

BEHAVIORAL HEALTH NEWS

45 Years Within Human Services: Reflections and Where We Go From Here

Frank L. Bird, M.Ed., LABA, BCBA, CDE®, Melmark Executive Vice President and Chief Clinical Officer

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I have had the privilege of working within the field of autism over the past 45 years. For 24 of those years, I have been honored to work at Melmark, a multi-state human service provider with premier private special education schools, professional development, training, and research centers, currently in Massachusetts, Pennsylvania, and North Carolina. At Melmark I have been able to apply my knowledge and experience with organizational behavior management to influence advancements in all areas of programming and service delivery including strategic planning, curriculum, and instruction, staff development, research, and written publications. I currently serve as the Executive Vice President and Chief Clinical Officer at Melmark.

Throughout my career, the individuals I have met and worked with have taught, inspired, and changed me. I have been most impressed with the perseverance shown by people who are leaning to live and learn to overcome obstacles they face as they navigate their disability, sometimes on their own, and often with the support of family members, loved ones and community helpers. I have learned to be a better educator, clinician, administrator, and advocate. Frequently I have been asked “why” I chose to work within human services and my response is simple: “There is no greater satisfaction than supporting individuals who deserve a chance to learn to become more independent and have the opportunity to a life that is purposeful and satisfying.” There is no doubt they have given me a sense of purpose in my career and life.

As my professional role has changed over the years, my primary focus has remained to deliver and advocate for autism services for those most impaired: children and adults with the highest acuity, individuals with accompanying co-morbid mental health diagnoses, and severe challenging behaviors. Through my work over decades with hundreds of professional colleagues as models and mentors, I have become more attuned to the needs of each individual involved in the highly specialized care offered by clinicians, schools, and human service agencies across the country.

Proudly, my professional knowledge and expertise has contributed greatly to the deinstitutionalization movement, advocating for the transition of people with disabilities from public or private institutions, such as psychiatric and state hospitals or settings where they had received contingent shock therapy, to home or community-based settings. Along with my esteemed colleagues at Melmark, I continue to design and improve evidencebased services such as our state of the art private special education schools, adult day programs, community houses and supportive vocational opportunities for hundreds of individuals who were previously defined as unable to be served in community settings.

My early experience as a young direct care clinician working overnights certainly informs my work as a senior clinician and administrator at Melmark, an organization that embraces care and compassion, evidence-based practices, best outcomes, a highly skilled workforce, integrity of service delivery, and diversity, equity, and inclusion for all. I have met amazing direct support professionals who have chosen to enter a field that unfortunately is always challenged by underfunding and a lack of public understanding for the necessity of complex care and the value of service provided.

I have had the opportunity to support and mentor countless young professionals and provide them with recommendations for how they can approach their role. Helping to shape them and learning from them as they become strong ethical leaders within the field is both inspiring and satisfying. I offer a few thoughts below to you as a reader of this article and hope you will consider adopting these values in your everyday experience.

Never Underestimate the Importance of Care and Compassion

The mission and vision of every human service organization needs to start by highlighting the care and compassion for our consumers and their families. At times I have had to remind my colleagues and peers why they chose a career within human services. I have met established clinicians or administrators who are caught up in their own success (research, publications, and promotions) and temporarily forget or minimize the value of care and compassion. At Melmark, we have an organization-wide practice of starting every meeting with “Mission Moments,” or sharing observations that highlight the successes of those we serve. This practice is one of my favorites as it helps to keep me centered in my daily work.

Create a Clinical Environment That Values Evidence-Based Practices

We have the opportunity to change lives by teaching new skills whether it be how to communicate needs or wants, become more independent within a work site, learn new daily living skills, access the community, develop social relationships, and establish new strategies to adaptively respond and cope with challenges. In order to be efficient and effective, we must look to the science and research when implementing supportive strategies for change and improvement.

Fidelity, Fidelity, Fidelity

As often as possible, I remind myself and other clinicians that we are only as effective as our ability to assess the fidelity of what we say we are doing. It is critical to evaluate systems of operation to determine effectiveness. There are times we need to pivot and make data-informed decisions for improvement in service delivery.

Learn From Those You Serve

Early on in my profession, I realized that the people I serve are influential and responsible for how successful I could be in the human service field. I think we can all look back and remember a teaching moment when the people we served taught us an important lesson or responded in a manner, which then led us to generalize this skill to other individuals, which in turn created more opportunities for success. Our consumers are our teachers, and we must look to them to make us better leaders while informing decisions to improve their lives and the lives of others in our community.

Advocate and Educate

More than ever, we need everyone’s voice to educate and advocate in ways that will positively influence our future. There are many competing interests and needs for our legislators to consider and therefore it is imperative that we raise our voices in a collective way for our needs to be heard and we must be united in our messaging. The services we provide are only as good as our front-line staff. The COVID-19 pandemic and the current workforce crisis has magnified the reality of that statement. We need to speak and advocate for those who cannot speak for themselves. We must insist that our government support the needs of the most vulnerable amongst us, and the skilled staff who support them. Maintain Your

Standards of Excellence

Despite the challenges you will face ranging from underfunding, a hiring and staffing crisis affecting direct care human service agencies, and a widespread lack of understanding of the highly specialized service needs of those we serve, do not sacrifice your professional standards.

It is critical that you define and establish your expectations in operational terms, which will enable you to assess and evaluate your performance as a professional and as an organization. It is my privilege to work among a community dedicating their lives to serve others living with intellectual disabilities and mental health concerns as they overcome challenges and obstacles. My advice is to remain steadfast and committed to those you serve and always be proud of what you do and how you do it. Our world deserves your presence, your commitment, and your expertise!



Frank L. Bird, MEd, BCBA, CDE® is Executive Vice President and Chief Clinical Officer at Melmark, Inc, and founder of Melmark New England and Melmark Carolinas. He is responsible for developing and overseeing clinical policies and practices, integrity, and resources across divisional settings. He has extensive experience in community-based human service delivery systems, having developed more than 80 programs in support of children and adults with intellectual and developmental disabilities, autism, acquired brain injury, and mental illness. He has a successful clinical history working with individuals with severe behavior disorders and his evidencebased practices have been published and presented at national conferences.