

**Requesting
Inclusion From the
Community -- The
Necessity of Asking**

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Currently, in the City of Seattle, the Department of Neighborhoods operates an inclusion project called "Involving ALL Neighbors," which is funded jointly between the City and the state Division of Developmental Disabilities to support each Seattle neighborhood in including its members with developmental disabilities.

ment"(1991) and "Backward Planning," a poster with a graphic image of the group's vision was developed. The group of agency providers and staff knew that their vision would not be realized without the assistance, support and involvement of the community. The community needed to be asked if they had the same vision, how they saw their role in realizing this vision, and had to be asked to expand their current role. To get this feedback, a "Community Member Forum" was scheduled.

Working to support fully inclusive communities for people with developmental disabilities involves three groups of people: individuals with disabilities, staff of the human services agencies that support them, and community members. Most of the work to date about community-building, community connecting, and supporting friendships between individuals with disabilities and community members has been from the direction of staff supporting the individual to approach community. However, there is a different direction: asking community to include people with disabilities. Success for full inclusion involves the absolute necessity for "asking" and of becoming an "askee" (Schwartz, 1997).

This is the only city in the country with a staff position dedicated to neighborhood inclusion of individuals with developmental disabilities. Various avenues for inclusion for individuals, their families and neighborhoods include: pursuing personal interests in the neighborhood, nurturing neighborhood hospitality, getting involved in existing neighborhood organizations, developing inclusive neighborhood organizations, and organizing neighborhood projects and efforts.

Agency personnel invited people they knew in town who were key leaders in the community, people who were active and could make a contribution, and their own friends. Some of the people invited included agency board members, ministers and priests. This first group said they shared the vision and that the people who really needed to hear it weren't at the meeting. So additional Forums were scheduled.

John McKnight, Kathy Bartholomew-Lorimer and others at Northwestern University's Center for Urban Affairs and Policy Research were pioneers in this direction. In the original Logan Square Project in the City of Chicago (O'Connell, 1988), the neighborhood association was the organizing entity for efforts to determine to what degree ordinary citizens were aware of fellow neighbors and citizens with developmental disabilities, and for asking these ordinary citizens to involve and include all members of the community in their lives.

Another mechanism which some agencies have undertaken, which could be pursued by others without the framework of a formal project, is called Community Member Forums. In some small communities in southwest Minnesota starting in 1995, all the human services agencies in the area worked together to identify their vision for an inclusive community. Using O'Brien and O'Brien's "Framework for Accomplish-

In the second meeting, an auto dealer started speaking about his friendship with a blind musician. These two were both members of an organization called Ducks Unlimited (duck hunters who also work to preserve wetlands and marshlands). The blind musician had gone to the auto dealer to ask him to go fishing together. The auto dealer had accepted, they'd gone fishing several times, and had become friends. The auto dealer underlined the necessity of asking. He said, "I would never have gone to him to ask him. But just because I wouldn't have gone to ask him doesn't mean I'm not friendly or not willing. I had to be asked."

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A minister in Nebraska who had been approached by a group home asking about potential friends for their residents also emphasized this necessity of asking: "I would bet a month's preacher's salary (not that that's much money) that every congregation in the country, whether it's Protestant, Catholic, Jewish or Muslim, has at least one person who is willing to

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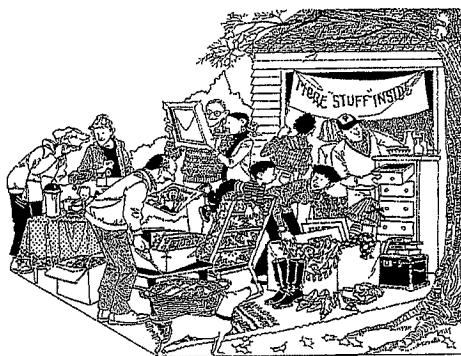
develop a friendship with a person with a disability. But I would also bet a month's salary that 90% of them don't know that they have this willingness ... because they haven't had the opportunity to find that out, they haven't been asked."

In 1996 the southwest Minnesota Community Members Forum group committed to meet monthly for a year in the town of Fairmont. Some of the community members who attended included a local newspaper journalist, a county commissioner, a city council member, a man who had a radio show and a local cable access show, some high school students who were involved in a diversity initiative, an ex-social worker who had many connections in town, ministers, and a member of the Minnesota Valley Action Council. Some of the associations which became involved in the effort over that year included Knights of Columbus, Kiwanis, Women of Today, the Social Concerns Committee of a catholic church, and several ministerial associations in the region.

The Fairmont Community Member Forum group that met in January 1996, upon deciding to meet monthly for a year, felt they needed to have a goal or a mission — what were they going to accomplish? The community members asked how many people with developmental disabilities lived in this town of 11,000 people. The agency staff estimated around 250 adults. The group committed that by the end of the year, all 250 people would be connected with nondisabled friends, be part of clubs and groups, volunteer in ways that expressed their interests, and/or have ordinary jobs.

The community members saw it was entirely possible within a year to accomplish that for all 250 people! By the end

of the year, progress was definitely more significant because of the Forum's involvement, however, not everyone was successfully connected by year's end. Agencies often had to re-organize their staff time, individual schedules, and agency focus. When asked why the group hadn't accomplished its goal, the radio host replied: "Because the agencies wouldn't give it up!"



Discussion of the Minnesota experiences was shared in Louisiana, and a provider agency in Baton Rouge decided to also try these forums. Their experiences are shared by the agency director:

"After many years of commitment to person-centered supports for 26 people with developmental disabilities, our agency took a systematic and critical look at how effective we were being in helping people to achieve their personal outcomes. We were surprised and disappointed by how limited our assistance had been in supporting relationship and membership outcomes. We could point to some positive examples, but most people continued to live without friendship or belonging.

Another pattern was clear. Agency staff had developed genuine and reciprocal relationships with the people they were helping to support, often including them in family visits and events. Though these relationships had real quality, the person's circle of friends remained narrow and was significantly affected by the patterns of staff turnover and discontinuity that plague the human service world.

About the time we heard about the Community Member Forums in Minnesota, we had done all we could think of to do as a human

service organization. The concept of the community as an equal and active partner in achieving relationship and membership turned out to be just the shift in thinking that we needed to get unstuck. We had always viewed the community as the web of relationships and belonging that people needed above all. But we had never seen the community as experts in building community. Despite our gloomy record on community-building, we still implicitly saw ourselves as the experts.

The strategy that represented the key breakthrough was the concept of the Community Forum. We adapted it slightly in that we began with the 26 people our agency served, rather than with a particular geographic community. But the major design was the same. Utilizing the community contacts or our staff, we identified and invited community leaders who lived in the same communities as the people we supported to attend a Community Forum. The community leaders at the first Forum included the president of the Elks club, a realtor, the director of a community center, a legislative aide, the owner of a fast food restaurant and the coordinator of a youth group.

We held the Forum at the home of a staff member, with plenty of food and refreshments. The agency director introduced the purpose of the Forum as seeking the advice and assistance of community leaders in supporting the people with disabilities at the Forum in achieving their particular dreams of membership and relationship. She acknowledged that human service agencies alone were incapable of achieving lasting and deep relationship and membership opportunities. She affirmed the community leaders in the room as the experts in community-building. In fact, as she pointed out, they were building community all the time.

Next, six people we support introduced themselves and described their interests. The community leaders insightfully brainstormed opportunities, some under their direct influence, others that they were willing to facilitate.

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One woman was interested in joining the Elks Club, a social club and service organization. With the help of the director, she was initiated three months later and is a devoted member.

The owner of the fast food chain hired one young woman. He has since spoken at a major conference regarding all she has brought to his business, making his store a better work community.

One young man with artistic gifts was invited to paint a mural at the community center. He did a beautiful job, and is now taking an advanced art course at the local university, where he is making some good ties with other students.

Another woman was assisted by a legislative aide to tell her life story to children at local schools. The aide also introduced her to two older adults at a nursing home to whom she taught signing and with whom she developed a real friendship.

We continue to hold Forums about every six weeks with new and former community leaders and both new and former people served by our agency. The same patterns of success continue: jobs, membership, and friendship opportunities. The community brings us not only their community-building experience and expertise, but the deeply-lived conviction that there is a place to really belong for everybody."

For further information contact Angela Novak Amado or Jacqueline Victorian Blaney, Human Services Research and Development Center, 1195 Juno Avenue, St. Paul, MN 55116.

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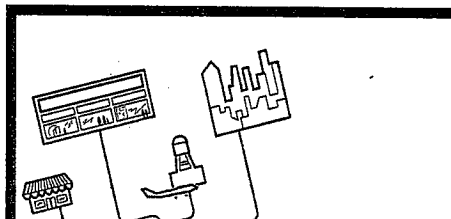
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