



Second Southwestern Connecticut
Regional Forum on Community Inclusion
Darien, CT - January 20, 2005

*A Sharing of Ideas on
Community Inclusion
for People with Disabilities*

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A.J. Pappanikou Center for Developmental Disabilities

A University Center for Excellence in Developmental Disabilities Education, Research and Service

Background and Introduction

The Model Communities initiative is part of a Real Choice Systems Change Grant funded by the Centers for Medicare and Medicaid Services (CMS), a division of the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services. The grant was awarded to the Connecticut Department of Social Services in October of 2002, and is being administered by the University of Connecticut A.J. Pappanikou Center for Excellence in Developmental Disabilities Education, Research and Service (UCE).

A key component of the grant was the selection and funding of three “Model Communities” - Bridgeport, Groton, and New Haven. The communities were selected based on written proposals submitted in late spring of 2003. The UCE has been working with these communities, providing technical assistance and guidance as they seek to reach their selected goals.

In addition to supporting the activities of the three Model Communities, the UCE invited representatives from the communities that had submitted proposals but were not selected for funding to a meeting on May 25, 2004 in Farmington. Seven Connecticut towns gathered to share ideas and experiences related to the inclusion of people with disabilities in the life of their communities. Discussion at this meeting was lively and productive, and the opportunity to meet people from other parts of the state and other municipalities proved fruitful. The idea of adapting the “lessons learned” in the model communities and hosting regional meetings was introduced; a shared enthusiasm for the idea gave rise to the first Southwest Regional Forum, hosted by the Town of Ridgefield, Connecticut on October 8, 2004.

Meeting in the southwest corner of the state facilitated the attendance of Fairfield County communities for whom driving to Farmington was a hardship. A second meeting was enthusiastically supported, with the Town of Darien offering to host a Forum on

January 20, 2005. Following the suggestion of participants in the October Forum, the agenda included presentations of what the three Model Communities have done and how it is working, and sharing of successes, ideas and resources among other participating towns.

Nine towns were represented by over thirty attendees at the January 20th meeting, including building officials, municipal agents, directors and others from town social service departments and non-profit agencies, and family members of children and adults with disabilities. The discussion was lively and multi-faceted, ranging from municipal representatives talking about initiatives in their communities, to parents talking about their fears and concerns for their adult children with disabilities. As one attendee said, "I am delighted we are having this discussion, this is such an important topic!"

Some Town Initiatives

As a follow up to the previous forum, participants shared some of the initiatives that were being implemented in their communities. Both New Haven and Bridgeport representatives described their respective towns' efforts at informing people with disabilities about resources and opportunities. Under the Real Choice grant, New Haven's Task Force publishes a quarterly newsletter that has covered a breadth of issues from voting accessibility to People-First language. It has also included information on subsidized housing opportunities, a description of federal programs offering telephone discounts for eligible individuals (Link-Up & Lifeline) as well as access reviews of restaurants and other public facilities. This newsletter, targeted at the New Haven community, is also available online through the City of New Haven's Department of Services for Persons with Disabilities website.

Bridgeport described the decision by their task force to address the Resource and Information gap by designing and producing large magnets containing critical phone numbers through which people with disabilities could get information on housing, technology, advocacy, benefits and other resources. The magnets were distributed

broadly at senior housing sites, community and non-profit organizations, and municipal and state offices in the Bridgeport area. This distribution often presented an opportunity to meet with groups in a comfortable, informal atmosphere, and to describe the services provided by the Bridgeport Office for Persons with Disabilities. A group of high school students with disabilities is designing a resource guide for youth that will go to print this spring.

In Groton, one of the focus areas has been promoting inclusive recreation. A quarterly booklet that lists all recreation activities contains a mission statement regarding inclusive programming, which states in part, “Our goal is to make sure that whatever programs and activities we offer to the Groton community is equally available to individuals with disabilities.” Inclusion Specialists are available to children and adults needing support in order to participate in any activity offered by the Parks and Recreation Department.

Members of the Groton Task Force have also connected with a local community theater group, which has enthusiastically embraced the idea of putting on theatrical productions that are fully inclusive in all aspects, from acting to work behind the scenes. As one of the group’s members stated at an early meeting: “No one ever asked us to get involved!”

In Ridgefield, the Department of Parks and Recreation works closely with the town Commission for the Disabled. Although not funded as a “model community,” their attitude is one of “What can we do?” Ridgefield has worked hard to make the downtown area more accessible. Their efforts have resulted in an audible signal light at a busy Main Street intersection; their Safe Access For Everyone program (S.A.F.E.) has conducted numerous accessibility surveys of restaurants, businesses, places of worship and municipal buildings, and an elevator was installed in Town Hall to make municipal offices accessible to everyone; a flyer designed to look like a parking ticket has been distributed for citizens to use on cars parked illegally in Handicapped Parking spaces;

and a Boundless Playground where all children can play together is being built with the help of local service clubs.

More Ideas For Action

Cross-fertilize: In Wilton, the local YMCA provides training for aides in their recreation programs, who are then often hired by the Board of Education to work in schools. In Ridgefield, education school aides work with campers during the summer months.

Mentoring: Allow young people with disabilities to match up with adults in the community to learn about various vocational and other opportunities; programs can recruit volunteers and require little or no money to administer.

Person-First language: Teach by example, and gently help re-state what you hear; let's get away from "the disabled" and "handicapped"! As one participant put it, "it is all about mindset". Addressing language issues is a great first step - changing the language individuals use can lead to a change in behavior.

Be creative in getting the word out: Mailings can be cost-prohibitive; use municipal web sites to promote community inclusion opportunities, or take advantage of local newspapers willing to publish public service information which can include restaurant guides, accessible events, etc.

Legislative action: A more formal way to promote inclusion. The city of Atlanta, Georgia passed the first **visitability** law requiring all new public housing be accessible. Since then, municipalities in Illinois, Vermont, Texas, Kansas, Arizona, New York, and Oregon have all passed the same or similar legislation. The United Kingdom has required *every* new home be built according to accessibility standards since 1998,

and Pima County, Arizona, has passed an “Inclusive Home Design Ordinance” requiring all newly constructed single-family residences to be “visitable”. The term “visitability” refers to single-family housing designed in such a way that people with disabilities can visit friends and family (e.g., one accessible entrance, sufficiently wide hallways, and access to one bathroom).

Lessons Learned

Along the road to making their communities more welcoming and inclusive, Forum participants shared some of the lessons that they are continuing to learn along the way:

- Commitment and support from elected officials and other community leaders is crucial
- Develop clarity that not only does a community’s infrastructure need to be accessible (e.g., housing, transportation, access to public buildings), but that the mind-set of typical citizens within the community may need to be opened up
- When developing new initiatives, piggy-back on existing efforts; there are people within your community that understand principles underlying the concept of inclusion, and they need to be identified and brought on board
- Projects should be “bite-sized” and have short-term results; long term change will take time, so start small and gradually progress to bigger and bigger challenges
- Try to “institutionalize” efforts so that they are sustainable over time
- Educate your friends and neighbors, enlist them to look for accessibility issues; identify as many allies as you can

- Get ahead of the game: find out what is proposed in your town before the plans are drawn up
- Talk to others who have experience developing inclusive communities, and take advantage of statewide resources (e.g., UConn Center on Disabilities)
- Persevere, persevere, persevere - community change takes considerable time and effort before you will see results

The Bottom Line

As one participant put it, “it is all about mindset”. Changing language is a great first step: change the language, and ideas change. At nearly twenty percent, people with disabilities are this country's largest minority. As we all age, many of us will increasingly experience vision, hearing and mobility limitations; changes we make to improve our communities now will benefit us all!

Next Steps

A third Regional meeting will be planned for early April, hosted by the town of Westport. Suggested topics include information on “Visitability” and Universal Design, promoting inclusion in Parks and Recreation Departments, and identifying and engaging “bridge builders” in your community.