

Real Choice Systems Change Grant Project

Grant Application from the Town of Groton

Summary of Current Inclusion Initiatives and Plans

Groton is a community committed to inclusion as evident in the opportunities that exist for residents with disabilities. The Town offers educational opportunities for those as young as three years of age all the way up to seniors living independently who utilize the Senior Center daily. Our commitment to inclusion provides year-round opportunities for those who enjoy sports, swimming and enrichment activities with the Parks and Recreation Department to those who enjoy a maritime experience offered through the Groton Police Department. Services for those who face the challenges of day-to-day living are available with the Town's Human Services Department. Employment opportunities for those living with a disability can be found by contacting Seabird, Inc. Opportunities are available for those who choose to make a difference in municipal government, both with the Town of Groton and the City of Groton.

Our goal for this grant is to expand services. Much is in place, but one of the challenges that faces every community is educating the public to recognize citizens, regardless of disability or special need, as contributing members of the community. This grant will provide a means for us to meet this challenge and overcome existing barriers by creating more opportunities to educate the employees and the public to be sensitive to the needs of all members of our community. Collectively, we have met and gathered information on existing services that are in place and have come up with a

plan to improve and expand access to those with disabilities to all services that are available within our community.

Description of Groton, Connecticut

Groton is located in the Southeastern corner of the state along the Thames River and Long Island Sound. Groton (population 40,000) is home to the U.S. Naval Submarine Base New London, the Global Research and Development campus of Pfizer, Inc., and the submarine construction facilities of the Electric Boat Division of General Dynamics, Inc. Other industries in our town range from a traditional fishing boat fleet to advanced medical supply manufacturing. Educational facilities include the University of Connecticut at Avery Point and the Ella T. Grasso Southeastern Connecticut Regional Technical and Vocational School.

The diversity of industry, military operations and businesses in Groton lends itself to a very diverse population. Groton has a large number of young families because of the Submarine Base, senior housing, affluent sections and at-risk neighborhoods.

Groton, Connecticut, is committed to inclusion as evidenced by demonstrated proficiency in providing inclusive services through several departments such as Parks and Recreation, Senior Center, Board of Education and Groton Human Services. Each department, although philosophically different, has a primary responsibility of aiding those of all interests, needs and abilities.

Nearly 5% of all elected and appointed officials within our community are living with a disability, a testament to the welcoming atmosphere that exists. Services are in place to minimize the barriers to full participation in community government. By

working collaboratively, we will demonstrate that current services and opportunities for future services will increase the quality of life for those with special needs.

Community Inclusion Task Force Members

The Groton Community Inclusion Task Force is a broad coalition of Town departments and agencies. The task force has members with disabilities, family members of individuals with disabilities, and others who are deeply committed to service of those with disabilities.

Groton Parks and Recreation Department

The Town offers year-round inclusive recreational opportunities that include special events, trips, boating, aquatics, after-school programs, sports leagues and enrichment activities. The Department maintains a trained staff of Inclusion Specialists who assist people with special needs in order to make their experience in our programs a successful and positive one. Currently, there are nearly one hundred and fifty Groton residents who benefit from inclusive services offered by Groton Parks and Recreation in collaboration with a number of outside agencies including the following.

- State of Connecticut Department of Mental Retardation - Early Connections
- Project Learn
- United Cerebral Palsy
- Various Supported Living Programs
- Ledge Light Health District
- Groton Public Schools
- Groton Human Services

Groton Parks and Recreation is proud to have a Therapeutic Recreation Specialist on staff who develops new programs, assesses current program opportunities and provides outreach to numerous departments within the town. The FYE2004 budget for Parks and Recreation reflects the commitment to full inclusion by including provisions for staff training, adaptive equipment and the hiring of inclusion staff. Representatives from the Town's staff are regular attendees of the annual National Institute for Recreation Inclusion (NIRI) conference to keep up-to-date on laws, mandates and current practices.

Recently, Groton Parks and Recreation was honored by the President's Committee on Mental Retardation with a First Place Welcoming Community award. Groton was selected based on its strong commitment to those with disabilities.

The Department actively publicizes its programs to all residents within the community through direct mailing to every household in Groton, flyers distributed through schools and collaborating agencies and announcements in local media.

Groton Parks and Recreation provides trained Inclusion Specialists that enable those with disabilities to actively participate in programs. Currently, the Department offers training sessions to educate staff and volunteers about disabilities, departmental policies and sensitivity training. Inclusive services seek to encourage the physical, social, emotional and intellectual development of the individuals in the least restrictive environment. Participation in these positive activities gives individuals the opportunity to experience greater independence, learn leisure skills, enjoy themselves and make new friends.

Groton Senior Center

The Groton Senior Center provides programs and services to residents fifty-five years and older. Recently, the center implemented a new program to provide additional assistance for seniors with a wide range of disabilities who live independently but who need extra assistance while attending Senior Center activities. The Town's Certified Therapeutic Recreation Specialist provided training to Senior Center staff to enable the program to be successful in serving the needs of the participants.

Groton Public Schools

There are approximately six hundred and fifty students benefiting from Special Education services within Groton Public Schools. Of this number, approximately five hundred and thirty are mainstreamed or placed in inclusive settings. The children are kept with their classmates and enjoy the opportunity of participating in music, art and physical education with their friends and classmates. They are able to enjoy the day-to-day experience of bonding with their peers just as typical children the same age experience. Each spring, teachers meet with the School's Principal and parents to develop each student's IEP. Many times, a referral for the child to participate in Groton Park and Recreation's summer playground program is made to continue the educational plan year-round. If appropriate, an inclusion specialist is provided to assist the child's participation in the program.

Department of Human Services

The Human Services Department includes three divisions: Groton Social Services, Groton Youth and Family Services, and the Groton Family Support Center.

Approximately eighty-five (85) percent of clients receiving services have mental and/or physical disabilities. Groton Social Services offers support in the form of direct assistance, case management, advocacy, crisis intervention, and information and referral services to individuals with disabilities who are in need of housing assistance, food, and other basic necessities. Groton Youth and Family Services provide intervention and prevention services for individuals with mental and physical disabilities. Intervention services include short-term counseling, crisis intervention, screening for depression, and information and referral. Prevention services include support groups, community service placements, and youth programs on a variety of topics. The Groton Family Support Center offers disability-related counseling through parent education classes, play groups, support groups and information and referral.

The Department of Human Services has recently introduced two programs geared towards offering support and an increased understanding of individuals with disabilities. Parent Link, a support group for parents of special needs children meets monthly to provide information, resources, and advocacy. Don't Laugh at Me, a program for parents and children in grades K-8, is being piloted in five Groton elementary schools to foster inclusion, celebration of diversity, intervention to prevent exclusion, and creation of compassionate classrooms.

Groton Police Department

During the summer, the Groton Town Police, in cooperation with an extensive array of agencies offers a Maritime Academy for teens between the ages of twelve-seventeen. This program offers inclusive services while providing a positive maritime

experience utilizing Police Officers as positive role models for the teens. Extra personnel are available for those that need assistance to successfully complete the maritime curriculum. This program began during the summer of 2002 with thirty at-risk teens and quickly expanded to include year-round opportunities in addition to the summer program.

Groton Human Resources

The Human Resources Division provides comprehensive training for current and new employees. This agency would be responsible for implementing a diversified program to provide sensitivity training for employees within the town.

The Challenges Facing the Community

The primary challenges that the task force has identified in the Groton Community are as follows:

- The inadequate availability of inclusive daycare and preschool for young children.
- The lack of sensitivity toward persons with disabilities in the community.
- Limited opportunities for young adults in the transition from school to community living.
- Attitudinal and physical barriers of the community.
- The limited work opportunities for people with disability.

We feel that community education best addresses many of these challenges. Groton's primary goal in applying for this grant is to advance the understanding and acceptance of disabilities in the community.

Among the objectives that Groton will accomplish during the three phases of this grant are the following.

First Year Objectives

- Institute disabilities and sensitivity training for current and future Town of Groton employees.
- Establish a comprehensive training program for early childhood education centers and pre-schools.
- Establish a comprehensive needs assessment study to begin September, 2003 and to be completed by December, 2003.
- Provide a "user-friendly" listing of all inclusive pre-schools and day care centers and facilities within the town.
- Develop a comprehensive listing of names and contact information of key individuals for all employers, housing units, transportation services, and spiritual opportunities that welcome those with disabilities. Those that are ADA compliant will be highlighted.
- Present inclusive training to the local Chamber of Commerce businesses.
- Develop a web page with current information concerning program opportunities, school registration and inclusive opportunities.

Second Year Objectives:

- Produce a comprehensive video program focused on the services available to those with disabilities.

- Provide inclusion education and training to daycare and preschool programs within the Town of Groton.
- Establish an awareness and sensitivity program for Town residents.
- Continue to focus on early childhood education and pre-schools within the community.
- Offer community children “Kids on the Block” programs throughout the summer.
- Offer The Second Step Players touring performance and other programs for sensitivity training.
- Develop a welcoming brochure for inclusion for Parks and Recreation
- Educate employers about inclusion in the workforce.
- Provide an inclusion workshop for elected officials.

Third Year Objectives

- Expand training to include interested outside agencies and business within the Town of Groton
- Provide increased employment opportunities for those with disabilities within the Town of Groton
- Incorporate inclusion into a community theatre production with opportunities in set, production and casting.
- Expand enrichment opportunities within the arts such as painting, ceramics, music and languages.
- Continue to focus on the early childhood education and pre-school centers.