**2014 Self-Advocates Becoming Empowered Conference Report**

**Executive Summary**

The 2014 Self-Advocates Becoming Empowered (SABE) Conference was held October 9– October 12. 2014 at the Renaissance Hotel and Cox Convention Center in downtown Oklahoma City. The conference was coordinated and managed by self-advocates from Oklahoma with support from the Oklahoma Self-Advocacy Network (OKSAN). OKSAN’s organizational partners provided time and funding for the conference. Those partners are Oklahoma People First Inc., the Center for Learning and Leadership (Oklahoma’s UCEDD), the Oklahoma Developmental Disabilities Council, the Oklahoma Disability Law Center, the Oklahoma Department of Human Services Developmental Disabilities Services, and the Oklahoma Family Network.

Highlights of Facts Collected about Conference Attendees

* **698** Attendees
* **387** Attendees who self-reported having disabilities
* **159** First Time Conference Attendees
* **195** Organizations Represented
* **43** States Represented (Representatives from Guam, Canada, and the Virgin Islands attended as well.)
* **77** Requests for Accommodations and/or Accessibility Needs Received
* **190** Self-advocates paid the SABE membership fee of $10.
* **49%** of participants came by plane
* **64%** of the participants arrived on Thursday ( first day of the conference)
* **20%** of the conference registrants took advantage of the “early bird” registration;
* **80%** of the conference registrants registered within the last two months prior to the conference.

**Satisfaction Survey Information**

* **80%** Reported Satisfaction with the meals
* **89%** Reported Satisfaction with the facility
* **89%**  Reported Satisfaction with the exhibit area
* **90%** Reported Satisfaction with the registration process
* **95%** Reported Satisfaction with the key note speakers
* **98%** Reported Overall Satisfaction with the Conference!

After the conference, the Oklahoma Self-Advocacy Network (OKSAN) met to debrief the conference. Self-advocates and conference planning staff outlined “what people liked about the conference”, “what worked about the conference,” “suggestions for SABE,” and “suggestions for the next host state.” This report from the debrief meeting is intended to help self-advocates and SABE improve future conferences, while showcasing the work of Oklahoma’s advocates with disabilities before, during and after this event

**What people liked about the conference**

From the very beginning of the conference planning, self-advocates requested to learn to “do it themselves.” In preparing for the conference, self-advocates learned what it takes to put on a conference by identifying and contracting with speakers, negotiating and finalizing ~~the~~ contracts with the hotel and conference center, selecting meals and snacks in accordance with budget limitations and dietary needs of attendees, fundraising and marketing for the conference, running registration, and providing transportation options.

Working with the hotel and their conference staff was a positive experience for self-advocates. The hotel and its facilities were highly rated by self-advocates. The hotel valet provided limos for the “Night-out on Bricktown,” which made something that was already highly rated by our guests an even bigger success. Conference planners provided great custom lighting and a backdrop, which enhanced the ballroom.

Also very highly rated were speakers. Andrew Imparato (AUCD Executive Director), Aaron Bishop (AIDD Commissioner), the Pearce Brothers, and Gary Guller, each received high praise for their engaging presentations and messages.

The entertainment also received high praise, as conference attendees enjoyed the Kiowa Dancers while being exposed to Oklahoma’s proud Native American heritage and traditions. Guests also enjoyed both dances, one with a DJ and another with the band, Mystery Dates.

**What Worked Well about the Conference**

The conference success was due in large part to time and people. To support self-advocates’ efforts to run the conference, OKSAN required that SABE give us 2 years of planning time. This time was crucial to the success of the conference, because it provided self-advocates time to receive training in conference planning, chair and run conference committees, set-up meetings with speakers and businesses involved in the conference (hotels, airport, transportation company, vendors, restaurants, medical equipment rental businesses), and understanding timelines and deadlines that needed to be met. It also gave our funding partners’ staff the time to be patient with self-advocates. The time also allowed staff to schedule meetings in Tulsa to get more Oklahoma self-advocates involved.

Each individual and organizational member of the Oklahoma Self-Advocacy Network brought important ideas and resources to ensure the conference’s success. One of the most valuable resources was the volunteers, who were recruited by OKSAN. Volunteers were able to direct and escort guests through conference venues (including transportation hubs), trouble- shoot problems and concerns, and help conference logistics run smoothly. The volunteers at the airport received high praise from the attendees. One attendee said, “It was so great to be met at the airport and shown where to pick up your bags and then to help you with finding the van to get to the hotel. Thank you.”

Conference planners also felt that the “Night on Bricktown” was a great success. Oklahoma City is thriving, and part of the reason for that is a downtown that has many entertainment options. We wanted our guests to have a meal outside the conference center, and we wanted Oklahoma City businesses to benefit from having a large conference in their city. We worked hard to create the voucher system, and in spite of poor weather, we believe our guests enjoyed an evening out of the hotel. Conference staff met with the restaurant managers after the conference and every one of them were very excited to have been involved with the conference. They were so complimentary of the people who used the vouchers and talked about what a great time everyone had. Several of the managers said they would not hesitate to partner with us again. We also heard from several people about how well they were treated in Bricktown.

The University of Missouri conference planning team helped many aspects of the conference run smoothly, particularly the registration process They also created the web site and e-blast, which did a great job of promoting Oklahoma City and conference logistics, such as entertainment options and accessible transportation..

Self-advocates on the Oklahoma conference planning were involved in reviewing and choosing breakout sessions. They were able to set clear expectations for all speakers and facilitate great discussions with conference planning members to select excellent and diverse sessions. The designs for the conference t-shirts and volunteer vests, were also conversations and decisions they took pride in*.*

**Conference Preparation**

Oklahoma self-advocates requested to learn to “do it themselves.” To help them plan the conference and increase self-advocate participation, conference committees were formed. Those committees included: marketing, transportation, sessions, volunteer and registration. Each committee was chaired by a person with a disability.

 Oklahoma People First contracted with the University of Missouri Conference Planning Team (MU), which had experience with SABE conferences in Kansas City and Minneapolis, to collect the registration forms and fees for conference, prepare needed reports from the registration database, design and manage the conference web site, send out updates on the conference through e-mail blasts, and print conference materials. Their experience with conference logistics helped the Oklahoma self-advocates and conference planning staff stay on track with programmatic deadlines. MU did an excellent job assisting in the creation of the registration form and controlling the on-line registration process. They worked well with self-advocates; explaining everything that was happening, whether it was something that needed to be completed by a certain time or an issue thatwasn’t understood. MU and the Oklahoma conference planning team also conducted trainings for the self-advocates and other conference planners in fundraising, partnering, registration, and advocacy to help everyone prepare for the conference. The trainings and partnerships with MU and the conference planning team provided self-advocates the tools and support needed to “learn to do it themselves” and plan and manage the conference with minimal support.

All of the activities related to planning the SABE Conference provided self-advocates with leadership opportunities and demonstrated their capabilities as leaders to project partners and community members. They facilitated discussions that led to decisions on the conference logo, conference web site, speakers, entertainment, merchandise, conference registration form, call- for-papers application, audio visual needs, meeting rooms, adaptive equipment needs, transportation options, and meals for the conference.

In reviewing promotional merchandise for the conference, committee members met with three agencies to discuss costs and products. Self-advocates were involved with meetings at the airport to determine logistics of the volunteers, and with MedRide to negotiate rates for accessible transportation. Self-advocate co-chairs and other planning committee members participated in several conference calls with MU as they worked to set-up the web site, online registration, and e-blasts with information about the conference. Four self-advocates participated in meetings with the Oklahoma City Convention and Visitors' Bureau, which led to a $10,000 contribution. Approximately 15 self-advocates helped the Sessions Committee review proposals and decide which breakout sessions would offer the greatest opportunity for conference attendees to take away something positive from the conference.

**Recommendations for SABE and future Host States**

It was a pleasure to host the 2014 SABE Conference for all who were involved. We look forward to attending the 2016 Conference, and continuing to work with SABE on their important work.

As we mentioned above, and for your review, we note again that planning this conference provided incredible opportunities for self-advocates to learn the complex process of planning such a large conference. It was a challenging experience, and we while the rewards were many, it is very important for both SABE and the next host state to know our successes, challenges, tips, and timelines.

First, it is important that the next host state be determined as soon as possible because this conference took the full two years to plan. A long planning period will allow the self-advocates from the host state a better opportunity to learn how to put on the conference and become an active participant in the planning process. This time frame will also allow the host state the time needed to receive financial support from AIDD for the conference. Federal agencies plan and budget funding for conferences 2-3 years in advance. AIDD funding was crucial to keeping the costs of the registration down.

Second, we highly recommend the host organization contract with an organization that has experience in conference logistics and in working with individuals with disabilities. Oklahoma was very lucky to have learned this “tip” from the planners of the Kansas City SABE conference. While the contract with MU cost a significant amount of money, their services were worth every penny to us.

Third, we strongly recommend building a long-term relationship with the conference hotel(s) and conference site (if not in the hotel). The hotel/conference staff had much to teach us, but they also needed to LEARN from us in terms of accommodating guests with disabilities. Establishing good communication and positive relationships takes time and effort. It will require multiple meetings to assure all accessibility requirements are met once guests start registering for the conference. Stay in constant contact with the hotel – and get everything from the hotel in writing.

Fourth, the Flag Ceremony, as we understand it, did not meet SABE expectations. We are sorry for that, but we changed the “standard” ceremony for budget considerations. We looked at the cost of renting large state flags for this conference. The rental price was $2500 just for the flags – not including poles and stands. A planning committee member suggested we purchase small state flags so that each conference guest could go home with their own flag. This option was more cost-effective, and we thought a fun idea, but it still cost the conference $1200. We suggest that SABE and the future host state put a picture of each state up on a projector screen. As the picture is shown, people will have more time to stand up and cheer for their state and it saves everyone money.

Additionally, we suggest the following to the next host site:

* Have clear and constant communication with SABE’s Board and Advisors, and make sure your expectations and plans are clear to SABE, and vice versa.
* Contact AIDD immediately to request financial assistance for the conference.
* Have as much information about the conference (including registration deadlines, fees, and program information) on a website as soon as possible.
* Understand that no single hotel will have enough accessible rooms for all guests requesting one. Make it clear to guests that the first priority of the conference planners is to accommodate EVERYONE as best it can.
* Work very diligently with hotels to assure they can accommodate the needs of the guests. In our case, one hotel gave us the wrong number of accessible rooms it had, which caused a great deal of extra work in moving guests from one hotel to another.
* Cut off registration at least two weeks prior to the conference date, to have enough time to assure hotel registrations are in and correct, and to provide a firm count for meals.
* Do all you can to get guests to provide as much very specific information as they can in terms of their accessibility needs. Many of our guests were vague in terms of their need for accessibility in the bathroom. For example, MANY people said they needed a fully-accessible, roll-in shower. Several of these were very easily accommodated with a transfer bench.
* Work with airports, bus, and train stations so they understand and are ready to accommodate a large influx of people who may have unique communication and transportation needs.
* Work with your travel/convention bureau. They have great ideas and sometimes money!
* We strongly suggest that the host state take every opportunity to educate potential conference guests about the costs associated with this conference. We received many calls about the high cost of registration, but very few understood that a multi-day conference with all meals included will create a high registration cost. Further, there was significant “waste” in terms of accommodations paid for that ultimately were not necessary. One example was a request for translation of materials into other languages. Oklahoma paid about $1000 to translate materials – and not one person who requested that accommodation picked up that translated material.

With all due respect, we feel compelled to share some concerns we have with the new guidelines SABE has published re: applications to host future SABE Conferences. Certainly the decision is for SABE to make, but we wanted to offer these perspectives from a recent host:

* The SABE Membership fee being included in conference registration is worrisome to us. While we understand the convenience of having this fee built into registration, it is an unfair charge for those without disabilities who are not extended the right to vote. Using our data for the conference, of 698 people registered, a little more than half did NOT identify as having a disability. That means half the registrants could have been subject to a fee for which they received no benefit. This seems unfair. Further, the membership fee is self-limiting for SABE. The membership fee seems to be a “poll tax” – as no other “membership benefits” are provided with this fee except the right to vote IF you are attending the conference. If SABE wants members to pay an annual fee, think about building a structure for any and all people with disabilities to buy an annual membership – not just those who attend the conference. Think about this: the conference is every two years. SABE could be getting membership dues EVERY year, instead of every two years if there was a membership drive and a concerted effort to define membership benefits beyond just the right to vote at the bi-annual conference. Beyond collecting membership dues from people with disabilities, SABE could establish a membership rate for “allies” – people without disabilities who want to support your mission. These could be individual or organizational memberships, and could raise new dollars for your work. We think there is much for SABE to think about and discuss here, and we encourage you to do so.
* We are very concerned about the requirement for free conference registration for the 21 members of the SABE Board of Directors. Certainly the work you do is vital to the organization, but is it fair to the rest of the membership that THEY pay your expenses for the conference? As a host state, we worked very hard to raise funds to offset the many expenses of this conference. The registration fee was set at an absolute minimum level so that as many people with disabilities and allies could attend, but even at this minimum level, it was financially out of reach for many – especially those on fixed incomes. Again, with all due respect, why shouldn’t the Board of Directors be expected to pay for their own meals – as it expects from the membership who elected them? At the heart of it, THAT’S what the registration fee paid for. Please reconsider this requirement.
* Similarly, we are concerned about the requirement that the host state be required to raise funds to pay for a particular vendor (Prime III/FSU) to participate at the conference. The fee plus waived registration fees amounts to about $9000 added to the budget. This puts an additional $12 onto the registration fee for EACH person attending. Is that fair? We strongly believe this expense should fall on the SABE budget – not the host committee. This is 100% a SABE function, and should be treated as such. Speaking for those who had to pay their own way to this conference, this requirement should be reconsidered.
* We note that the conference is required to extend through Sunday afternoon, and remind you that SABE required this of Oklahoma as well. As such, we booked the conference center space and a meal that cost the conference more than $10,000. Additionally, it cost many of our guests an extra night in the hotel room. From the beginning of the planning process, we were told very specifically that SABE was solely responsible for the program on Sunday, which would include a “look back” over the past two years, and a planning session for goals for the next two years. This would have been a great and informative session. Sadly, the program delivered was no more than 20 minutes, and it was your host state that took on a lot of blame from very dissatisfied guests. Many of the conference guests were infuriated that they had spent an extra night in the hotel without any substantive session on Sunday. The session planned would have been excellent – but SABE did not deliver this.

We are pleased that SABE has made the effort to put in writing its requirements for a host state, but continued communication is key when co-hosting any event. We recommend that SABE give the host state additional feedback throughout the planning process .The phone calls were good, but it is important to provide as much feedback and set clear expectations for the host state as possible. We think SABE should have multiple meetings on site with the conference host state prior to the conference. It is important in the planning process that the host state know SABE’s activities and vice versa.

These recommendations are respectfully meant to improve the conference and save money, which will decrease the registration fee, allowing more people on fixed incomes to attend these conferences.

Again, thank you for the wonderful opportunity to host this conference and support the work of SABE. Please feel free to contact us if you want to discuss any of our recommendations or if you need clarification on any areas of this report.

Respectfully submitted,

The Oklahoma Conference Planning Team