

## What Is the Ask Me!<sup>sm</sup> Project?

Ask Me!<sup>sm</sup> is a Consumer Satisfaction Evaluation administered by The Arc of Maryland for the Developmental Disabilities Administration (DDA) in collaboration with the Maryland Developmental Disabilities Council. In Year 5, 1000 individuals will be surveyed about their quality of life and satisfaction with services. Interviews are conducted by trained interviewers with developmental disabilities who receive DDA-funded services. The Project is unique for the following reasons:

- We believe persons with developmental disabilities are in a better position to elicit more meaningful responses from other individuals in DDA-funded programs than more traditional surveyors, as a result of their first-hand understanding of DDA services.
- The original survey instrument is a melding of the *Quality of Life Questionnaire*, by Robert Schalock, Ph.D. and Ken Keith, Ph.D. and *Signs of Quality*, a booklet developed by People On the Go of Maryland, that examines the concept of quality in DDA services. The name of the project, “Ask Me!<sup>sm</sup>” is derived from People On the Go’s *Signs of Quality* question, “Did You Ask Me?” The Ask Me!<sup>sm</sup> Survey was subjected to several reviews in Fall 1996 by People On the Go members to make the survey more applicable to Marylanders with developmental disabilities, simpler to administer and easier to understand. In Year 3 Project staff, Dr. Gordon Bonham and other stakeholders, including members of People On the Go began revising the questionnaire due to copyright concerns. Year 4 introduced a new survey, based solely on *Signs of Quality*, the cornerstones of self determination and the new regulations from DDA. This survey tool may not be used without the written expressed permission from The Arc of Maryland.
- The project has enormous capacity to increase the visibility and empowerment of persons with developmental disabilities, both because the interviewers themselves have developmental disabilities and because people receiving services are directly asked how they view their lives and services.
- As the project expands, a professional career path may open in the area of quality of life survey research for some of the interviewers.
- Ask Me!<sup>sm</sup> is a project with national significance, as states look for ways to strengthen quality assurance efforts around the voices of persons with developmental disabilities.

During the first year of the project, a total of 237 persons receiving services from ten provider agencies (including day or vocational services, supported employment, and residential or supported living services) were interviewed. First year pilot data established the reliability and validity of the survey and data collected, and the capability of interviewers with developmental disabilities to conduct surveys. Ask Me!<sup>sm</sup> interviewers found the experience to be overwhelmingly positive; the majority of interviewers have continued with the project in Years 2 - 5. Individuals who were interviewed reported that they enjoyed being asked their opinions about their lives and services.

In Year 2, 500 individuals were interviewed at twenty provider agencies representing the four DDA regions. In Year 3, 700 individuals were interviewed representing an additional seven agencies throughout the state. In Years 4 & 5 1000 individuals will be interviewed at a total of thirty-five agencies statewide. Interview sessions are scheduled during the day, evenings, and weekends, as necessary, and are usually held in agency conference rooms or nearby community centers. Individuals are randomly selected to be interviewed, and an individual’s participation in Ask Me!<sup>sm</sup> is voluntary.

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An important component of the project is support to participating provider agencies as they strive to enhance their internal quality assurance efforts. In the first three years of the project, the two lead researchers met with provider agencies to interpret and apply data to their unique agencies' efforts. Year Five will continue these efforts, with additional technical assistance training.

Gordon Scott Bonham, Ph.D. is the principal researcher. In Year 4, he will provide consultation, train interviewers, and conduct the data analysis. Dr. Bonham is President of Bonham Research and formerly Assistant Director of Survey Research at the Regional Economic Studies Institute, Towson University. In addition, Robert Schalock, Ph.D., and members of People On the Go will continue to provide consultation to the project. Dr. Schalock is Professor and Chair of the Psychology Department at Hastings College in Nebraska, and Immediate Past President of the American Association on Mental Retardation (AAMR). People On the Go is Maryland's statewide self advocacy group comprised of approximately 140 individuals from 12 counties.

An Advisory Committee is established to advise on the implementation of the project, use of survey results, and recommendations to DDA. The Advisory Committee is comprised of representatives from DDA, the Maryland Developmental Disabilities Council, each provider agency participating in the project, a parent of a person receiving DDA services, Service Coordination, and the Maryland Disability Law Center. People On the Go members and Ask Me!<sup>sm</sup> interviewers will review recommendations and give input on needed changes and future direction of the project.

Beginning in Year 5 the Ask Me!<sup>sm</sup> project is required by DDA for all community providers in Maryland. The Arc of Maryland is very excited about the enormous potential for enhanced consumer empowerment through this project.