

The Basics of Supported Decision Making

What is Supported Decision Making?

Supported Decision Making (SDM) is getting the help you need, from people you trust, to make your own decisions. Isn't that how we *all* make decisions? We *all* need help when we're faced with tough choices, or don't understand our options, or just want some advice. It's simple: they give you information and advice to help you make the best decision for you. They support so you can decide.

SDM is very important for people with developmental disabilities who can make their own decisions when they get the support they need. For them, SDM can be used instead of more restrictive options, like guardianship. For individuals with guardians, SDM can be used to maximize self-determination.

Why Should I Use Supported Decision Making?

- Scientific studies have shown that people with disabilities who make more decisions (who are more *self-determined*) have better lives: they are more likely to be independent, work, and safer. This is true regardless of the nature of their disability.
- Using SDM instead of options like guardianship protects rights instead of taking them away.
- Virginia law, the National Guardianship Association, and best practices all agree that you should use the least restrictive option for decision making support. You can always seek additional legal authority later if it is needed.
- Putting SDM into place can be cheap (or free), fast, and flexible as needs change.

What if Something Bad Happens?

The honest reality is that something bad can happen to anyone, at any time, and people with disabilities are often more vulnerable. Historically, we have leapt to guardianship to protect people. Unfortunately, there isn't a single study showing it makes people safer, and it can take away people's rights and self-determination, which increases their vulnerability.

SDM builds on people's strengths, and the help of their supporters, so they can overcome their limitations, make their own decisions, and direct their lives. That way, even when people make "bad" decisions – and everyone does, sometimes – they can learn from them and use support to do better next time. That process can be long and slow, but we all go through it as we become adults.

How Do I Really Use SDM?

There are as many ways to use SDM as there are people. Some SDM users stay in contact with their supporters by phone, email, and text. Others find it helpful to have an SDM team that meets and talks regularly, like a circle of support. Others use phone apps or technology to help them track spending or remember to take medications. Some people create Powers of Attorney, Advanced Directives, Special Needs Trusts, ABLE Accounts, and other legal forms to help them set up support systems and work with their supporters. Options can be added or changed over time as you learn what works best. The next page will show you some ways you can explore and use SDM in your life or with a family member, friend, or person you support.

74% of the funding for this product was provided by the Virginia Board for People with Disabilities under the federal Developmental Disabilities and Bill of Rights Act. For more information on the Board, please contact: Virginia Board for People with Disabilities, 1100 Bank Street, 7th Floor, Richmond, VA 23219, (800) 846- 4464, or visit the Board's [website](#).

Putting SDM into Action

1. Read and Brainstorm about SDM

Read about how SDM works (see resources below) and highlight examples that may work for you, your family member, friend, or person you support.

Think about life areas - like money, medical care, relationships, education, and work- and brainstorm about when support is needed, what kind of support is needed, and who can provide support (like having a family member who is good with money help you write a budget and work with you to track your saving and spending)

2. Ask Chose Supporters to Help

Go over your list of who you want to help and support you. Some SDM users rely heavily on one or two supports for everything, others have a big team. When you're happy with the list, reach out and make sure the supporters agree to help you and understand how you want them to help and how you'll stay in touch.

3. Develop Your Tools

Once your SDM team is in place, start thinking about whether you want to add some new tools to support you. For example, a Power of Attorney can be customized to limit spending over a certain amount or to have someone in the room with you when you make medical decisions.

Representative Payees can manage Social Security funds and Special Needs Trusts and ABLE accounts can help with saving and spending.

4. Start, Evaluate, Revise

Now, get going. Work with your team to think about, make, and communicate decisions. Plan to talk often and re-evaluate every 6 months or year to make sure things are working or add more support if needed. You can always add or change team members or tools - SDM can grow and change as you do.

Supported Decision Making Resources

1. The Arc of Northern Virginia's Toolkit with contacts, sample POAs, and more
<https://thearcofnova.org/sdm/>
2. Webinars on SDM implementation and team building
<https://youtube.com/user/VideosatTheArcofNoVA>
3. Asking any SDM Questions
<https://thearcofnova.org/answers/>
4. "Supported Decision Making" book by Jonathan Martinis and Peter Blanck
<https://tinyurl.com/SDM-book>
5. Jenny Hatch Justice Project info on start of SDM in VA, SDM data
<http://www.jennyhatchjusticeproject.org>
6. "Setting the Wheels in Motion" article by Suzanne Francisco

74% of the funding for this product was provided by the Virginia Board for People with Disabilities under the federal Developmental Disabilities and Bill of Rights Act. For more information on the Board, please contact: Virginia Board for People with Disabilities, 1100 Bank Street, 7th Floor, Richmond, VA 23219, (800) 846- 4464, or visit the Board's [website](#).

- <https://tinyurl.com/SDM-Wheels>
7. National Resource Center for SDM's stories, videos, agreements, and research
<http://www.supporteddecisionmaking.org/>
 8. "When Do I Want Support" SDM tool
<https://tinyurl.com/SDM-ACLU>
 9. Center for Public Representation's SDM forms and stories
<https://supporteddecisions.org/>

74% of the funding for this product was provided by the Virginia Board for People with Disabilities under the federal Developmental Disabilities and Bill of Rights Act. For more information on the Board, please contact: Virginia Board for People with Disabilities, 1100 Bank Street, 7th Floor, Richmond, VA 23219, (800) 846- 4464, or visit the Board's [website](#).