Community Transformation!

A Compendium of Ideas on Community Inclusion for People with Disabilities

What's Inside...

Introduction

In 2004 and 2005 the Real Choice Systems Change Project facilitated a series of eight regional forums and one statewide conference on community inclusion. The events brought together persons with disabilities, families of persons with disabilities, and those in the public and private sectors interested in making Connecticut's communities more inclusive of all our citizens.

The forums and conference covered everything from personal experiences to public policy. The sessions were stimulating, energizing, and sometimes aggravating. There were tears shed, but also much laughter. Over 250 people attended these events. This publication presents the most meaningful and poignant stories and opinions, which shaped policy recommendations and action steps to enhance community inclusion.

See appendix or background on the Real Choice System Change project and the A. J. Pappanikou Center.

Who Came to the Forums and Statewide Conference?

Over 145 people came to the eight regional forums from 41 towns, representing a diverse range of roles, backgrounds, and experiences. Attendees included parents and other family members of children and adults with disabilities; individuals with disabilities, including people with mental disabilities, intellectual disabilities, visual and hearing disabilities, learning disabilities, and other related conditions; First Selectmen and Selectwomen; a Deputy Mayor; directors and front line staff of various municipal departments (e.g., Social Services, Senior Services, Human Services, Parks and Recreation, Housing, Building Inspectors, ADA Coordinators, Affirmative Action officers, Municipal Agents for the Elderly, and law enforcement officers); and members of local advocacy groups and organizations such as the Centers for Independent Living and local Arcs.

The statewide conference, "Creating Inclusive Communities for Everyone," brought together 130 individuals, representing the same constituents as described above, to discuss inclusion and community change. The format involved the use of "Open Space Technology," which enabled conference participants to create their own agenda.

What Happened?

The eight regional forums began with a speaker on a topic of general interest followed by group discussion. The forums were scheduled in different regions of the state so individuals with travel restrictions could participate. Topics discussed at the forums included:

➤ Finding the low cost/ no cost opportunities that exist in your community;

➤ Using an "assets" approach to inclusion, in contrast to the typical "deficits" approach;

➤ Identifying "bridge-builders" - those local individuals of influence who are in a position to assist towns to include community members with disabilities in all aspects of community life;

➤ Designing places, communications, and things using universal design as a framework to accommodate the widest possible spectrum of users;

➤ Reviewing the status of the Americans with Disabilities Act and its relationship to inclusion;

➤ Changing how we speak and what we say by using person-first language, which can affect the way we act.

At the "Creating Inclusive Communities for Everyone" conference, 20 discussion groups were created using the Open Space Technology format. The result was a powerful, effective connecting and strengthening of what is already happening in Connecticut communities. Topics discussed in the small group meetings ranged from sidewalk accessibility to respite care to youth transitioning out of high school to bridging the gap in the gay/ lesbian communities.

Through the discussions at the forums and conference a variety of barriers to community inclusion were identified. In addition, participants offered suggestions that may help to overcome these barriers based on successful inclusive practices that have worked in other towns. The following section presents this information.

Inclusion Barriers and Action Steps

The following are the barriers identified by participants and suggested action steps to address each barrier.

Stigma

A participant noted that in the course of history, people with disabilities have been perceived in various negative ways, and have been treated differently, often with harmful results. Consensus was that for many people with disabilities, stigma is the major handicap.

Action Steps

➤ Focus on Similarities

Community inclusion strategies must include a focus on similarities, not differences. People with disabilities and the general community population have more in common than not.

➤ Promote People First Language

Assist members in your community to understand how the language they use to describe people with disabilities can be empowering or hurtful. One participant said, "guide your friends and neighbors gently to a better understanding of how language can be used to either support people or put them down."

General Awareness

The general public is not aware that the 2000 census has revealed that one in five people in the United States has a physical or mental disability. In addition, people with disabilities are not as visible as they should be. As one attendee put it, "Where are they? They're not coming out!" Another said, "I feel like I'm the only voice speaking out in my town."

Action Steps

➤ Be Seen

People with disabilities share responsibility to become more included in their community. It is important for those with disabilities to get out in the community to educate fellow citizens and open minds.

➤ Organize Disability Awareness Trainings for Municipal Employees

This will enable municipal employees to feel more comfortable with residents with disabilities. Infoline (2-1-1) can give you a list of agencies and organizations that may have staff available to speak to your group or organization.

➤ Encourage Teachers to Promote Awareness

Local schools are where genuine understanding (or misunderstanding) about "differentness" occurs. Find a supportive teacher willing to work with teenagers on enhancing awareness. Begin with one class, using a video to stimulate discussion.

ADA Compliance

Municipalities often perceive ADA compliance as a burden. Requests for accommodation are frequently met with the attitude of "how much do we have to do?" versus "what can we do to enable you to participate?" As one participant put it, the first question governmental agencies and private businesses often have is, "when can I say 'no' to the ADA?" In addition, participants reported that having an ADA coordinator in the town does not automatically mean inclusion exists in the community. The letter of the law may be followed, but the spirit supporting inclusion maybe lacking.

Action Steps

➤ Educate Local Businesses About ADA Compliance

Information about access requirements and cost-effective solutions can be found on internet web sites (e.g., the U.S. Department of Justice ADA Division or the Architectural and Transportation Barriers Compliance Board). Share this information with local businesses and remind them of the important role they play in inclusion.

➤ Make Sure New Developments Are Accessible and Usable

Ask to meet with developers of new construction to give feedback on the plans before a building is constructed. Also, make sure there is a requirement that someone, perhaps from the town's disabilty commission, with Building Code and ADA knowledge participates on the building plan review board

Consumer Awareness & Assertiveness

People with disabilities and parents of children with disabilities are not aware of and are not assertive about their needs. For example, a tenant asks to have a counter lowered to accommodate her disability and the landlords replies "Why should I make changes, we've never had a problem before. Besides, if I provide that accommodation for you, everyone will be asking for something." If people are not asking for the accommodations they need, how can you convince landlords and building owners that a need exists?

Action Steps

➤ Educate Yourself

Knowledge is power. Educate yourself on all laws, ordinances and regulations that pertain to disability, and the different community models that promote inclusion. Seek out opportunities to learn about the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA), Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA), Fair Housing Act, and related state laws and regulations.

➤ Advocate for Your Rights

The Mayor or the First Selectman in your town represents all citizen interests. Ask for a meeting and explain how a group of community members want to make the town more inclusive. Begin discussions about creating a municipal commission or task force to address disability issues. Identifying the numbers of individuals with disabilities in your town can make a big impact (demographic information about your town can be obtained from the 2000 census).

Housing

Individuals with disabilities find accessible and affordable housing sadly lacking in Connecticut, they often remain confined to a four wall existence. Where there are accessible, affordable options (often in elderly housing complexes) conflicts often develop between younger people with disabilities and elders.

Action Steps

➤ Promote Visitability

Identify a core group of people to work with you in promoting a local ordinance or regulation that either requires or encourages single family homes to be "visitable." A number of communities throughout the United States have adopted ordinances that require a minimum degree of accessibility in all housing that is newly constructed, including single family homes. The visitability concept means that one zero-step entrance is provided, as well as sufficiently wide hallways and one bathroom that can be entered and used by someone in a wheelchair.

Media Portrayal

The media typically portrays people with disabilities from either end of a spectrum, as heroic and extraordinary or as sad and tragic, with no apparent middle ground. People with disabilities are portrayed as being more different from typical citizens than like them, which is not the case at all.

Action Step

➤ Educate Local Media

Share the "Media Portrayal" fact sheet with your local media resources to teach them about the importance of the issue.

Lack of Funding

Towns lack funding to support ADA compliance efforts for full accessibility. Making sidewalks, intersections, and public buildings accessible is costly and full compliance may take many years to complete. This process is particularly difficult for towns with lots of historic structures.

Action Steps

➤ Apply for Grants

Cities and towns that have made progress in this area have used Community Development Block Grant (CDBG) or Small Cities funding, but few towns have pursued this option.

➤ Reallocate Resources

Inclusion can be achieved by using existing resources in a different way. Town funds spent on transportation to send children to an out-of-city summer camp can be used to support inclusive programming in community camp programs.

➤ Use Public Resources

Libraries no longer serve just for book-lending, but are considered community centers. Municipal web sites are another good way of spreading the word about local programs and services. Before posting information on a municipal web site, make sure it is accessible to all town residents as required by ADA.

➤ Involve Places of Worship and Local Civic Organizations

Places of worship and local civic organizations (e.g., Kiwanis, Knights of Columbus, and Rotary) can play a powerful role in community inclusion.

➤ Utilize the Town Recreation Department

Work to support inclusion training for the town recreation department staff. Parents of children with disabilities can be recruited to do the training.

Transportation

Transportation that is poorly coordinated and unavailable is a major barrier to creating opportunities for people to be truly included. Many communities in Connecticut have no public or private transportation of any kind. In communities that do, participants noted that vehicles are typically not available during peak times of need or are restricted to certain populations. Fixed route buses are only available in limited parts of the state, and bus stops are often difficult to reach, especially in bad weather. Retaining paratransit van drivers is another concern as there is a high turnover rate.

Action Steps

➤ Meet with the Board of the Transit District

Arrange a meeting with the Board of the transit district to discuss concerns relating to transportation barriers.

➤ Promote the Publication of a Travel Guide

Many travel guides and tourism bureaus have directories for specific populations. Ask your local organization to publish a directory that highlights accessibility, or places that are particularly welcoming to people with disabilities and volunteer to help them assemble needed information.

Consumer Presence

Disability commissions are difficult to establish and often lack consumer presence. Active commissions do not always have a universal vision of what community inclusion would look like. Many towns have vacancies on boards and commissions and therefore rely on the same people for involvement and input. When members burn out or leave, it is not easy to fill these openings.

Action Steps

➤ Examine Board Representation

Review the existing municipal commissions, disability specific boards and commissions, and generic entities for representation of people with disabilities.

➤ Train People with Disabilities and Families

Offer training to people with disabilities and families so they will be better prepared to serve effectively on boards and task forces.

This section has presented an overview of some of the common barriers to community inclusion as well as suggested actions that may help people to overcome these barriers. At the forums and conference participants also described what they think are important components of successful inclusion strategies. These suggestions are presented in the following section.

Keys to Inclusion Strategies

Participants at the forums and conference also identified the following strategies as important components of successful inclusion strategies.

➤ **Develop Relationships**

Begin discussions with community members about their interest in making their town more welcoming for people with disabilities. Adopt strategies to draw people out of their homes and interact with their neighbors. As one participant noted "the biggest barrier to inclusion is the lack of front porches."

➤ **Enhance Social Capital**

Develop or strengthen "social capital," those networks that weave individuals into groups and communities. People who seek community change and are interconnected can reach goals far beyond the grasp of individuals acting in isolation.

➤ **Focus on Assets**

When promoting community inclusion, focus on the assets that individuals possess. Typical impressions of people with disabilities center on their disabilities and deficits, ignoring their abilities and talents.

➤ **Identify Bridge Builders**

Communities need to identify and cultivate community bridge builders. Bridge builders are those respected individuals who can provide a link to the community at-large, including official and unofficial leaders.

➤ **Tailor Inclusion Initiatives**

Approach different communities in different ways (e.g. a Commission on Disabilities may work in one town while a parent group spurs more action in another)

Municipal Examples of Community Inclusion Initiatives

This section presents towns that have succsessfully implemented community inclusion strategies.

Mansfield

A Disability Advisory Committee under the guidance of the Department of Social Services has given input as the town strives to become 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.

Middletown

A requirement has been included in the city ordinances that any building committee in town must include a representative of the Commission Concerning Persons with Disabilities. This policy has resulted in the construction of facilities that are not only accessible, but usable as well.

Cromwell

A Small Cities Grant was received to make their parks more accessible, including the restrooms. As an example of Universal Design, instead of meeting the minimum path width in the park, an 8 foot path was paved. That decision has made it easier for people with strollers, walkers, roller blades, bikes, and more to use the path, in addition to people who use wheelchairs. With money left over from the grant, an ADA expert was hired to evaluate the town's other public spaces and general compliance with the ADA. A second Small Cities grant was submitted and approved.

Groton

Promoting inclusive recreation is a long-term goal. A quarterly booklet listing the town recreation activies contains the following mission statement "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 needing support to participate in any activity offered by the Parks and Recreation Department.

Bridgeport

User friendly disability resources for youth and adults were created for this community. One item, a colorful refrigerator magnet with the phone number for the City Disability Resource Office, is being distributed throughout the city housing networks. Another resource was created by a committee of high school students, mentored through a program at the Disability Resource Center of Fairfield County (a center for independent living). The students designed an address book containing a comprehensive directory of resources, which has been broadly distributed to Middle School and High School youth in the Bridgeport area. The City recently released an RFP for homeownership production and stipulated that developers had to incorporate the principles of universal design into their proposals.

New Haven

A very successful Youth Mentoring Day was held in October to coincide with the National Disability Mentoring Day, which promotes employment of people with disabilities by local businesses. The New Haven Office for Persons with Disabilities has developed a quarterly newsletter focusing on topics of interest to people with disabilities and conducted structural assessments of public accommodations in the city.

Conclusion

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

Disability is a natural part of the human condition. Helping people realize we are all disabled, or differently-abled, is a long term goal to work toward. It takes a lot of planning and groundwork to make change happen, first with individuals one-to-one, then with organizations. As one participant put it, we need to "do the legwork one person at a time." Inclusion comes with time. Another participant said, "the more we're out there, visible, the more people see you as a human. They're not looking at your wheelchair; they're looking in your eyes." After all, what is normalcy? It is normal for all of us to be different.

The UCEDD will follow up on its experience under the Real Choice grant by taking this challenge to the next level. Since at least four state agencies are involved in either placing or supporting people with disabilities in the community, they need to be brought into the dialogue and put in contact with local community leaders. In addition, there are a number of private sector entities (e.g., Centers for Independent Living, and residential and vocational service agencies) as well as local advocacy organizations that play a role in either placing or supporting people with disabilities in the community. These stakeholders will be brought into the planning process, along with community members, to tie together all constituencies. State agencies will be asked not just to participate in the process, but to provide a small amount of funding to support the community inclusion initiative, the beneficiaries of which are the "clients" of the agencies. With this support, it is anticipated that 1-3 communities will be selected as pilot program(s) during the 2006-2007 year.