



First Eastern Connecticut
Regional Forum on Community Inclusion
Groton, CT - December 3, 2004

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

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

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. Papanikou Center for Excellence in Developmental Disabilities Education, Research and Service.

On May 25, 2004 representatives from seven Connecticut towns gathered at the A.J. Papanikou 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. Towns in the Southeastern region were invited to the discussion held on December 3, 2004 in Groton, CT.

Towns at this meeting included New London, Waterford, Griswold, Old Lyme, Stonington and Groton, and were represented by officials ranging from First Selectmen, Building Officials, to Directors of Parks & Recreation and ADA Coordinators. In addition, the director of the New London ARC and a parent of a young adult with a disability and who is a regional Coordinator of the CT Family Support Network were also in attendance. All those present shared a desire to bring back to their towns ideas for

enhancing awareness among community members of the barriers faced by people with disabilities in becoming fully included and integrated into those communities.

The meeting began with introductions and a viewing of the video “Interroburst 2003” filmed at a two day conference held in October of 2003. The “Interroburst” event had been organized to bring together people with a wide variety of disabilities to discuss their feelings of isolation or exclusion within their community. Participants included both individuals who had lived in the community for some time and those who recently transitioned into the community from institutional settings such as nursing facilities. After identifying the major barriers to inclusion, Interroburst participants suggested a number of strategies communities could use to address the problem.

Discussion: Barriers

The film was a catalyst for positive and productive discussion. A number of significant barriers to inclusion were identified:

- The lack of coordinated and available transportation. While several attendees acknowledged that Handi-vans were not always being used, they are typically not available during peak times of need. Accessible fixed route buses, are available in only limited parts of the region, and bus stops are often difficult to get to. Keeping van drivers is another concern.
- Lack of funding to support ADA compliance efforts to make towns fully accessible. Making sidewalks, intersections and public buildings accessible is costly and difficult in towns with lots of historic structures, and full compliance may take many years to complete. Some of the larger towns receive more significant allocations, leaving small communities with far fewer resources.
- Disability Commissions are difficult to establish and often lack consumer presence. Many towns have vacancies on Boards and Commissions and therefore often rely on the same people for involvement and input. When members burn out or leave, it is not easy to fill these openings, and many Commissions either have vacancies or become dormant.

Ideas for Action

Transportation: SEAT (the South East Area Transit district) identifies needs and determines priorities for transportation in the southeastern part of the state. One strategy might be to arrange a meeting, or a series of meetings, with the Board of the transit district to discuss concerns relating to the transportation barriers discussed at the December 3 2004 forum. In addition, the University of Connecticut Center on Disabilities will be receiving a transportation grant from the state Council on Developmental Disabilities to present the consumer perspective to the state Department of Transportation, giving area representatives an opportunity to make an impact at the state level.

Re-vitalizing Boards and Commissions: Review existing resources and examine under representation. Constituents voicing their needs and concerns can be a powerful agent for change. Begin discussions around the formation of advisory groups that can get energized and form the basis for a Disability Commission or Task Force.

Recruitment can be done through local disability agencies and organizations, a Parent-Teacher organization, civic organizations such as Kiwanis and Newcomers clubs, or even by talking to High School Students. Asking specific individuals in person makes a far greater impact than an announcement through a newsletter.

Old Lyme and Griswold are both in the process of updating their websites to include a "virtual Town Hall"; this seems to be a good way of attracting young people to participate.

The point was made that different communities might need different approaches; while a Commission on Disabilities may be workable in one town, in another town a parent group or informal organization may spur more action.

Identifying Consumers: Finding people with disabilities in the community to invite to participate in town activities or to conduct needs assessments can be challenging. Ideas included reaching out to parents through schools, talking with Directors of Special Education, and Case Managers from the state Departments of Mental Retardation and

Mental Health and Addiction Services, distributing surveys and needs assessments through doctors and dentists offices, connecting with the area Center for Independent Living, and identifying local support groups for various specific disabilities. The regional Family Support organization and the New London ARC are two examples of groups that have much to offer local communities.

Numbers Talk! It is important to engage local and regional legislators, elected officials and town council members. Having specific figures to present can make a big difference. Five years ago Groton identified over 300 kids that were in Special Education in the town, and this gave them more leverage in asking for additional town resources. The 2000 Census data shows 5786 people with disabilities over the age of five in Groton, 5488 in New London, 1757 in Griswold, 2948 in Waterford, 914 in Old Lyme, and 2547 in Stonington.

Raising Funds to Help With ADA Compliance: A creative approach was suggested by the City of Groton's Deputy Mayor: Develop a program as part of your Town's Capital Improvement Program or Plan of Development and Conservation that takes advantage of open space and sidewalk requirements for subdivision approval. Discontinue the patchwork approach of sidewalks, which if built in sections can eventually be connected to one another. Instead, develop a specific program which uses payment from developers in lieu of setting aside open space or sidewalks to create or repair accessible sidewalks in other parts of your town.

Town Recreation Departments: Support the hiring of part time "Inclusion Specialists"; Groton has created such positions, which appear to be working well. The Inclusion Specialist is available to anyone needing support in order to participate in an activity offered by the Parks and Recreation Department.

Groton sponsor Family Days in the summers which are great opportunities both to educate community members and to promote inclusive activities.

Finding Volunteers: Outreach to faith-based groups and places of worship can be very effective. Attending meetings of civic organizations such as Kiwanis, Knights of Columbus and Rotary serves to educate members and recruit volunteers. However, it is important to stress that it is not sympathy you want but action. Natural supports can grow out of small individual actions: for example, when a participant in a religious service is then invited to dinner at a fellow congregation member's home.

Municipal Success Stories: The sharing of experiences that local municipalities have had in developing more welcoming communities can be a powerful tool in enhancing community inclusion. Opportunities for sharing, such as those created by regional disability forums are one way of facilitating that process.

The Bottom Line

Even the smallest town can promote systems change. A true shift in attitude and culture of a community goes well beyond meeting the minimum requirements of the Americans with Disabilities Act or State Building Code. While such compliance is important, a town can be fully accessible and yet not be inclusive; on the other hand a town that is still struggling to become accessible can be a warm and welcoming place for all its residents, including people with disabilities. The bottom line: a change in the underlying values and culture of a community is the key to successful inclusion.

Handouts

A number of handouts were made available to meeting attendees:

- Copies of local ordinances creating disability commissions or committees from Bridgeport, New Haven, New Britain, and Middletown
- Information about Title II of the Americans with Disabilities Act
- List of various useful internet resources

Next Steps

Everyone attending agreed that networking, sharing ideas and information with other communities, and learning from each others' successes were valuable reasons to keep the process going. A second meeting was enthusiastically supported, with the Town of Groton offering to host a second Forum in March 2005. Several participants suggested inviting community members with disabilities to future meetings. A forum dedicated to making Parks and Recreation programs more inclusive was requested at which 'resource sharing' by municipalities could be explored. Another suggested topic was to have presentations on what other communities are doing to eliminate attitudinal barriers, as well as information on developing natural and informal supports.