Promising Practices in Community Life Engagement

Guidepost 4: Outcome-oriented and regularly monitored

Using mobile communication technology at SEEC

By Oliver Lyons

Background

SEEC (Seeking Equality, Empowerment, and Community) is a Maryland-based provider of employment, community living, and community development supports to people with intellectual and developmental disabilities (IDD). Originally established in 1987, SEEC started converting from facility-based to exclusively community-based supports in 2005, and closed down its center-based program completely in 2009.

Currently, all of SEEC's supports are individualized and community-based, in keeping with the organization's mission "to support people with intellectual and developmental disabilities to direct their lives with dignity, choice, authority, and responsibility." SEEC provides supports to over 200 people with IDD throughout Montgomery County and the District of Columbia.

Because SEEC has no central facility, having ways to maintain contact between staff and management is paramount. From prepaid cell phones in 2005 to outfitting every staff member with a tablet or a laptop today, SEEC has embraced mobile communication since it started its conversion. By pursuing non-disability-specific grants and reallocating resources, SEEC is able to maintain a mobile organization.

Implementation

Once SEEC began offering community-based supports, management needed a way to check in with staff. Starting in 2005, SEEC would purchase low-cost prepaid cellphones with unlimited texting for field staff in order to keep in touch. The more

SEEC staff was out in the community with individuals, the more they had stories they wanted to share with management and other staff members. However, their basic cellphones lacked the ability to photograph with any clarity, and those photos were unable to be shared. The executive director approached the Verizon Foundation about their need for more effective mobile communication and increased photo capacity, and Verizon responded by outfitting SEEC's staff with iPhone 4s.

Though the iPhones had been paid for, they still needed cellular and data plans. Because SEEC was in the process of moving towards completely community-based services, funds that had once been budgeted to maintain their building could now be shifted to maintaining their mobile technology. However, even with the iPhone's more modern camera, staff still found it difficult to text the pictures they wanted to share.

SEEC's IT department suggested to instead upload their pictures to the shared app Photostream. SEEC implemented in-house training on how to use Photostream. Because all SEEC staff have iPhones and access to SEEC's Photostream site, an internal competition sparked staff interest in sharing the best pictures and stories. These stories are not just kept internally; they are shared when SEEC staff presents at conferences or when giving tours to prospective families to highlight the community services offered.

Impact

SEEC's use of mobile communication extends beyond showcasing individual stories. In addition to monies from the Verizon Foundation, which is now a regular funder, SEEC accesses four separate technology grants. These diversified grants not only decreased dependence on IDD services funds, but also has allowed SEEC to outfit all staff with Windows tablets in addition to iPhones, while managers receive laptops.

Staff currently use the Carematic app, which allows them access to their case notes and program books while out in the

community without the burden of carrying around many confidential files. SEEC has also begun using Office 365, which allows for easy file sharing across all staff and provides each staff member their own email address. As SEEC has no central facility, managers in the office now simply check in with their staff out in the community every morning via email.

Though SEEC is using the latest mobile technology, they still strive to increase its use. Their goal is to get iPhones and tablets in the hands of everyone they support. They have encouraged parents to purchase tablets for their children, or to use a Maryland-specific communication program, Maryland Relay, that provides free tablets to those individuals who cannot use common communication devices such as cell phones and who meet specific financial requirements.

SEEC stresses the free safety features available on these tablets, such as Find My Friends, an app that allows a user to track a shared user's location and movements. These features can provide peace of mind to parents and management when individuals are out in community settings. Staff has also begun being trained on iMovie so they and the individuals they support can start creating and sharing movies about their activities in addition to photographs.

When asked how to go about increasing mobile communication at a provider site, SEEC's executive director had the following advice: "Start with the people who know how to use this technology and who like to use it. Then have them share their experiences about what the device is capable of with others to get them interested. In addition to trainings, you want your staff constantly interacting with their device to learn how to best use it, so don't discourage gameplay and social media. But start small with the people who are already well-versed in order to create the greatest amount of success."

Suggestions for Replication

- Reallocate existing resources to accommodate mobile communication and investigate new funding opportunities. What resources could be replaced with a mobile device? If staff no longer had to drive to the facility to check in before going out into the field, could the money saved on gas reimbursement be invested into a company phone? Could the money spent on secure storage and disposal of paper documents be spent on a tablet with a dedicated app instead? What technology-specific grants could benefit individuals with disabilities? Keep in mind that these grants are often less competitive than ones established specifically to aid those with disabilities.

- Have tech-savvy staff tout the benefits of mobile communication to everyone on your staff. Start by outfitting your most technologically experienced staff, and have them demonstrate the abilities of their device to other staff members with less technology experience. Have them explain the benefits of having a mobile device out in the field: the ease of communication, the lack of paperwork, etc. Let the less experienced staff play around with the device to help them get excited about using one themselves.

- Take full advantage of built-in or low-cost applications on the mobile device to increase communication. Almost every mobile device has a built-in camera for photographs and videos. Use those to share individuals' community experiences internally and with potential consumers and their families. Use free apps like Find My Friends to keep track of where your staff is at all times from any location. Use the device's free texting app or free, web-based email for mass communication.

For more information, contact:

Oliver Lyons, Research Study Coordinator, Institute for Community Inclusion:

oliver.lyons@umb.edu

Karen Lee, Executive Director, SEEC:

klee@seeconline.org

SEEC website: http://www.seeconline.org/