



Second Southeastern Connecticut
Regional Forum on Community Inclusion
Griswold, CT - April 28, 2005

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

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University of
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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.

On May 25, 2004 representatives from seven Connecticut towns gathered at the A.J. Pappanikou Center in Farmington to share ideas and experiences related to the inclusion of people with disabilities in the life of their communities. Three of the towns - Bridgeport, Groton and New Haven - were Model Communities, having been selected in 2003 from a list of twenty towns that submitted applications to receive a grant from the Center. 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 a series of Regional Forums, the first of which was hosted by the Town of Ridgefield, Connecticut in October 2004 for the Southwestern part of the state. The first Southeastern Regional Forum was held on December 3, 2004 in Groton, CT. The Town of Griswold graciously offered to host this second Forum on April 28, 2005.

Attendees from six towns included a Director of Employment Services for an Arc, a college Affirmative Action Officer, a municipal Director of Social Services, several town ADA Coordinators and Recreation Directors, and a Deputy Mayor.

The Asset-based Model of Community Development

At the heart of the April 28, 2005 Forum was a presentation by Greg Ryan from the Connecticut Assets Network, Inc. Asset Based Community Development (ABCD) is based on the work of Kretzman and McKnight, authors of *Building Communities From the Inside Out: A Path For Finding and Mobilizing a Community's Assets*. It works on the principles that:

- a. Every person in the community, including people with disabilities, has gifts to offer; and
- b. Every person in the community can contribute his/her gifts and resources for mutually beneficial problem solving.

Many organizations, especially in the social service world, see people as broken and in need of “fixing.” This deficits-oriented approach is driven by public and private funding streams that require the identification of “problems” to justify the need for financial support. Greg described the asset-based model as seeing all members of a community as having gifts, talents and strengths (assets) that can pave the way for people to become connected in order to build a healthy community.

Greg talked about studies that show that in the 1950's, 80% of people in a neighborhood could name five families they knew who lived nearby. In recent years, this figure has decreased to only 8%. People are often disconnected and isolated, especially if they belong to a marginalized group such as youth at risk, people in recovery from addiction, or people with disabilities. Discovering, and eventually mapping, the assets that individuals in a neighborhood or community possess, creates a culture of neighbors helping neighbors in a mutually beneficial way, forming connections that transform communities. Greg noted that more often than not, money is not the main obstacle; changing the mindset of the members of the community is the main task.

An Exercise of Assets Discovery

To illustrate the ease with which assets, gifts and skills can be discovered and shared, Greg led the group in an exercise entitled “Hands, Head, Heart and Home.” Participants were invited first to list one or more examples of skills they possess (Hands); second, knowledge they can share with others (Head); third, examples of things participants are passionate about, that stir them to action (Heart); and finally, places, groups or associations where there is a capacity to network (Home).

Some examples of assets that forum attendees identified are:

Hands:

Sewing, gardening, hair styling, rough carpentry, electrical work, yoga, playing the oboe, painting, wheelchair basketball, and cooking (one participant specializes in soups).

Head:

Writing and editing, conducting online research, math, group facilitation, CPR/First Aid, knowledge of history, organizing and parenting.

Heart:

Passions included social justice, politics, diversity issues, helping the underdog, police & firefighter rights, doing things for the right reasons and community organizing.

Home:

Here, networks and connections included the Red Cross, Toastmasters, Boys & Girls Clubs, Masonic Lodge, Music Boosters, MADD, Realtors Association, Wheelchair Sports network, Connecticut College and Restaurant Owners association.

Forum participants were clearly impressed with the array of talents, skills and opportunities elicited from a small group in such a short amount of time. Greg explained that when working with a neighborhood or community, it was even more productive to conduct personal interviews with individuals to ask not only what assets they had to

offer, but also identify their needs. The matching of community members who have assets to those with corresponding needs can then ensue, developing connections between people.

Ideas for Application

Attendees then communicated ideas they had of ways to share these concepts with others.

- Conduct an assets discovery exercise with a staff team to enrich connection and teamwork. In the workplace, people often only present one side of themselves, yet have significant untapped resources to share.
- At a Senior Center: people who are elderly often feel useless and disconnected. The rich history that participants have can help create an inter-generational program with kids who have little exposure to history.
- With people with intellectual disabilities who may need more creative ways of enriching their employment opportunities and connect with their neighbors. For example, a skill as simple as being able to carry groceries can connect someone to another person who needs help with this chore.
- Start small, have patience, and build in small steps.

Examples of Town Initiatives

In **Mansfield**, a Disability Advisory Committee under the auspices of the Department of Social Services has provided input along the way as the town strives to create a more welcoming community. This has included a continuing renovation of the downtown area for better accessibility and the building of a new town Community Center. A challenge is getting the message across that being ADA compliant does not necessarily make a

place accessible. For example, a doorway may have the correct width, but without automatic door access, the entrance may still be too difficult to open for someone using a wheelchair.

In Groton, one of the focus areas has been in promoting inclusive recreation. A quarterly booklet, listing all recreation activities in the town, contains a mission statement regarding inclusive programming that 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 assist children and adults who need support in order to participate in any activity offered by the Parks and Recreation Department.

The Bottom Line

It’s in the process, not destination after destination. Transformation occurs over time, as a natural result of continuous discovery and connection.

Next Steps

A third Regional meeting will be planned for June, and hosted by the town of Mansfield. Suggested future topics include: discussion of what makes a community “welcoming,” sharing of success stories from different communities, and talking with a panel of people who have successfully engaged their communities or neighborhoods in the asset-based process.