



TOGETHER, WE
RISE

76TH ANNUAL CONVENTION

APRIL 29-30, 2026 | HYBRID



Ray Graham Association®

Empowering people with disabilities to reach, grow, and achieve.™

Empowering Advocates to be Agents of Positive Change: The RGA Council Journey



Ray Graham Association®

Empowering people with disabilities to reach, grow, and achieve.™



RGA Council

RGA's Mission

To create opportunities that empower people with disabilities to reach, grow, and achieve

Anne (aka Annie) Thurston has been supported by Ray Graham Association since 1982.

Anne is a natural leader and someone people turn to for advice on rights and advocacy.

Anne is a long-time key founding member of RGA's Self-Advocacy Group the RGA Council and has influenced many positive changes at RGA including Peer Mentorship and the Wellness Committee. Anne is a former Board Member of Blue Tower Solutions and RGA's Board of Directors and has presented at many conferences.

Currently, Anne is the Co-Chair of RGA's Wellness committee, a Human Rights Committee member, and is a certified Peer Support Specialist/Mentor.

Anne is a proud aunt and in her free time loves to paint.





Cami Smith has been supported by Ray Graham Association since 1994.

Cami is a self advocate leader that others look to when seeking advice on how to speak up and out for themselves.

Cami is a founding chairperson of the Ray Graham (RGA) Council, a member of RGA's Board of Directors Advocacy Committee, and a past member of RGA's Board of Directors.

Cami completed the IL Self Advocacy Alliance Ambassador program and recently became a certified Peer Mentor.

A quote that Cami enjoys:

“ Born with limits living without limitations”



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RGACouncil



Where it all started!

Various agency “resident advisory groups” were combined to create the RGA Council

First meeting of the newly organized Council was in **July 2011**

- 14 members
- Cami was appointed as Chairperson & Anne was a member!

Some of the discussion points during our 2nd ever meeting included:

- Wanting to know dates for activities sooner
- Be more involved with deciding what we are going to make to eat
- Take first aid classes
- Host a cook-off
- Get people out to vote & vote early
- Processes to access to money is challenging



RGA Council

2016

Partnered with the IL Self Advocacy Alliance

Formalized the Council's Mission: **To Empower Advocates to be Agents for Positive Change**

2017

Created our first logo



2018 Goals started to really move us forward:

Host Summer Picnic to create more awareness about the Council and the IL Self Advocacy Alliance

Partner with RGA's Family Education Night

Start a RGA Council Newsletter

Order T-shirts for Council members – voted on purple 😊

We want to Recognize Successes – Advocacy - Health



RGA Council

Fast forwarding to the **2020s**:

Mission remains: To Empower Advocates to be Agents for Positive Change

Our Voice

- Our voice & influence at RGA (examples)
- Our efforts, voice & influence in our communities & state
- RGA's support

Structure & Values

- Move to Current structure (co-chairs + secretary & leads from several committees)
- New logo
- How we have made a difference (at RGA, in our communities & in our State)
- Education/Training



RGA Council

Our proudest accomplishments (so far)

- Updating a Handbook for people receiving RGA services
- Legislative visits
- They Deserve More support
- Protect Medicaid Campaign efforts & acknowledgments - they know who we are!
- RGA Council awards & recognition both for people and the team supporting them
- CQL recognition that RGA's self advocates are strong, successful advocates

- Wellness Committee*
- PEER MENTOR program*



RGA Council



RGA Council

RGA
Wellness
Committee

RGA Wellness Committee

Provide resources & share ideas to create a culture of health & wellness and to improve quality of life

A Great Idea was Born!

June 2023: A Doctor of Nursing Practice (DNP) student connected with RGA to work on his project.

- **The Goal:** To help people create and maintain healthy lifestyles
- **The Idea:** People could come together to share ideas to create a culture of health and wellness and to improve quality of life. The Wellness Committee was created!
- **The How:** Monthly virtual meetings were held for advocates and team members to gather to discuss topics from nutrition and fitness to mental and spiritual health.
 - The **initial group of 5 advocates** was designed for people from specific geographic locations and was heavily supported by team members.
- **The Outcome:** People loved sharing ideas and successes!





RGA Wellness Committee

All Good Things Must Come to an End ...Or Do They?

April 2024: The DNP student finished his project, so the Wellness Committee *could have* come to an end.

- Members wanted to move forward, so they decided to regroup and come back stronger!

July 2024: The Wellness Committee came back under new leadership!

- Anne and another advocate co-chaired the Committee.
- The first meeting of the new forum was in-person.
 - Discussed ideas about the Committee's direction
 - Grew from 5 to 13 members with little Team Member support. It wasn't needed!
 - Anne suggested the idea of a Wellness Committee Newsletter
 - Members voted and agreed that this was the direction they wanted to go in

 **The Wellness Committee Newsletter**
August 2024

This Month's Topic: Healthy Eating

Sugar-Free Desserts
There are many desserts that come in sugar-free options, like ice cream, Jello, pudding, candy, and cakes.





Drinking Water
Drink a lot of water to stay hydrated. You can make water taste better by adding fruits, vegetables or herbs like lemon, lime, orange slices, cucumbers, ginger or mint.



Fruits And Vegetables
Fruits and Veggies are nutritious and have vitamins. You can cook them in many different ways like boiling, grilling, air frying or blending into smoothies. You can add spices or herbs to make them taste better.



Reducing Salt
Some foods that are high in sodium (salt) are bacon, sausage, TV dinners, fast food, doughnuts and cookies.



Too much salt can make you feel bloated and thirsty, and can cause high blood pressure, swelling, and sleep trouble.

Health Is Important!

August 2024:

- The first edition of The Wellness Committee Newsletter was created!
 - Members selected and researched topics together.
 - Each member brought their own ideas and experiences!

September 2024 to Present:

- Topics Include:
 - *Physical Fitness*
 - *Taking Control of Your Healthcare!*
 - *Fall Prevention*
 - *Heart Health*
 - *My Food, My Choice*
 - *Ableism*
 - *Steps to Less Stress*
 - *Much More!*
- **October 2024:** The Wellness Committee Newsletter started being shared through the Alliance community's email list and Facebook page, reaching a wider audience.

All ideas
welcome!

RGA Wellness Committee

- **August 2025:** Partnered with RGA's Peer Mentors to host the first Lunch and Learns!
 - People from across the agency come to learn about health and wellness topics from the Newsletters
 - Great opportunity for discussion and getting new ideas to bring back to The Wellness Committee





RGA Council



PEER MENTOR

What is Peer Mentoring?





PEER MENTOR



RGA Council

**Ray Graham Association Peer Support
Specialist /Mentor Initiative:
A Brief History**





PEER MENTOR

Peer Mentorship empowers self-advocates to lead, support one another, and strengthen their communities.

From an idea to reality!

RGA Council members wanted to use their advocacy skills to help others and set a goal to make it happen

Learned about how people supported through the Arc of Beaumont (Texas) started a Peer Support Specialist program

Reached the coordinator / curriculum designer to learn more

Fortunate to have received a grant from the Coleman Foundation to get things started



RGA Council



PEER MENTOR

Peer Mentorship empowers self-advocates to lead, support one another, and strengthen their communities.

How we made it happen

- Curriculum and Coaches training
- Getting the word out
- Application and Interviews
- Our initial education & certification
- Bi-monthly on-going education we receive

- We have held small group mentor sessions
- Some mentors have met individually with people - with and without coaches
- Hosting Outreach session for people that want to know more about what partnering with a mentor can offer (via RGA's day services)



RGA Council



PEER MENTOR

IMPACT & POTENTIAL

Quotes from RGA Peer Mentors

In total, Peer Mentors have worked 140 hours since the start

I learned more about myself, who I am & how I can help others

I am a leader and a good one

I am voice for others

I listen & learn from others and help them live the lives they want

We help others to grow & stand up for what they want

People have a better outlook on life

We're dedicated to keeping this going!



PEER MENTOR



**From
Application
to
Certification
&
Celebration
to
Impact!**



PEER MENTOR

What's Next & How you can join us

Vision: Create a Statewide Peer Mentor Network

1st step: seeking partners interested in learning more

We'll come to you & help you get started!

We'll provide:

- A minimum of **10 hours of technical assistance** to each participating organization **at no cost to the organization**
- Guidance from experienced Peer Mentors and RGA team members
- Support to engage and develop self-advocates as leaders
- Structured training and implementation tools via access to vetted curricula **at NO cost to at least ten organizations in the State**
- Participation in a statewide network of Peer Mentor programs

RGA Peer Mentors





PEER MENTOR

Interested? Let's Connect!

RGAPeerMentors@raygraham.org

331-758-7402



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Questions?

Who can be a peer mentor?

How do you know a peer mentor is doing a good job?

Do Mentors get paid?

Do peer mentors receive training?



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**Thank you for
spending time with
us today!**