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CLE Promising Practices: Using Staff Networks to Build Community Membership

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Promising Practices in Community Life Engagement

Guidepost 2: Promote community membership and contribution

Using staff networks to build community membership at LOQW

By Oliver Lyons

Background

LOQW (Learning Opportunities/Quality Works) is a community skills training, service coordination, and employment services provider in northeast Missouri. LOQW employs over 100 people and serves 14 counties in northeast Missouri and 600 customers annually. Their mission is to “positively impact the lives of individuals through support, advocacy and connection to resources.”

LOQW operates several satellite offices in addition to its main office in Monroe City, MO. One of these satellite offices is located in Hannibal, MO, a city with a population of less than 18,000. For comparison, Busch Stadium in nearby St. Louis can hold over twice that amount of people.

But being located in a small city does have its advantages. One advantage is that a majority of the Hannibal staff has lived there for their entire lives, and they have countless connections in the area. Staff often use their own networks to bring people they support into the community and access services. These relationships also help create many volunteer opportunities that allow individuals to build reciprocal relationships with members of the community.

Implementation

Because Hannibal is such a small city, staff networks are homegrown and relationships have existed for years. As one staff person summarizes it, “... I went to school with basically everybody that works in this office or like Wendy is my friend’s mom... I mean everybody knows everybody.” When seeking opportunities for community

participation, staff access their networks to identify options. And these networks are not just comprised of people who work in social service. They are with a wide array of community members, including teachers, police officers, small business owners, and clergy members.

So though Hannibal may lack the resources of a larger, urban environment such as career training centers and specialized classes, these close relationships allow access to many opportunities that would perhaps not be available to most people. One LOQW staff member provided an example: “[Another staff member] knows people, I know people... [For example,] we have a [person we are serving who] wants to become a teacher’s aide at the Early Childhood Center, so I did an internship there... and I’m actually going to go in with her and talk to the head director of the special education program because that’s who got me an internship, and I’m going to see if she can volunteer there.”

Volunteering is an important aspect of community membership that is encouraged at LOQW. Because Hannibal is such a close-knit town, the community often actively gives back to LOQW. For example, the local YMCA offers LOQW free passes for staff and individuals they serve to use their pool, and the Parks and Recreation Dept. offered to help build and fund a sensory room at the armory for the entire community to use.

Given the generosity of the Hannibal community, individuals served by LOQW are encouraged to reciprocate that relationship by participating in volunteer activities through churches, Meals on Wheels, town government, and self-advocate groups. Volunteering not only helps serve the community, but by consistently showing up to the same places over and over again, the individuals are able to build relationships with people in the community. As LOQW’s director of employment and community services says: “You need to go to the same places all the time. When you go to the same places, you start seeing the same people, and you start building relationships, and it honestly should be that easy. It should be that easy.”

Impact

One staff member explained using their personal network to assist an individual that had no family who had to be removed from her home:

Monday, we got her into a domestic shelter in local Hannibal. But then what was she going to do for her whole day, and she's starting all over and she had no family, no money, nothing. So we found--my kids go to a daycare right down the street from the shelter, and I talked to the director who I've developed a relationship with, and worked out a volunteer job for her because it's right down the street. And then we also found her a free bike off of a mutual friend. So she rode her bike down the street and started volunteering there.

And she wanted to work with children. And we saw that she was really good because we also, on our own free time, were kind of taking her under our wing because, again, we didn't want to leave her in a shelter where she knows absolutely nobody. So I saw on my personal level that she was excellent with kids and I thought, "She'd be great in daycare," and she said she wanted to do that. So she started volunteering there and got to know the staff and the kids and the director. The director told her as long as she did a great job this summer, which she was, that they had two teachers going on maternity leave this fall, and that they'd love to pay her to come in and work as an employee during maternity leave.

Another staff member speaks of the reciprocal community relationships that come from volunteering:

Our nursing homes in Shelbina are great. They loved to have our people volunteer, come out and just help, and then just be included in the activities to the nursing staff and administration level. Our consumers love being able to go out there and help the elderly. So that's a really great place for us...

It started off with we asked if they needed any help setting up Christmas stuff, and they loved the idea. You know, nurses stay so

busy in nursing homes they don't really have time to set up Christmas trees and stuff. So when we offered to come out and help, they were all about it.

And, you know, some of the elderly residents there just loved to sit there and watch them and kind of tell them how they'd like the tree set up and whatnot, and it worked out great. And everything since then, we try to always help them set up Christmas trees. Any big events they have, we go out and try to help with, and, you know, maybe some days just go out and play bingo with them.

Suggestions for Replication

- **Encourage staff to use their own networks and share those networks.** Ask staff to create an inventory of their community connections. Who do they know that could potentially provide a community connection for people with disabilities? Then make those inventories known to all other staff. Even if your organization is in a large city, bringing together your staff's networks can make knowing who to reach out to for services much less daunting.
- **Make sure volunteer opportunities are consistent and allow for socializing.** Do the people you support to volunteer interact with many of the same people every time they volunteer at a

particular location? Do they interact with people without disabilities? Are there opportunities for socializing? Consistent interaction with the same people builds relationships. When considering a volunteer opportunity, think about the potential for relationship building in addition to skill building.

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