

*Supported Decision Making is when a person with a disability exercises their right to make decisions for themselves, while accessing a support network of their choosing.*

## Supported Decision Making: A Guide for Families and Supporters

As a youth with a disability approaches the age of 18, parents and the youth are encouraged to explore a long-term plan that is right for their family. For some, the option of guardianship is a good fit, but for many, there are other models that are less restrictive which may be more appropriate, such as Supported Decision Making.



### What is SDM?

Supported Decision Making (SDM) is a way for people with disabilities to get help in making their own choices. Unlike in guardianship, the person with a disability is still the ultimate legal decision maker.

The person with a disability selects trusted family members, friends, community members and/or service providers to serve as supporters.

### What SDM is not-

- **Legal Liability:**  
Supporters are not making the choices. They are helping the person with a disability to make their own choices.
- **Length of commitment:**  
Supporters can stop at any time but should only agree to be a supporter if they can commit to at least a year. Allowing time to learn and try out the process is important to the person with a disability and their supporters.

### What is the role of the supporter?

A supporter helps and advises the person with a disability to make their own decisions. The supporter helps the person understand the choices and the pros and cons of an issue.

People can learn by making bad choices, but they are safer and more protected if they can make their own choices with the support of others. It is important to respect this. If the supporter thinks they would want to insert their own judgement into a decision, they should not be a supporter.



### What are the areas of support?

#### Personal Care:

- Clothing choices
- Nutrition
- Personal hygiene

#### Living and Working:

- Choosing work
- Transportation
- Choosing where to live
- Housekeeping
- Finding, hiring, firing staff
- Education

#### Safety:

- Safe choices at home and in the community
- Protection from exploitation
- Choices about alcohol and drugs
- Access to emergency services

#### Finances:

- Paying rent and bills
- Budgeting and banking

#### Friends and Partners:

- Free time
- Healthy relationships
- Dating, sex, and birth control
- Marriage

#### Health Choices:

- Choosing a health care provider
- When to go to the doctor
- Over the counter medication
- Prescription medication
- Remembering to take medication
- Non-emergency care
- Emergency care

#### Communication:

- Expressing likes, dislikes, and choices
- Self-advocacy

### How can my family get started with this?

The issue of guardianship is an extremely personal decision, and each person with a disability requires different kinds of supports to be successful. Vermont Family Network is here to help you navigate the transition to adulthood and alternatives to guardianship.



As you look to the future, consider the following questions:

1. What types of support does the person need to make the best decisions for themselves?
2. Where and with whom, can the person get those supports?

The supporter should ask the person with a disability who else is supporting them and ask to meet the team to determine what roles and areas of support each team member will provide.

After a support team is identified, we recommend signing a Supported Decision Making Agreement so that everyone understands what SDM will mean for the person with a disability and how the process will work.

Unlike guardianship, there is no need to pay a lawyer or involve the court to start using Supported Decision Making. To start using SDM you need to choose who you want as a supporter and talk with that person about being a supporter.

Establishing an SDM model allows the person the opportunity to grow in their independence while having the safety net of supporters. The SDM model is designed to be flexible and can change based on the needs of the person.

### Write a Supported Decision Making Plan

An SDM plan is not a legal-binding document. It is a structured way for the person with a disability to identify their supporters and the areas that they need support in. When writing an SDM plan here are some considerations:

- Label it
- Identify who the plan supports
- Identify what decisions the person needs supporters for
- Identify who the supporters will be
- Describe how each of the supporters will help
- If supporting on financial decisions - appoint a monitor
- Prepare other documents needed such as releases
- Sign it



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## Supported Decision Making in Practice

Many individuals may be able to reach their maximum potential and live independent lives by using the Supported Decision Making model. Having a team of trusted people who can provide support and input about life decisions, may be the only tool one needs to be successful. The supporter assists in the decision-making process; the individual with the disability always makes the final decision.

The individual will communicate to their team how much support is needed, how often they would like to meet, and what communication will look like.

The individual being supported is always able to change their mind, change their supporters and change the terms of the agreement.

## Health Care Proxy

As a companion to your SDM agreement, you may want to consider a Health Care Proxy.

A health care proxy is someone you choose to make health care decisions for you if something happens to you and you cannot make decisions for yourself. To choose your health care proxy, you fill out a form where you write the name of who you pick as your health care proxy. Then, if something happens and you cannot make your own decisions, your health care proxy can temporarily make the decisions for you.

A health care proxy is like a backup plan in case something happens, and you are unable to make decisions for yourself.

Health care proxies are for everyone – not just people with disabilities or people using SDM. Most people who do SDM decide to pick one of their supporters as the health care proxy. A great resource for health care forms is the Vermont Ethics Network.

## Vermont Resources:

[Green Mountain Self-Advocates](#)  
802-229-2600

[Office of Public Guardian](#)  
802-828-2143

[Vermont Family Network](#)  
802-876-5315

[Vermont Legal Aid Disability Law Project](#)  
800-889-2047

[Vermont Ethics Network](#)  
802-828-2909

**National Resources:**  
[National Disability Rights Network](#)  
202-408-9514

[National Resource Center for Supported Decision Making](#)  
202-448-1448

