

Exploring Community Engagement:

A MASSACHUSETTS FAMILY SUPPORT CENTER PROJECT

Sponsored by the Massachusetts Department of Developmental Services, Central/West Region

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1 INTRODUCTION & OVERVIEW

Family Support Centers in Massachusetts, as in most states, provide critical services to people with disabilities and their families. They help families navigate systems and solve problems, connect to one another and to their community, and secure the goods and services they need for day-to-day living. These centers know that the more families can be integrated into their communities, the better off everyone will be. Families with disability experiences will not feel so all alone, and other families and organizations in the community become more inclusive.

Still, the primary services offered by support centers tend to become Center-based activities, which are only accessed by individuals with disabilities and their families. That is, Family Support Center staff, who often have limited resources, doing the best they can, tend to plan and execute support services that ultimately emanate from the agency center. Of course, families appreciate these efforts and the safe harbor they offer, yet when families remain segregated the ultimate goal of inclusion is mitigated.

Given these realities, in 2019, the MA Department of Developmental Services launched pilot project on community engagement. They issued an opportunity to the Family Support Programs in Central and Western MA to explore more community-based strategies. For this project the Department retained Dr. Al Condeluci, a national expert in understanding social capital and community engagement, to help guide the project. Dr. Condeluci had presented a number of times at the state-wide Family Support Conference and many attendees found the ideas engaging but challenging to carry out at their Family Support Center. This pilot project was meant to provide the strategies and support necessary for these centers to shift from a micro focus on the family, to a macro focus on the greater community.

Key strategies presented by Dr. Condeluci at the Family Support Conferences included the following steps:

1. **Identify and gather interests**, assets, passions, advocations and other elements of connection that might link people. This process is conducted through a cultural profile and can apply to families as well as individuals.
2. **Explore and “map” the community** to identify clubs, groups, and associations, both formal and informal, that might correspond to the individual/family’s interest.
3. **Understand and adopt cultural rituals**, patterns, jargon, and other elements that are typical to cultural acceptance and assure that the newcomer is aware of actions that will hasten engagement.
4. **Find the gatekeeper**, the community member who can help escort the newcomer into the community for more meaningful engagement.

The application to participate in this pilot project was built around these themes and invited proposals for demonstration of projects that were focused on community engagement, social capital, and meaningful opportunities to participate in community.

Once the proposals were reviewed, 3 centers (out of 15 invited) were chosen to participate. It is important to know that there were no direct dollars available to the selected centers, but rather offered twelve months of focused training and technical support, through Dr. Condeluci and state staff, to help guide each of the 3 participating teams.

The overall project had 3 phases that framed the effort. These were:

1. **Introduction and overview.** Staff were called together for a 2-day training and framing. That is, Dr. Condeluci was on site to review concepts and strategies for community engagement. Staff were then given time to frame their projects and had opportunity for peer support from fellow projects.
2. **Initiation and project roll-out.** Back in their home communities, each project was initiated. In this time-frame we had another on-site meeting along with 2 videoconference sessions to discuss project advances, barriers and frustrations. These sessions allowed for “group-think” in sorting out challenges, and sharing areas of commonality.
3. **Project conclusion and next steps.** A final videoconference was held with Dr. Condeluci to discuss project to date, lessons learned, and ways to continue efforts into the future.

This report is an overview of this project with focus on each of the 3 efforts and how they have influenced their agencies and impacted families/individuals supported.

2 THE AGENCIES

The three selected agencies for this project were:

1. **Berkshire County Arc** (BCArc) provides Family Support services in central and southern Berkshire County, a broad geographic area that includes the urban community of Pittsfield and is otherwise comprised of small rural towns. While some of the communities served are quite affluent, many others experience high rates of poverty; all communities in Berkshire County experience a lack of public transportation.
2. **Multicultural Community Services** (MCS) provides Family Support services to families who live in the urban centers of Holyoke and Chicopee, and also a number of small cities and towns in Hampden County, some of which are rural. Approximately 15% of the families that MCS supports speak Spanish and are of Puerto Rican heritage. Holyoke is one of the state’s poorest cities, with nearly 30% of its residents living below the poverty line.
3. **Pathlight** provides Family Support services in Hampshire County, which is made up of many small towns, including what is known as the 5 College area. Pathlight also runs the regional Autism Support Center for all of western Massachusetts, which encompasses Hampshire, Hampden, Berkshire and Franklin Counties. These programs support families that are economically diverse. While the vast majority of families are white (95%), other cultural groups served include Latinx, Middle Eastern, and Asian communities.

3 PROJECT GOALS

Each project identified their goals for the effort, each with a different approach. These were:

- ▶ **BCArc** aimed to increase the capacity and reach of their current community integration projects, and implement new community-based programming for the families served. This was done with a focus on community inclusion and building social capital. Initially 3 individuals were identified for the project, although circumstances caused one participant to drop out.
- ▶ **MCS** had two stated goals: 1. to identify, collaborate and create partnerships with local community resources in order to increase their understanding of people with disabilities and their ability to create inclusive opportunities and, 2. For each participating individual (4 total), to have opportunities to participate in activities in their local community and feel welcomed and accepted.
- ▶ **Pathlight** aimed to support people in the quest to become “of the community” as opposed to simply be “in the community.” They set out to help their 3 identified participants explore areas of interest and begin to make sustainable connections in the community. Over time, these efforts will help community groups welcome difference, and normalize participating in general community groups rather than in specialized groups that tend to be only for people with disabilities.

All three teams used the same baseline assessment instrument to measure the level of community engagement of the ten participating individuals. Each project then began to implement supports to achieve their goals. Since each project varied, equally, the approach and outcome varied.

4 PROJECT IMPLEMENTATION

All Centers benefitted from the same training and support, and all used the same pre- and post-assessments to measure their success in helping people feel more a part of their community, and to be less lonely. Each center approached their effort from a unique direction. This included:

- ▶ **BCArc** – The Berkshire team started by identifying individuals who had recently transitioned into a more independent living situation, and who were looking to become more connected to their local communities. Once participants were identified, an orientation was provided for families, participants, support staff and project staff. At this orientation the goal was to have an overall explanation of social capital, and what the desired outcomes of the project were. Participants created vision boards to identify existing relationships, community connections, and interests. At the same time, support staff and caregivers processed key intentions, such as establishing community connections and fading professional supports. The project then rolled out, but experienced some unforeseen bumps in the road that will be covered in the Outcome section.
- ▶ **MCS** – The Holyoke team started by identifying two partnering community organizations: the Holyoke YMCA and Holyoke Public Library (HPL). These partners attended one of the trainings with Al Condeluci to learn about concepts of social capital, and to discuss their potential role in furthering those goals for individuals supported by MCS. The Holyoke team

met on several occasions with staff from these resources to discuss opportunities, which included having MCS youth volunteer at the YMCA, and participate in a variety of Library programs. The MCS team then began to match people with these opportunities, based on their interests, but as time rolled on the YMCA commitment started to wane, and a staff change affected the Library's commitment to the project, so the team had to regroup and identify other community partners, which ended up being a Holyoke Public Media project based at the Library, and Holyoke Community College.

- ▶ **Pathlight** – The Pathlight team began their project with participants already identified, with the intent of conducting interest inventories and initiating community connections based on individual interests. When several participants dropped out of the project due to life circumstances, the team was forced to go back to square one. To re-group, an event was planned to explain the pilot project and to solicit new recruits. At this event 8 people signed up. This interest, though positive, created challenges as the project had no financial resources tied to it and the agency just could not support all those interested. In the end, they prioritized 3 individuals and continued with the project.

5 PROJECT OUTCOMES, LESSONS LEARNED & UNEXPECTED VICTORIES

BERKSHIRE COUNTY ARC

- ▶ **Outcomes:** The Berkshire team had positive outcomes with the two participants who completed the project. When assessed prior to the intervention, both participants reported feeling safe in their current situation, but lonely. After the intervention and support, Participant 1 moved into a new setting where he felt less lonely and more connected, however he felt more vulnerable. Participant 2 also felt less lonely after intervention becoming more involved with social groups on his college campus. To this extent, the intervention of supports and coaching for both participants seemed to have an impact on lessening their social isolation.
- ▶ **Lessons Learned:** The Berkshire team agrees that using an application to determine candidates for a project like this is helpful in preparing a team for what supports are needed to aid someone in getting connected to their community. The project team was selective in who they chose to participate in this program, focusing on individuals who had a desire to be more independent. They also learned that it is important to have support staff who have a natural connection with the participant. For example, one participant who was starting college was supported by another student at that college, who helped him navigate the physical and social environment, and helped connect him to a theater club that he enjoys. It was also noted that the use of good person-centered planning and resource mapping tools, such as Charting the LifeCourse, are helpful to this work.

“It has been remarkable to see how a pilot project could quickly grow into a program that supports several individuals in a long-term effort to build community connections and to gain more social capital.”

-- Berkshire County Arc

- ▶ **Unexpected Victories and Next Steps:** The team concluded that this project allowed them to start thinking about how this initiative could be replicated and sustained. Although only 2 participants were able to receive supports, this pilot has resulted in a DDS funded program at the local Community Center, through which BC Arc will be able to plan for 5 more consumers at a time to receive similar supports, with the expectation of further expansion. The Berkshire team also plans to review existing services, to find ways to integrate community-building into programs that have existing funding.

MULTICULTURAL COMMUNITY SERVICES

- ▶ **Outcomes:** After delays due to changes in community partners, MCS launched their program with 4 participants in January 2020. Each of the 4 participants were initially connected with regularly occurring activities with community organizations, such as a working with a baseball team at the community college, participating in yoga classes, a LGBTQ youth group, and a weekly media group at the local library. Unfortunately, by March things halted due to the pandemic. Given this imposition, the Holyoke team was unable to measure outcomes, but they reported the following:
- ▶ **Lessons Learned:** The MCS team agrees that to do this community building work well requires the ability to devote the necessary amount of time, and in the long-term this would be best accomplished through a position dedicated to community inclusion. They also learned that it is important to use the gatekeeper concept, but to establish multiple relationships at partnering community organizations, so the relationship is not lost when one staff leaves for another position. MCS also found the importance of conducting community mapping early on, and using one's own social capital to develop community relationships. MCS summarized that as an organization, they will always continue to look for and engage in community partnerships and will encourage people and families supported to participate in their local community. This project sharpened and refined the process of community engagement.

"This kind of work takes time and lots of planning; and even though there will be bumps in the road, every bump is a lesson learned."

-- MCS

- ▶ **Unexpected Victories:** Despite the lack of measured outcomes for the individuals involved in the Holyoke project due to the pandemic, many relationships have been formed with community organizations that are proving beneficial for MCS families. For example, although the Holyoke YMCA did not prove fruitful for placing MCS volunteers, after participating in the initial training with Dr. Condeluci, the Membership Director became a certified Autism Fitness Specialist, and conversations continue on future collaborations. MCS also benefitted from the social capital of the contacts they made. For instance, the Holyoke librarian who subsequently left for another position connected MCS with Holyoke Media, who then connected them with a resource center run for and by LGBTQ youth and their allies. These relationships continue to open up opportunities for people supported by MCS.

PATHLIGHT

- ▶ **Outcomes:** Pathlight conducted a general meeting to explain the project and to solicit participation, and ended up with 2 adult participants, and one youth. This allowed the team to explore connections with various age issues. With the 2 adult participants, Pathlight discovered that not only does it require being able to identify an area of interest, but finding the right fit is also an exploratory process. One adult participant is still in the discovery stage of exploring the interest area chosen; the other adult participant is now involved in a dance class independently with support for transportation. With the younger participant, the team found that the family's faith community played a key role. This youth is now immersed in several different ongoing activities which have proven to be good ongoing opportunities for him to build relationships.
- ▶ **Lessons Learned:** The Pathlight team emphasizes that community- and relationship-building are both lengthy processes and won't fit any particular time frame. Because of this, it is important to celebrate success while continuing to building and refining the process. Critical to this work is keeping the person you are supporting at the center of the process. This requires having a good knowledge of the person so you can help them to explore interests and find a good fit. Be prepared for unexpected life events and do your community mapping so that if the first group does not work for the individual, you are ready to find another.

In the end, Pathlight staff felt that the project shifted thinking from activities to relationships. The project taught them that relationship building is not quick and easy. It is hard work that requires a shift in mindset, but that this project got us closer to our mission, which is to partner with people with disabilities to create opportunities and build relationships throughout their lives.

- ▶ **Unexpected Victories:** Pathlight reports that this project created the opportunity to have better programmatic discussions about future growth throughout the organization. These discussions between programs have enhanced the way their programs work in conjunction with one another.

"Shifting thinking to incorporate social capital and relationship building is where efforts should be concentrated...this work can not be done in isolation but should be woven into all programming, yet there still needs to be some dedicated effort." -- Pathlight

6 FINAL THOUGHTS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Building community relationships is something all Family Resource Centers want to see happen, yet getting to this goal is illusive. These 3 project sites were willing to dig in, with no additional funds, to explore this challenge. It presented an opportunity to test, explore, and examine ways and means to impacting the relationship-building process.

Even though each site was free to shape their project to reflect their community, there were some common themes and recommendations that each project shared. These themes/recommendations are:

1. **Paradigm Shift:** Centers need to think about this from a systemic point of view. That is, you are not going to be able to “shoe-horn” relationship-building agenda in a system that is activities-based. In an effort to promote relationship-building, Centers must shift focus and funding from activities-based programming. This shift must be intentional and deliberate, and can be done incrementally. The Centers can consider setting up a specific team that can lead the effort of conversion. To this end, It is recommended that FSC’s make a focused effort to engage in a strategic exploration to shift from activity-based services to a relationship-building agenda.
2. **Training:** Staff need to be trained and ready for the task. There are training topics and resources that can help staff understand community issues and relationships building. These include written materials as well as videos that can help staff to build new capacities. Centers should take advantage of these types of training opportunities and look to become more of a “learning organization.” Many of these can be made available in webinar format and should be more economical for Centers. Finally, staff who participated in this project might be available to help mentor other Centers who are interested in shifting from micro to macro. It is recommended that FSC’s embark on a training initiative that focuses on community engagement and relationship-building strategies.
3. **Funding:** The process requires time and adequate funding. It is important to understand that unlike activities-based programming, which can be done in ratio format, and be more predictable with both time and funding, relationship-building efforts are initially more staff intensive, and often difficult to assure success. These complexities are common when variables are outside of your control. Indeed, all 3 projects had bumps in the road where individuals/families dropped out, or had difficulty in following through. We need to ensure that public and private resources are available for these community-based activities. Governmental entities, like CMS, have begun to set service targets for conversion from activities-based to community-based options, and plan to impose financial disincentives to promote compliance. It is recommended that Family Support Centers explore budget shifts, or obtain new, unrestricted dollars to adequately fund a shift in programming focus.
4. **Community Mapping:** The Centers must be prepared to do “community mapping,” and to keep this information up to date. The key to relationship-building success is found in understanding the community. More, once discovered, the social infrastructure must be softened to assure community hospitality. These require intentional efforts. It is recommended that FSC’s adequately “map” their communities and establish a dynamic data-base on available community resources.
5. **Partnerships:** Staff doing this work must be prepared to develop partnerships with community resources. These partnerships are essential, but are also fragile. As we learned in this project, resource staff can change, or decide on another direction that might mitigate efforts made to date. It is recommended that FSC’s explore and develop partnerships with key community resources that will enhance the relationship-building shift in services.

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