

Visitor from Thailand's Bureau of Special Education interested in empowerment

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Ekkachai "Tommy" Nasompong

Ekkachai "Tommy" Nasompong, a policy and planning analyst from the Bureau of Special Education in Thailand, received a high quality education and went on to a challenging job. He came to the Center for Persons with Disabilities at Utah State University this week, because he wants more people like him to have the same opportunities.

Blind since he was 14, Nasompong is visiting the United States as part of the Young Southeast Asian Leaders Initiative Professional Fellows Program. YSEALI is a professional development exchange for outstanding community leaders from the Association of Southeast Asian Nations working in the field of civic engagement.

Nasompong came with a keen interest in empowerment for people with disabilities. "We have many laws, many policies related to people with disabilities' empowerment," Nasompong said. Thailand was one of 162 nations to sign the United Nations' Convention on the Rights of People

With Disabilities. (So far, the United States has not ratified that convention.)

"We have ratified for many things, but we don't have practical implementation. ... Even though we have the law allowing people with disabilities to study, the quality of that education is not very good." Likewise, private companies face fines if they do not include two people with disabilities per 100 employees in their hiring.

That policy has resulted in people with disabilities getting jobs, but Nasompong said those employees are underutilized, and many spend too much time doing nothing. Likewise, children with disabilities may go to school, but they often lack access to teachers who know how to work with them, or methods that help them learn.

Specialized schools do exist, but they have a hard time finding the students who need them, and often parents do not know about them and keep their children at home. In rural areas it is even harder for people with disabilities to get a meaningful education, or find engaging jobs.

"We don't talk about equality," he said. "We talk about access."

The society in Thailand values kindness and sympathy, he said. People with disabilities are often provided for, but attitudes can still be a barrier. "People don't have a very good attitude about us," he said. "Sometimes they make us feel very frustrated."

For example, he takes the Sky Train (an elevated mass transit train) to work, but it has a policy that doesn't allow him to walk to his train alone. And after one blind person was involved in an accident on the escalator, blind people were forbidden from using it. Instead he has to climb stairs. He would like to see a policy that trains people on how to escort a blind person to the escalator, rather than banning them.

He knows of students with disabilities who left school to go busking in Bangkok, where they make more money for less hassle than they could in traditional jobs. "We try very hard to encourage them to study," he said. "They can just go busking, get lots of money. They don't see the importance of study."

Some students drop out of school when they learn how much they could make performing in the streets.

His own education included studying abroad in England, at the University of Liverpool, earning a bachelor and master's degree in computer science. That opportunity

was made possible through tax money from his government, and he feels the need to give back. "I have to do something to make me feel like my life is helpful to others."

Nasompong knows that in the US, people with disabilities face different problems. What interests him most is how people are working to solve them—and how people with disabilities are involved in that process. He wants to learn more about the CPD's strategic plan and how it is put into practice; how to move a policy from words to actions. He plans to talk not only to successful people, but also to those who struggle.

He visited the University of Montana for a week before coming to the CPD. He will be here through November 10.