Equip for Equality advances the human & civil rights of people with disabilities in Illinois.
Change. It starts with a sense that things are just not fair, that the situation is getting worse. Legal rights violations are identified. Brainstorming sessions are held with Equip for Equality attorneys and our pro bono partners. Legal advice. A course of action is set. And lives change forever. Many people solve the problem themselves. It’s an empowering experience. For others, ongoing legal support. Life changes. The power of choice.

Removing barriers requires a mix of strategies—class action litigation, public policy and legislative advocacy, independent facility monitoring.
and abuse investigations. The power of the ADA is harnessed. Systems-wide reforms are achieved. The Illinois landscape for people with disabilities changes, becomes a bit more inclusive.

An education that works. In-home services and community integrated housing and supports. Competitive employment. Access to buses and trains, hotels, banks, sports, polling places and public libraries. Our work is united by a common vision: the right of everyone to fully participate in all aspects of community life. Equip for Equality. Justice for all.
Equip for Equality provided an avenue for athletes with disabilities to participate in the state finals.
Despite losing the use of her legs in infancy to a neuromuscular disease, Mary Kate trained relentlessly to become an accomplished and valuable member of the Fenwick High School swim team in Oak Park, Illinois.

Mary Kate watched from the sidelines—not allowed to participate—as her team qualified and finished second in the Illinois State finals. The Illinois High School Association (IHSA) failed to provide any accommodations for swimmers with disabilities and used a scoring system that disqualified them.

Unwilling to accept this unfairness, Mary Kate sought the help of Equip for Equality. EFE joined forces with the
Illinois Attorney General and sued the IHSA under the Americans with Disabilities Act, demanding that IHSA provide an avenue for its athletes with disabilities to participate in the state finals.

As a result of Mary Kate’s willingness to take her fight out of the water and into a courtroom, IHSA issued new guidelines that allowed her and six others to be the first swimmers with disabilities to participate in the state finals.

Now, all student athletes with disabilities have a chance to join their non-disabled peers and teammates at state championships.
Equip for Equality sustained life at home and paved the way for others.
As David neared his 21st birthday, he lived at home, attended college, and enjoyed music and computers. David also lived with a neuromuscular disease, with quadriplegia, cardiac problems, and respiratory issues causing him to be on a ventilator 24/7. With home nursing services from the State, David’s disability was a fact of his life - but not his whole life.

For David, turning 21 was a nightmare because the State of Illinois reduced home services for people with significant disabilities when they “aged out.”

So, when the State cut David’s services in half on his birthday, David’s father monitored his ventilator during the hours when nurses stopped coming.
He quit his job and drained his savings to support his family.

But David and his family refused to accept defeat. Represented by Equip for Equality, they filed suit in federal court and challenged the State’s age cut-off for services.

David claimed the State’s policy put him at risk of institutionalization, violating the ADA’s mandate that services be provided in the least restrictive setting. David and EFE prevailed and David’s services were reinstated.

This paved the way for many other medically fragile individuals and a change in the State policy.
Kaleb and Chewey
Equip for Equality upheld the right to bring a service animal to school.
When Kaleb was six years old, his mom asked Kaleb’s school to allow Chewey, a service animal, to join Kaleb in school. Without exploring what Chewey did for Kaleb, who has autism, the school refused.

The Illinois School Code provides that service animals be allowed to accompany children with disabilities in public schools. A service animal is trained to perform specific tasks for a person with a disability.

So Kaleb and Equip for Equality challenged the school district’s decision by filing suit in state court. The case proceeded to trial where the District attempted to demonstrate that
Chewey was not helping Kaleb educationally and thus was not a “service animal.”

The District lost. The Court held that Chewey was trained to help Kaleb and did conduct specific tasks to benefit him, and that was all the law required. Undaunted, the District appealed to the Illinois Appellate Court. EFE attorneys filed briefs and argued before the Court, defending Kaleb’s right to have Chewey at school.

The Court ruled in Kaleb’s favor and issued an opinion upholding the right of all children with disabilities in Illinois to bring a service animal to school.
Cory
Equip for Equality paved the way to independent living.
When his teacher called Equip for Equality, Cory was 17 years old and attending a school where he was loved. But he was not thriving.

Cory was born with cerebral palsy, a condition that didn’t affect him intellectually but left him unable to walk, dress or eat without help. Cory often arrived at school hungry. He was neglected by his father’s partner, who was his caregiver. Sent to bed early without access to his communications device and unable to move, Cory was physically and socially isolated.

Cory had a modest trust fund to cover his care, and he looked forward to having control of the fund when
he turned 18. But days before Cory’s birthday, his father made an appointment to take Cory to an attorney’s office to sign papers giving his dad control over Cory’s decisions and assets.

After learning of Cory’s plight, EFE’s attorneys met with him and went to court where they obtained an order preventing contact by his former caregivers and banning their interference with his assets.

The court action paved the way for Cory to live independently, with the assistance he needed, near friends and family who care about him.
Stanley
Equip for Equality championed community integration.
Stanley lives in an apartment and has a job at a restaurant. He can go to the grocery store, library and out with friends. But life wasn’t always that way for Stanley.

Stanley was still in an institution 15 years after the ADA was passed and six years after the US Supreme Court held in the Olmstead case that the unjustified segregation of people with disabilities was a violation of that law. In 2005, Stanley agreed to go public and become the lead plaintiff in a class action led by Equip for Equality against the State of Illinois.

In Ligas v. Maram, Stanley and eight other people, representing thousands of individuals with developmental
disabilities throughout Illinois, challenged the State’s system for funding services by keeping people with developmental disabilities segregated in large congregate facilities.

Stanley’s case eventually led to a Consent Decree, the first of three that required Illinois to transition thousands of adults with disabilities out of institutions and into the community where they can live, work and play along with everyone else.

The success of this case and the importance of community integration are best expressed in Stanley’s own words: “Freedom is very, very nice!”
Equip for Equality opened access to public transportation.
In 2000, the situation in Chicago was bleak for people with disabilities using public transportation: buses lacked working lifts and those with operating lifts often bypassed people who needed them. Gaps between train platforms made wheelchair access dangerous, and calls for help went unheeded. Blind riders had to guess when to exit a bus or train, and deaf riders missed announcements when trains were going express.

Then a group of individuals joined forces to take action. With Equip for Equality as lead counsel, they filed suit against the Chicago Transit Authority (CTA) alleging that lack of access violated the Americans
with Disabilities Act and the federal Rehabilitation Act.

Intense litigation led to a class action Consent Decree that changed everything. Under the decree, the CTA committed to an overhaul of accessibility, including $15 million for improvements.

Today all buses have lifts that are deployed and gap fillers aid access to trains. A working intercom is in place; employees are trained and discipline motivates compliance. Signage informs people who are deaf, and auditory announcements inform people who are blind. Now the CTA and disability advocates work together to resolve problems and address concerns as they arise.
Equip for Equality keeps people safe.
Equip for Equality plays a critical role in protecting people with disabilities from harm. Using our federal and state statutory powers, we safeguard the fundamental right to be free from abuse and neglect and the right to be supported by quality services and care wherever people live.

We use many strategies to keep people safe, including individual and systemic litigation. We secure orders of protection to prevent domestic abuse and restore funds lost through financial exploitation. An interdisciplinary team of attorneys and clinicians in our nationally recognized Abuse Investigation Unit makes unannounced on-site monitoring and investigations in public and private facilities and has
access to critical records. Through this work and our interactions with people with disabilities, their families and guardians, staff and administrators, we have uncovered serious problems, dangerous practices, unsafe conditions and suspicious deaths.

In response to these problems, we have alerted the public, state and federal agencies and policy makers, and secured systems-wide policy and legislative reforms and significant changes to practices and policies within facilities and programs. We have successfully pushed for the closure of dangerous public and private facilities, institutional and community-based, including the state-run Howe and Lincoln Developmental Centers.
An Overview

The First Thirty Years
Five years before Congress passed the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA), Equality for Equality (EFE) embarked on its mission to advance the civil and human rights of children and adults with disabilities in Illinois. Designated by then-Governor Thompson, EFE, a private not for profit organization, became the Illinois agency to carry out the mandates of the federal Protection and Advocacy Systems for people with physical, mental and developmental disabilities.

For 30 years EFE has served individuals with disabilities and their families. With federal, state and private funding, our work has varied in activity and scope: from coaching individuals to advocate for themselves to giving
advice, legal assistance, negotiation, and representation. From individual cases to systemic litigation, we have protected individuals from abuse, promoted their self determination, and fought against discrimination in education, employment, voting, housing, hotels, buses and trains, and many other arenas. Our diverse work has been united by a common vision: the integration of people with disabilities in all aspects of public, private and community life.

Some highlights:

In 2000, EFE took the lead in a case that led to the overhaul of transportation of the Chicago Transit Authority, making it accessible to people with
disabilities, including wheelchair users, those who are deaf or hard of hearing and those who are blind or have low vision.

In 2001, we were awarded a Congressional appropriation for a national demonstration project to investigate abuse and neglect of individuals with disabilities. The demonstration was successful and eventually became the Abuse Investigations Unit, which investigates claims of abuse and neglect in facilities and community settings, monitors public and private facilities, and acts as a watchdog to assure the safety of people with disabilities throughout Illinois.
Following the Supreme Court’s landmark decision in Olmstead vs. LC, which held that the unjustified segregation of people with disabilities is a violation of the ADA, EFE launched the first of three class actions in 2005 to fulfill the promise of that case: a full life in the community for people with disabilities. Partnering with other organizations, we first brought the case of Ligas vs. Maram, which successfully challenged the segregation of adults with developmental disabilities in institutions and resulted in a consent decree to move thousands of people into the community.
Ligas was followed by Williams v. Quinn, which has led to the integration of individuals with mental illness into the community, and finally, the Colbert case whose consent decree is giving people with physical disabilities and mental illness who have been warehoused in nursing homes, the opportunity to live independently in the community.

Although education for children with disabilities had long been a focus for EFE, in 2007 EFE launched the Special Education Clinic to expand our services to this underserved population. The clinic boasts a Helpline and the fully supported services of 150 pro bono attorneys from law firms.
and corporations, and handles more than 1,400 cases per year.

In 2015, EFE partnered with the Illinois Department of Human Services to monitor the safety of residents during and after the closing of state institutions. And that year we also launched the Employment First project, which promotes competitive employment as the first option for people with disabilities.

With co-counsel partners, EFE negotiated a settlement on behalf of mentally ill prisoners in our class action against the Illinois Department of Corrections in January 2016. Highlights of the settlement
agreement include the investment of funds for new residential treatment units and additional clinical and security staff.

Throughout, our work has led to transformational changes in the lives of thousands of individuals, advocating for the right of people with disabilities to be free from discrimination and abuse, make their own decisions and chart their own lives.
Moving Forward...
Equip for Equality has helped tens of thousands of people with diverse disabilities in Chicago and across Illinois achieve their personal goals, in many instances resulting in life-changing outcomes.

Equip for Equality developed the in-house expertise to pursue a strategic mix of systems change strategies to achieve broad societal reforms. This internal expertise – combined with our broad federal and state statutory powers as the federally-mandated Protection and Advocacy System for Illinois – have enabled us to play a unique role as an independent watchdog over state government and service providers. We conduct unannounced site visits and
investigations at troubled institutional and community-based agencies and secure their eventual closure. We pursue class action litigation to secure expansive relief for thousands of individuals facing the same problem.

Equip for Equality has played a critical role in the state’s decision to shift away from segregated, institutional settings to person-centered services and build a more effective system of in-home care and community-based services. The organization has targeted our limited resources on issues of importance to people with disabilities and their families – education, employment, housing,
transportation and the provision of individualized services and supports necessary for success. At the same time, we have enhanced the state’s efforts to keep people safe from abuse and neglect and rescued countless individuals from dangerous situations.

These achievements would not be possible without our amazing Pro Bono Partners – 24 of Chicago’s leading corporate law departments and law firms. By leveraging the power of the private bar, Equip for Equality and our 150 volunteer attorneys have been able to break down barriers that hold people back, opening up a world of possibilities.
Equip for Equality is privileged to be celebrating 30 years of advocacy that has led to life-altering outcomes for people with disabilities and transformative changes in the systems that serve them. As we move forward, we are expanding our advocacy mission to incorporate older adults as they seek to maintain a life with dignity and control over personal decisions in the community. We are strengthening our work to reengage the highest risk court-involved youth in school, continuing to ensure that all children can learn and play together in neighborhood schools, and building resources to eliminate discrimination and secure reasonable
accommodations for people with disabilities at work. We will continue to grow our Pro Bono Partners Initiative, engaging more corporations and law firms in support of our mission. All in all, we know that our unique blend of individual and systems change strategies will remove barriers for thousands more people with disabilities so they can enjoy full, satisfying and independent lives well into our next three decades of advocacy.

Zena Naiditch
Founder, President and CEO
Lead Community Champions
and Pro Bono Partners

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