



Third Southwestern Connecticut
Regional Forum on Community Inclusion
Westport, CT - April 5, 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

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 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 around the state, several of which have been held in the Central and Southeastern regions of Connecticut. Two were held in the Southwestern region, the first in Ridgefield and the second in Darien. The town of Westport graciously offered to host the third Regional Forum on April 5, 2005.

The Forums have been sponsored by the Model Communities initiative, 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).

The series of Forums will culminate with a day-long **Statewide Conference on Community Inclusion** September 16, 2005. This conference will provide further opportunities for dialogue and bridge-building between elected officials, advocates and community members with disabilities around barriers to inclusion and ideas for action.

Facilitated Discussion

The April 5, 2005 Forum in Westport was attended by fifty-four individuals from nine towns. They included representatives from senior centers, public schools, police departments, social services, parks and recreation, YMCA, advocacy organizations, as well as persons with disabilities and family members. Following an introduction by Diane Goss Farrell, the First Selectwoman of Westport, and an overview by the Forum facilitators, the attendees broke up into three smaller discussion groups to share ideas and experiences relating to inclusion. Discussion was prompted by the posing of three questions that gave the groups fodder for discussion.

What Experiences Have You Had With Feeling Excluded?

Participants shared many stories of times they felt disconnected, isolated and rejected, and agreed that everyone has felt excluded at some point in their lives. Examples ranged from moving to a new town where community connections were missing, to having a child with autism who was isolated from his peers. Another parent described her “worst nightmare come true” as she found her sociable son increasingly alone in his room watching television, as he reached an age when being perceived as “different” resulted in social isolation. One participant spoke of feeling “like a pariah, unwanted, stupid.” Another felt “second class.” Participants expressed feelings such as: fear, sadness, frustration, anger, helplessness, being overwhelmed, feeling diminished and inadequate.

What Does It Feel Like To Be Included?

Experiences with inclusion gave rise to recognition of self and feelings of worthiness and validation. People spoke of feeling happy, valued, satisfied, confident, whole and connected. A mother of a child with a significant disability described the gratitude and joy she experienced when another parent called her up and offered to arrange a play date with their respective children.

What is the Difference between Being Present and Being Welcome?

The first requirement is accessibility: having a physical environment that is supportive is a critical first step. Issues such as lack of transportation, unavailable or inconvenient parking, or a lack of accessible bathrooms despite the presence of a ramped entrance are barriers to even being present. Being welcome, however, goes well beyond the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) compliance as it addresses the human side of the issue. Awareness and outreach to a group helps create an environment of understanding. As one attendee said, “People want to help, want to do the right thing- they just don’t know how.” Sometimes a mentor or peer “buddy” can help facilitate the process.

Those in attendance agreed that being welcomed can be identified by the following characteristics:

- ❖ Being participative vs. being passive
- ❖ Feeling respected as an individual
- ❖ Knowing that someone made an effort to bring you in
- ❖ People know and value your presence

Examples of Town Initiatives

The Westport Department of Human Services presented a program for teens called Toquet Hall, which opened in 1998 as a positive response to the need of Westport youth for a safe and fun place they could call their own. Toquet Hall is a supervised drug/alcohol-free place where high school age youth can initiate and participate in social, cultural, recreational, and educational activities. Toquet Thursdays are open specifically for middle school students. Kids with various disabilities have been welcomed and included from the beginning, but in addition, a program called “Kid Connections” is an innovative resource for families of youth ages 10 - 21 who need

personalized individual support in social and recreational settings. The focus of Kid Connections is to help match an individual child's needs with trained helpers. Recreation support coaches are available to accompany youth with disabilities in any recreation setting in order that they might more fully participate in their community's programs.

Young adults with learning disabilities who feel shut out of community groups asked to have a monthly social group called "The Connecticut Connection." This is aimed at young adults, 21 and over or out of school, who are independent, but need a place to socialize and meet compatible young men and women. The Kennedy Center in Bridgeport holds a similar group called "Our Place" for young adults ages 17 - 21.

Feedback from Attendees

Forum participants agreed that the format and content of the morning activity were valuable, both by providing opportunities for networking with others in the area with similar interests and goals, and through sharing perspectives, ideas and experiences with such a diverse group. It gave attendees a greater awareness of what "inclusion" truly means. Small group discussions were seen as insightful and informative, as was the chance to learn about local programs and projects. Several people shared the idea of desiring to develop specific action steps to implement in their communities and to find some way of following up discussions with concrete tasks. Others suggested bringing awareness training, a sort of "Disability 101," to groups within a community such as civic organizations, faith-based groups, women's groups and others - even bringing in "people from the streets" to this kind of gathering - spread the word!

The Bottom Line

The gathering of a widely diverse group of people who have a common interest in disabilities is a powerful event. The challenge is to develop collaborations in order to create action plans that focus on one or two specific areas of need in a community.

Next Steps

The following is a partial list of suggestions from Forum participants for future activities:

- ❖ Present more information on specific solutions to various issues, such as the coordination of charitable resources
- ❖ Coordination of services available in different towns - sharing of "best practices"
- ❖ How do you fill in the gaps of services that are in the communities? What programs are available for parents of children with disabilities?
- ❖ Team approach (possibly partnered communities) to define specific goals & strategies (action plan) for achieving them - need the decision makers & leaders who can commit resources & will be responsible for moving goals forward
- ❖ Ideas for teaching inclusion on a grassroots level. Inclusion is a very difficult topic - even among people with disabilities; everyone has a different idea of what it means. There is a need to teach all young people empathy, and the idea that everyone has something to contribute.
- ❖ Train-the-Trainer on Disability Awareness 101
- ❖ Choose a specific need or issue, such as Integration in Parks & Recreation Departments. Break down into groups, divided by interests, to develop specific solutions for all to take back to the community.