A JEWISH PERSPECTIVE ON DISABILITY AND INCLUSION

March 2 symposium at Spertus Institute for Jewish Learning and Leadership addresses disability in Jewish communities

(Chicago) Over the past several decades, the status and rights of people with disabilities have moved to the forefront in policy platforms worldwide. Providing much-needed insight into how the complex issues surrounding disability and inclusion are interpreted in Jewish law and addressed in Jewish communities, Spertus Institute for Jewish Learning and Leadership presents a public symposium titled Disability and the Law: A Jewish Perspective. The symposium takes place on Sunday, March 2, 2014, at 2 pm at Spertus Institute, 610 S. Michigan Avenue.

Kicking off the symposium, rabbi and lawyer Gideon Sapir will speak about disability rights in Israel and how disability is addressed in Jewish law. Legal advocate Deborah Pergament will discuss disability law in the United States and the range of ways that disability issues are addressed in American Jewish communities. Human services and policy expert Suzanne Strassberger will join them to moderate the program and facilitate a question-and-answer session.

An expert on Israeli constitutional law and theory, Gideon Sapir received Rabbinical Ordination from the Israeli Chief Rabbinate, his LLM and SJD from Northwestern University, and his law degree from Israel’s Bar-Ilan University, where he serves on the Law School faculty. He is the founder of two legal clinics, one focused on disability rights and one on rights for the elderly. Spertus Institute is proud to have him serve as 2014’s Ezra Sensibar Visiting Professor.

Deborah Pergament is Managing Attorney of Children’s Law Group and a professor at both DePaul University College of Law and Case Western Reserve University. She is known for her work representing children with cochlear implants, autism spectrum disorders, visual impairments, and genetic syndromes, and for her expertise on legal issues surrounding prenatal genetic testing, educational policy, and mental health. About the importance of the symposium, Deborah Pergament said, “The American Jewish community is making noteworthy efforts to move from mere awareness of people with disabilities to meaningful inclusion. In doing so, we must make efforts to understand the complex interplay of the legal status of people with disabilities under American law and our own roles and responsibilities."

Moderator Suzanne Strassberger, who serves as the Jewish Federation of Metropolitan Chicago’s Associate Vice President for Government and Community Partnerships, has more than 25 years of policy development, coalition building, and lobbying experience on behalf of children and families. Among other statewide roles, she is a founding member of Illinois Partners for Human Service, a coalition dedicated to strengthening the state-funded human service system.

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While addressing current policy and focusing on 21st-century attitudes and opportunities, the Disability and the Law symposium recognizes that Judaism has a tradition of engaging with issues of disability. From the struggles of biblical heroes (Isaac with blindness and Moses with a speech impediment, for example) to explicit rabbinic rulings (blind people are not excluded from saying the Jewish prayer thanking God for the ability to see light) to the recent designation of February as Jewish Disability Awareness Month, Judaism has long grappled with the legal, spiritual, and practical needs of those with disabilities. This seminar is designed to build on that platform, setting a stage for thoughtful discussion about what inclusion means for the Jewish future.

Tickets to the Disability and the Law symposium are $18 for the general public, $10 for Spertus members, and $8 for students and Spertus alumni. Tickets to the event can be purchased online at spertus.edu and by phone at 312.322.1773. Discount parking is available for $10 with Spertus validation at the Essex Inn, two blocks south of Spertus.

This program is the Norman Asher Memorial Lecture and Alex and Klara Tulsky Symposium for 2014. Addressing challenges facing today's American Jewish community, it reflects the vision of the donors of these long-standing Spertus programs.

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Spertus Institute for Jewish Learning and Leadership offers dynamic learning opportunities, rooted in Jewish wisdom and culture and open to all. Graduate programs and workshops train future leaders and engage individuals in exploration of Jewish life. Public programs—including films, speakers, seminars, and concerts—take place at the Institute's Michigan Avenue facility, in the Chicago suburbs, and online. For more information, please visit spertus.edu.

Spertus Institute for Jewish Learning and Leadership is a partner in serving our community, supported by the JUF/Jewish Federation of Metropolitan Chicago.