



First Southwestern Connecticut
Regional Forum on Community Inclusion
Ridgefield, CT - October 7, 2004

*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

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 the first Regional Forum, hosted by the Town of Ridgefield, Connecticut on October 7, 2004.

Nineteen municipalities from a region of Connecticut known as Fairfield County were invited to the Forum, and fifteen individuals attended from Darien, Stratford, Danbury/Brookfield, Fairfield, Bridgeport and, of course, Ridgefield. Several other communities had also indicated an interest in being a part of the group, but were unable to attend.

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's theme

was introduced by the Ridgefield First Selectman Rudy Marconi who described how the town met one of the challenges - incorporating an elevator into the historic Town Hall building to make it fully accessible.

The showing of a video filmed at the two day Interroburst conference held in October of 2003 served to stimulate a lively discussion. The Interroburst event had been organized to bring together people with a wide variety of disabilities to discuss their feelings of isolation and exclusion within their community. Participants included both individuals who have 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

Raising awareness of issues surrounding community inclusion of people with disabilities was described by one attendee of the October 7 event as having two goals:

1. To educate people without disabilities about the scope and breadth of the presence of people with disabilities who are living in their communities, often invisible because they are not fully included, and what typical citizens might do to help overcome barriers to inclusion.
2. To empower people with disabilities who feel isolated, discouraged, and “beaten down” through their efforts to be integrated.

In either case, showing the film to community groups such as service clubs and clergy was seen as providing a catalyst for positive and productive discussion.

Questions

Concerns raised by people attending the forum included the following:

1. How do you bring the concept of true inclusion to middle school and high school students who can be judgmental and cruel?
2. What is the best way of approaching civic organizations and other community groups?
3. People without disabilities often lack information and exposure to disability issues, so they fear the unknown. How do you go about dispelling this fear without confrontation?

Ideas for Action

In schools: Find even one supportive, sympathetic teacher who would be willing to work with kids on enhancing awareness. Begin with one class, using a video such as “Interburst 2003” to stimulate discussion. Support this teacher in working with students on an Awareness Fair, where, for example, kids would be able to experience first-hand what it is like to have a disability.

With parents: Work with the local Parent Teacher Association, getting their support for activities such as the Awareness Fair.

In town leadership: Approach the Mayor or the First Selectman, presenting the information that there is a group of individuals in the community who want to be involved with disability issues. Begin discussions around the formation of a core group that can form the basis for a Commission or Task Force. Constituents voicing their needs and concerns can be a powerful agent for change.

Town Recreation Departments: Support the hiring of “Inclusion Specialists”; both Ridgefield and Groton have created such positions, which appear to be working well. In Ridgefield, the Inclusion Specialist helps guide families of children with disabilities in finding appropriate activities for their child, offering options and contacting instructors as needed to ensure that the child’s needs are fully met. In Groton, the Inclusion Specialist is available to anyone needing support in order to participate in an activity offered by the Parks and Recreation Department.

Places of Worship: Outreach to religious groups can be very effective. However, it is important to stress that it is not sympathy you want but action. Start small: one goal, one or two projects, such as developing a “Welcome Wagon”.

Find a Speakers Bureau: Organizations such as “Ability Beyond Disability” (formerly DATAHR) and the UCONN Center on Disabilities have speakers available who can present on a wide range of subjects, from the Americans with Disabilities Act to issues affecting inclusive childcare.

Educate Hospital Social Workers: Often discharge planning does not take into account the needs of the whole person, and people are discharged from hospitals into nursing facilities rather than community settings due to a lack of understanding on the part of hospital administrators that living in the community is the preferred option where supports are, in fact, available.

The Bottom Line

As one participant put it: “the bottom line is doing the legwork one person at a time”. It takes a lot of planning and groundwork to make change happen, first with individuals one-to-one, then with organizations.

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 on voter registration processes and the rights of people with disabilities in the electoral process
- Information about Title II of the Americans with Disabilities Act

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 Darien offering to host a Forum on January 20, 2005 at 9:30 a.m.; January 27 will be an alternate snow date. One suggested topic was to have a presentation of what the three Model Communities have done and how it is working. Other ideas for future topics included Principles of Universal Design, Employment issues, and what communities are doing to eliminate attitudinal barriers.