promotes community integration and self direction for individuals with disabilities, including those with psychiatric, intellectual and developmental disabilities. We also work towards equity for Marylanders with disabilities in terms of voting rights, education, public policy, health care, assistive technology, and more like Sarah described,

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Ashley Biggs 08:13

wow, that's a big undertaking. It is, you know, Can you can you give me an example of a large scale advocacy undertaken by DRM, there

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Sarah Miller 08:26

is a case that we're working on. It's the good Lacson case, which is a sidewalk case. So DRM is part of a lawsuit against Baltimore City for having inaccessible sidewalks. Baltimore City has inaccessible sidewalks and curb ramps and several neighborhoods, and individuals with mobility impairments are not able to use sidewalks to navigate to from their homes, or to other public places around Baltimore City. Sidewalks are an important way to travel and to get to places in the city and should be accessible for everyone. And this is one case that we that we are currently working on at this time.

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Ashley Biggs 09:04

Wow. You know, I'm, I think some of us take sidewalks for granted. And, and I can see where that could be an issue. Absolutely.



Also, we, after DRM and cars, which is stands for consumers for accessible ride services, after we spent years advocating for better mobility link service, that's the paratransit service that

MTA runs. We finally felt filed a complaint with the Department of Justice in 2021. So just like Sarah was talking about the sidewalks, it's really the whole transportation infrastructure from the sidewalks to the paratransit system itself that's dysfunctional. And we had to file a complaint with the Department of Justice in 2021 to get that to get that mobility link service improved. At the time riders were being left abandoned. On the street, do to poor on time performance of the vehicles. One woman who uses a power chair was actually left on the street in downtown Baltimore all night, since her ride never came to bring her home. It was very unsafe riders were also unable to reach mobility link at their call center. So our complaint with Department of Justice is now under investigation, and we hope that the Department of Justice will identify the services shortcomings and recommends specific improvements for MTA mobility link.

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Ashley Biggs 10:33

Again, that sounds like a huge undertaking.

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Audrey Sellars 10:36

It is. But you know, we have this great group of group of volunteers that are working on it.

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Ashley Biggs 10:42

Well, that that actually brings me to my next question. I know, plenty of people always ask me, where can I go to volunteer? So do you have volunteers? And if someone wants to get involved, what do they have to do?

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Audrey Sellars 10:55

Yes, we have two volunteer groups. We have cars consumers for accessible ride services. And we have sunshine folk. They both work with DRM. Cars as a group of paratransit riders advocating for service improvements, Sunshine focus, the other volunteer group, Sunshine Folk is a group of former nursing home residents who help current nursing home residents leave the facility and move back into the community. So please contact us if you're interested in applying to our governing board of directors, our mental health advisory council, cars, Sunshine folk or to volunteer in any other way, including as a pro bono attorney.

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Ashley Biggs 11:37

That would be really cool. You know, one of the cool things about doing these podcasts is I run into great groups like the DRM who are like hanging people from the community come volunteers, so that that's great. Yeah,

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absolutely. We wouldn't be the organization we are without the volunteers we have, especially

absolutely. we wouldn't be the organization we are without the volunteers we have, especially cars and sunshine folk, are, those are all individuals with disabilities themselves who have been directed, directly affected by these issues. And it's an it's the voices of the people who are affected the most that need to be heard. So we're glad to have them with us.

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Ashley Biggs 12:15

I 100% agree. So one of the reasons why I wanted to connect with you guys is because of the amazing services that you provide. And, you know, July is Disability Rights month. Oh, I'm sorry, Disability Pride Month. And I would love to know why you guys think it's important to celebrate disability pride.



Sure. So I have muscular dystrophy. I've had it my whole life. I've I've only been disabled my entire life. And that's the only life I know. However, for a long time, I did not have disability pride. What helped me to develop that disability pride was being around others with disabilities and learning about the history of disability rights. So whether or not you have a disability yourself, you can celebrate Disability Pride Month by learning about a figure from the disability rights movement, for example, like Ed Roberts or Judy human. If you haven't seen the documentary, *crip camp*, this is a great time to watch it for free on YouTube, or rewatch it if you've already seen it. It's a great film about the burgeoning of the disability rights movement in the 1970s. You

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Ashley Biggs 13:30

know, it wasn't that long ago, 1970s people, people, you know, just because you see photos that are kind of like dated and in black and white or read text that was written, you know, 3040 years ago doesn't mean it's, it's over. The price should still be there. Right? Yeah. And



as someone with a physical disability, I was, I was born with a physical disability and it took me a very long time to accept myself. I think it is important for people in this community to be heard and accepted. I'm proud to be someone with a disability and it is definitely important to celebrate disability and promote awareness in

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Ashley Biggs 14:15

the community. Well, how do patrons get in touch with you?



If anyone would like to get into contact with us, there's a specific number that you can call and that number is 410-727-6352. Extension zero, and you can just call that number and then

someone will be able to talk with you. Well,

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Ashley Biggs 14:42

I would love to hear what else you guys would like to share about DRM and the work that you do. Thanks.



We'd like to invite everyone to come to DRM breaking barriers Awards Gala. On Thursday, September 26. X at the American Visionary Art Museum in Baltimore. If you haven't been there, it's a beautiful museum. This is our annual annual fundraising event where we'll be celebrating a few incredible leaders who have advanced disability rights and made Maryland a more equitable place. So there'll be good food drinks, music friends, you can find more information at [Disability Rights md.org forward slash braking, dash barriers dash gala forward slash](https://DisabilityRights.md.org/forward-slash-breaking-barriers-gala).

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Ashley Biggs 15:33

Okay, now is it is it a black tie? Is it a black tie event?



It's close to a black tie. It's it's not really, you don't need to come wearing a suit. But But, but this is the kind of engagement that you want to get a little bit pressed up for.

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Ashley Biggs 15:52

The only reason I ask is because if I put my partner in a suit, I'm gonna lose them. He's I'll lose them in the crowd. You guys do amazing work. And we've we've been fortunate enough to be partners with disability rights, Maryland for various events in the past. So I'm excited to have you on our podcast today.

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Sarah Miller 16:13

Thank you so much for having us.



We've really enjoyed this. And we hope that this will be useful to some of your listeners.

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Ashley Biggs 16:23

Yes, thank you so much.

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Ashley Biggs 16:26

This has been great. Well, guys, thank you so much for listening today. And we will be back next month with another group. So thank you so much and have a great day.

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Maryland State Library Agency LBPD 16:36

This has been a presentation of a Maryland State Library Agency. For links to additional resources provided by today's presenter, please visit the show notes. For more information on MSLA or the Maryland State Library for the Blind and Print Disabled. Was it Maryland libraries.org