

## **Introduction to Supporting People with Brain Injuries**

Systems Unlimited Inc. provides services to individuals with acquired brain injury. Many people with a brain injury are funded through the Brain Injury Waiver program. Systems Unlimited is required to provide training about brain injury to all staffs that will be providing support to a person with a brain injury who is funded through the Brain Injury Waiver.

The purpose of this document is to provide Systems Unlimited staffs basic information about supporting people with brain injury. Staffs will also complete a three-hour Brain Injury training class within six months of providing supports to an individual with a brain injury. During the class, staffs will learn about brain injury in greater detail as well as strategies for supporting individuals with brain injury.

The Brain Injury (BI) Waiver program is similar to the Mental Retardation (MR) Waiver. However, there are some important differences. Costs for services funded by the BI Waiver are capped at approximately \$2700.00 per month. If a person with a brain injury needs services beyond the cap, they can request an exception to policy through their case manager.

**Why is it important to learn about brain injury?** Every brain injury is unique just as every person is unique: The individual experiences normal growth and development from conception to birth, until sustaining an injury to the brain (at any age) which results in impairment of brain function.

***An individual with a brain injury is not mentally retarded unless they were mentally retarded prior to sustaining the brain injury.***

**What causes brain injury?** An injury to the brain can occur at any age, from birth to old age. Common types of injury are:

- Traumatic Brain Injury. Examples: falling; a blow to the head, gunshot wound; shaken-baby syndrome.
- Other Causes: Examples: lack of oxygen, stroke, aneurysm, tumors; other diseases.

**Brain Injury Defined:** The Brain Injury Waiver defines “brain injury” as clinically evident damage to the brain resulting directly or indirectly from trauma, infection, anoxia, vascular lesions or tumor of the brain, not primarily related to degenerative or aging processes, which temporarily or permanently impairs a person’s physical, cognitive, or behavioral functions.

### **Common misconceptions about brain injury**

- The person with a brain injury will be volatile, aggressive, and unpredictable.
- The person with a brain injury will have a dramatic loss of intellectual functioning.

- The person with a brain injury will improve for the first 12 months after their injury and then the improvements will stop.

The truth is that people with a brain injury can continue to show physical and cognitive improvements for the rest of their lives if they have the proper supports and encouragement of loved ones and support staff.

### **Common cognitive and physical impairments after sustaining a brain injury**

The brain is a very complex organ with many parts including the cerebral cortex, the brain stem and the cerebellum. The brain has been described as a three-pound universe and regulates every aspect of human behavior. Some types of injuries can cause damage to all areas of the brain. Other types of injuries may result in injury to just one or two parts of the brain. Cognitive and physical impairments will vary based on which part or parts of the brain are injured. **Impairments may include:**

- **Short-term memory loss**
- **Difficulty speaking**
- **Difficulty in processing thoughts**
- **Problems with balance and movement**
- **Loss of ability to eat (swallow)**
- **Lack of inhibition**
- **Seizures**
- **Increased or decreased interest in sexual behavior**
- **Difficulties in self care**
- **Fatigue**
- **Depression**
- **Sleep disorders**
- **Lack of initiation (getting started)**
- **Poor judgment**
- **Emotional liability**

The above list represents just a sample of possible impairments a person with a brain injury may experience. To learn about the impairments the person you support may experience, read the person's individual service plan (ISP). It will also be helpful to review any neuropsychological reports in the case file as well as the social history.

Many individuals with brain injury benefit by following a very structured routine. A structured routine helps them to be as independent as possible. Individual planners, calendars on the wall, checklists, and signs around the home can help the person "remember" what they need to do and what steps need to be taken.

If the person has difficulty speaking or processing information allow lots of extra time for them to respond. If you have trouble understanding the person, ask them to repeat what they said and ask questions to help determine what is being communicated. Do not pretend to know what is being said if you don't understand.

If the person has trouble with judgment (acting before thinking), developing verbal or non-verbal cues that you can give will help them remember to "stop and think" before acting. Role-playing and rehearsing social interactions can also be very helpful.

If the individual has difficulty managing emotions, you can remain calm and confident and provide supportive feedback to help them regain control. Expect the unexpected and understand that brain injury can prevent a person from feeling guilt or empathy. Be fair in your expectations and realize that it is the injury, not the person, which is affecting behavior.

## **Summary**

The information offered in this document provides basic information about brain injury. You will be completing a three-hour Brain Injury course in the near future. Additional learning resources can be found in the SUI library as well as on the web.

The greatest learning resource of all is the person you are serving. Take the time to get to know them, their likes and dislikes, their strengths and areas that require your support. It is okay to ask the person about their life before the injury occurred. Even when people have poor short-term memory, they can often remember, in detail, their life before the injury. Be respectful and remember that prior to the injury the person experienced a normal physical and intellectual development. Remember, a person with a brain injury is **not** mentally retarded unless they were mentally retarded before the injury.

Finally, remember that a person with a brain injury can continue to attain cognitive and physical improvements for as long as they live. You are in a unique and exciting position to help the individuals you work with truly maximize their potential.