

# Georgia Council on Developmental Disabilities Real Communities Initiating Group

Foundation Meeting • 21 October 2009 • Friends Meeting House, Decatur

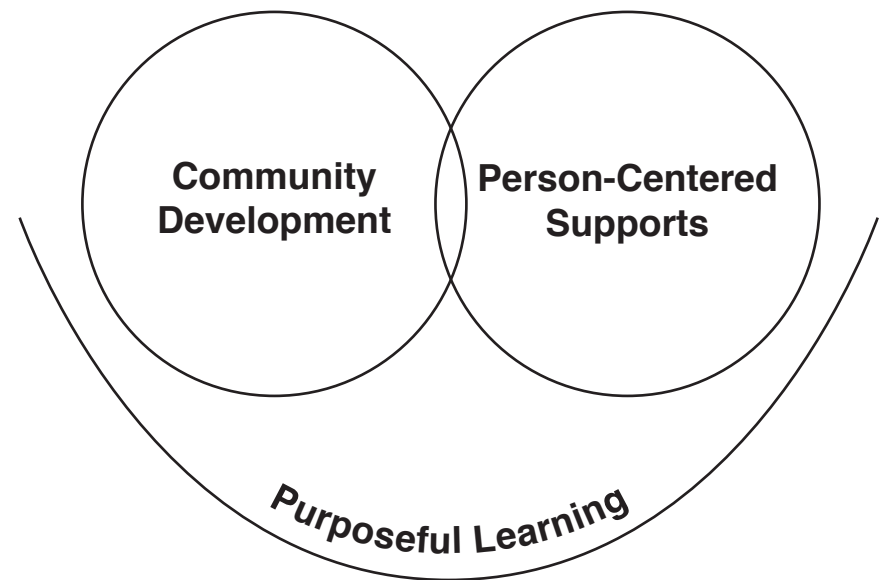
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For generations, people with disabilities and their families and allies have organized to improve services and increase accessibility. Both the successes of their efforts and the bonds among their members have benefited many people with developmental disabilities. The **Real Communities Initiative** builds on these efforts to explore this possibility:

**Georgia's communities will be stronger, and life chances for people with developmental disabilities will be better, if we intentionally build bridges that connect people with disabilities and their organizations to other citizens and associations to act collectively on community issues.**

This exploration calls for purposeful learning at the boundaries of community development and person-centered supports for people with developmental disabilities. Organizing around issues that matter to all citizens needs to explicitly recognize the assets of people with disabilities and reach out to include them among their members and in their alliances. Assistance to people with developmental disabilities needs to actively enable their participation in civic life. This will require social innovation.

**Initiating Group** members accept responsibility for guiding the first steps of the Real Communities Initiative. They agree to conduct a series of dialogue interviews with some currently active and forming disability organizations to explore the potential for bridging to community development efforts. The results of these interviews, along with the wisdom of the initiating group's experience, will shape the



Council's initial investments in the Real Communities Initiative. The purpose of this meeting is to create a foundation for the dialogue interviews by reflection on member's experiences of community development, identification of some of the issues involved in expanding the number of civically active people with developmental disabilities, and a sense of the member's hopes for the initiative.

## Reflecting on community development



In pairs, group members listened to one another tell a story of their experience of a community development effort that they found meaningful. They practiced listening from a position of openness and appreciation of the other person's

story, suspending as much as they could the impulse to judge or jump into the other person's story with their own experiences, ideas, agenda, or comments (this position is essential to the dialogue interviews that group members will conduct).

Reflecting on what they heard in these appreciative interviews, small groups of six considered this question:

**What is the *living core* of community development? Without these qualities an initiative would die or do harm.**

These qualities of a living community development effort guide what Initiating Group members will listen for in dialogue interviews.

*Please tell a story about a community development effort that has been especially rewarding for you to be a part of. The scale of the effort doesn't matter: it may be as simple as organizing an event for your neighborhood or congregation or as extensive as building an enduring community organization. You may have been a participant or played a leadership or organizing role. What matters is that an association or community grew stronger and better able to serve its purpose as a result of people working together.*

*What were the high points of this whole experience?*

*What uncertainties or difficulties did you face?*

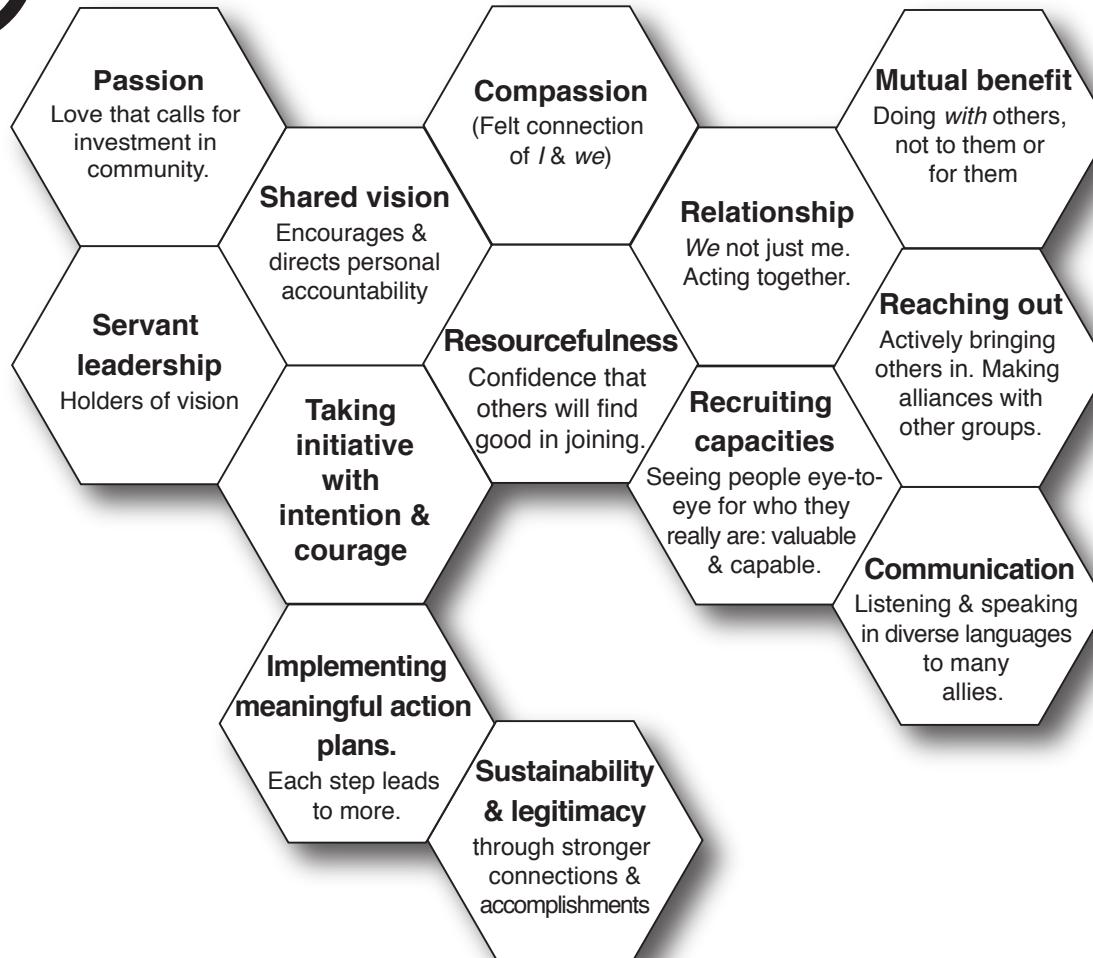
*What qualities and skills did this experience call on you to use or develop?*

*What did you learn from this experience?*

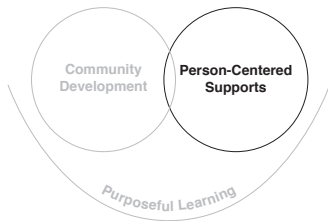
*What, specifically, made this experience meaningful to you?*



# The Living Core of Community Development



## Learning about support for participation



Organizations of people with disabilities and their families have created their own decision making tables, some of which are established in law, like the Council on Developmental Disabilities and the State Independent Living Council. As

much as these organizations have improved disability services and as much farther as there is to go on the service improvement agenda, three additional items of unfinished business remain:

- Organizations of people with disabilities need to develop even better ways of engaging more people with disabilities, especially people with cognitive disabilities and communication difficulties.
- Organizations representing people with developmental disabilities need to develop effective ways to get community decision makers and civic activists to take their seats at disability organizations' tables.
- Civic organizations need to recognize the untapped capacities of people with disabilities and find ways to include them in their membership and their organizations in their alliances; and people with disabilities need to take their fair share of responsibility for adding their energy and talents to organizations concerned with community issues.

The Real Communities Initiative focuses primarily on the third item: purposeful learning about how to bridge organizing around community issues and the contributions of people with developmental disabilities. However, the chance of success on this item increases with progress on the other two. And all three depend in an important way on generating better ways to support community participation.

### *Practical assistance*

The key support question for a person who has chosen to participate in a community organization can only be answered one person at a time: *What does this particular person need in order to participate actively and successfully?* Part of the answer to this question will be the same as it would be for any other citizen; part of it may be specific to a person's disability.

It's important to remember what kind of participation we want. Real Communities wants to find ways that people with developmental disabilities become necessary to community associations and civic initiatives. This won't happen if people are objects of an organization's charity, or observers, or token representatives of diversity. When an organization decides, people with developmental disabilities have their voices heard and exercise the same decision making power as other members. When an association is at work, people with developmental disabilities pitch in and do a fair share.

Many people will need safe, accessible, convenient, timely and affordable transportation (indeed, better public transit is a civic issue with good potential for alliances in many communities).

Some people will require personal assistance with physical needs or communication or interpretation that are available at times and in places that respond to the requirements of a community organization.

Some people will need extra time or help in figuring out what they think and want to say about an issue when an organization is planning and making decisions. Some need coaching or facilitation to participate in a groups projects or activities. Other citizens may be able and willing to offer help, but they will often need invitation and orientation and sometimes training. If a person can't ask for him or herself, someone will need to ask for them.

Some activities (like Rotary Club lunches) cost money and some groups rely on members' donations.

Because most developmental disability services have not been set up to support people's active participation in community life, service providers need to learn more flexible and individualized ways of offering assistance. Otherwise participation will be limited to people who are somehow able to manage on their own or with the help of family members

#### *Bridge builders on the community side*

If most of us average six degrees of separation from anyone in our community (or country), there are some people who are only two or three connections away from most community members. They often combine a desire to contribute and charisma with their connections, though they don't necessarily play formal political or organizational roles. Some of these people enjoy using their trust, credibility, and influence in the service of their community. It's important to build relationships with these connector-leaders, whose knowledge and links can take people with disabilities into new opportunities.

It is important to respect the customs and capacities of local associations. Bringing an organization the question of how to include or ally with people or organizations who share their interests has more chance of success than assuming that citizens need to be admonished or educated before they can figure out how to make room for new contributors. Engagement is necessary; shared problem solving is often necessary; presumptive disrespect for active citizens' capacity for inclusion is unhelpful.

#### *Bridge builders among people with disabilities*

Many people with developmental disabilities have grown up unseen for who they are and what they can contribute. Many of their fellow citizens see them as incapable and requiring some form of special and separate life. Sometimes people's need for assistance meets with pity ("those poor handicapped people"); sometimes with resentment at necessary accommodation or public expenditure. These devaluing ways of seeing people will only change as more people with

disabilities are visible to other citizens as active contributors. People with developmental disabilities who show up as contributors teach their fellow citizens that there is far more to see than their prejudice shows them. (This is what makes jobs in a community's everyday workplaces such a powerful mode of public education.)

People who do not imagine themselves as exercising community leadership need a challenge from good models –other people with disabilities with whom they can identify who have already crossed the bridge to civic involvement. Those who have already made the journey can be mentors, coaches and guides. They can set the expectation that people with disabilities should take up the responsibility to exercise leadership in making the places they live better. It will be important to identify and support leaders who are willing to come back across the bridge and invite others on to it.

Sometimes there is more to do than simply offer encouragement and guidance. People with developmental disabilities too often have to put up with rudeness, rejection, and abuse from people whom they encounter every day.

Some people with developmental disabilities react to unfair treatment with anger and to rejection with counter-rejection. Their withdrawal from wider community involvement is a way to push back at those who wrong them. Some people react with fear and keep their heads down and themselves out of situations where they might suffer being made fun of or hurt. Even people who courageously go out to face frequent teasing and intimidation feel the hurt, frustration, and anger. Some of them have a daily dose of a low grade, banal form of evil.

No one response will exorcise this petty evil or heal those who suffer it. But those who have lived with the rejection, the disparagement, the fear and made a life in community nevertheless can be agents of empowerment.

We were able to see this in action as one member of the Initiating Group advised another on how to respond to the pain of being treated as different:

*Be out there anyway.*

*Be strong.*

*Hold your head up.*

*Do your job.*

*Be proud.*

*Don't be alone.*

The work of the Real Communities is to create the conditions under which citizens with and without developmental disabilities can work together on the interests they share in making their communities better places. We believe that settings that grow out of the living core of community development are places where the risk of rejection and abuse of participating members are greatly diminished and the resources and desire to repair such hurts as may occur are most likely to be available.

## What we want more of

Group members made very brief statements in answer to this question:

**Think ahead five years and identify one change that would be a signal to you that Real Communities has been worth the money and energy the Council invested.**

The common themes in members responses to this question can be summarized as a set of questions to ask about proposed investments The Real Communities Initiative's resources. Overall, we want these investments to build human connectedness by bridging separation between people with developmental disabilities and citizen associations.

- Does this investment open the doors of community organizations and associations that have not previously included people with developmental disabilities so that citizens with and without developmental disabilities work together on an issue that matters to all of them?
- Does this investment increase the number of people with developmental disabilities who will experience themselves and be seen by their fellow citizens as community leaders?
- Does this investment have a good chance of supporting citizen action that will make a local community better for everyone?
- Does this investment increase the power and influence that people with developmental disabilities and their families have over policies and practices that affect the wellbeing of all citizens?
- Does this investment decrease the expectation that services that congregate people with developmental disabilities are necessary?
- Will this investment have a positive effect on the employment of people with developmental disabilities?

- Does this investment reflect an attitude of welcome and openness to diverse voices and contributions rather than a sense of *we can't, we don't* and *I'm sorry, but...*
- Does this investment make sense to people with diverse political convictions: can people with conservative values see the investment as making sense?
- Does this investment respect and build on the positive in the culture and customs of the community it is creating bridges within?
- Does this investment promote a feel of naturalness: the sense that active participation by people with developmental disabilities is “the way its supposed to be”?

## Draft Interview Guide

### *Why we are listening*

We want to ground the Real Communities Initiative in the ways people are currently organizing collective action in order to make life better for people with disabilities. We want to know what is emerging in these efforts so that the Council can make good decisions about its investments of people, influence, and money.

### *What we are listening for*

We want to learn how people understand their organizing work. We want to hear the story that they want to tell about their work, in the way and in the words that make sense to them. We don't want to impose a grid of our questions on their story line.

We will be listening to their story for...

- ... purpose and vision
- ... how the group is structured
- ... the community they want to change and the benefit they want to create for that community
- ... what they have learned from their accomplishments so far and what future plans attract them
- ... important relationships and alliances
- ... the ways they are reaching out to bring other people and associations in or making bridges to join with others
- ... how leadership happens

### *How we want to listen*

We want people to feel that the story of their work is welcome and valuable.

There will be plenty of time to reflect on what we hear in the dialogue interview after we have used the interview time to hear what people can tell us. We will quiet our minds and set aside our internal voices of criticism and judgement. We will open our hearts to the story we are privileged to hear.

We will do our best to see the story from the point of view of those who are telling it.

We will be appreciative: we will be alert to what is alive and growing in this effort, to the strengths and capacities that we can hear, to the lessons that we can learn.

We will listen for what people sense is most important and especially for the future that they want to create.