



First Central Connecticut  
Regional Forum on Community Inclusion  
Wethersfield, CT - February 3, 2005

*A Sharing of Ideas on  
Community Inclusion  
for People with Disabilities*

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University of  
Connecticut

**A.J. Papanikou Center for Developmental Disabilities**

*A University Center for Excellence in Developmental Disabilities Education, Research and Service*

## Introduction

The Model Communities initiative is part of a Real Choice Systems Change Grant funded by the Centers for Medicare and Medicaid Services (CMS), a division of the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services. The grant was awarded to the Connecticut Department of Social Services in October of 2002, and is being administered by the University of Connecticut A.J. Pappanikou Center for Excellence in Developmental Disabilities Education, Research and Service.

On May 25, 2004 representatives from seven Connecticut towns gathered at the A.J. Pappanikou Center in Farmington to share ideas and experiences related to the inclusion of people with disabilities in the life of their communities. Three of the towns - Bridgeport, Groton and New Haven - were selected in 2003 from a list of twenty towns that submitted applications to receive a grant from the Center. Discussion at this meeting was lively and productive, and the opportunity to meet people from other parts of the state and other municipalities proved fruitful. The idea of adapting the “lessons learned” in the model communities and hosting regional meetings was introduced; a shared enthusiasm for the idea gave rise to a series of Regional Forums, several of which have been held in the Southwestern and Southeastern regions of Connecticut. The meeting on February 3, 2005 was the first Regional Forum for the North Central Region of the state.

Towns at this meeting included New Britain, Coventry, Cheshire, West Hartford, East Hartford, Bloomfield, Newington, Wallingford and, of course, the host town Wethersfield. The towns were represented by officials ranging from First Selectmen, Building Officials and other elected officials to Disability Services Specialists, Directors of Parks & Recreation and ADA Coordinators. A significant number of participants were either individuals with disabilities or family members of people with disabilities, which greatly enhanced the quality of the discussion. All those present shared a desire to

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bring back to their towns ideas for enhancing awareness among community members of the barriers faced by people with disabilities in becoming fully included and integrated into those communities.

The meeting began with introductions and a viewing of the video “Interrobust 2003” filmed at a two day conference held in October of 2003. The “Interrobust” event had been organized to bring together people with a wide variety of disabilities to discuss inclusion opportunities and their feelings of isolation or exclusion within their community. Participants included both individuals who had lived in the community for some time and those who recently transitioned into the community from institutional settings such as nursing facilities. After identifying the major barriers to inclusion, Interrobust participants suggested a number of strategies communities could use to address the problem.

## Discussion: Barriers

The film was a catalyst for positive and productive discussion. A number of significant barriers to inclusion were identified:

- A participant noted that in the course of history, people with disabilities have been perceived in various ways, often with harmful results. For example, in the not too distant past, people who were disabled were seen as not having the same moral values as others - “their moral credentials were lacking.” In some cultures, people with disabilities are seen as having sinned and therefore deserved the condition they were in, or their parents sinned and therefore had a child with a disability.
- Although the 2000 census has revealed that one in five people in the United States has a physical or mental disability, people with disabilities are not as visible as they should be; as one attendee put it: “Where are they?” They’re not coming out!” Another said, “I feel like I’m the only voice speaking out in my town.”

- The media typically portrays people with disabilities from either end of a spectrum, as heroic and extraordinary on the one hand, or as sad and tragic on the other, with no apparent middle ground; the perception, therefore, is that individuals with disabilities are more different from them rather than like them, which is not the case at all.
- “This is a social justice issue,” one participant noted; others added that prejudice, stigma, and bias - typically unconscious - prevent the average citizen from seeing beyond the disability.
- Disability distinctions are often made by age, and not by physical or mental characteristics: while elders may have disabilities, they see themselves as just “old” or “frail.” It is often hard for elders to admit when a disability develops, and difficult for them to accept younger individuals with disabilities in their midst.
- Conflicts often develop in elderly housing projects between younger people with disabilities and elders; one participant reported that a younger person was blamed for a destructive act that was actually done by an elder, and that this was just one example of a type of problem that most of the participants agreed exists in elderly housing projects.
- ADA compliance is often perceived as a burden by municipalities. Requests for accommodation are often met with the attitude of “how much do we have to do,” versus “what can we do to enable you to participate?” As one participant put it, the first question people often have is: “Tell me when I can say ‘no’ to the ADA?”
- Having an ADA coordinator in the town doesn’t automatically mean inclusion is present in the community; the letter of the law may be followed, but the spirit is lacking.

- People with disabilities, and parents of children with disabilities, are either not aware of, or are not assertive about, their rights and needs. For example, while there may be a need in an apartment setting to lower a counter or provide accommodations in the bathroom, owners or landlords have been known to say “why should I make changes, we've never had a problem ” - how do you answer that? If people aren't there asking for the accommodations they need, how do you convince landlords that the need exists?
- There was a clear consensus that transportation is a major barrier to creating opportunities for people to be truly included.
- One municipality reported that a town employee, whose responsibilities included assisting people with disabilities in gaining access to town programs and services, has been laid off, reducing the availability of needed community supports

## Ideas for Action

**Accessibility:** Make sure new developments are not only accessible, but usable as well. ADA compliance is important,, but giving developers feedback on plans before a building is constructed, may result in a higher degree of access with little extra cost (e.g., Blue Back Square in West Hartford): One participant said “ get in on the ground floor, it's really important to get involved from the beginning.” If there is a building plan review board in your town, ensure there is a requirement that someone with ADA knowledge serve. Support efforts to make all elderly disabled housing units accessible or visitable.

**Support Cross-Disability Initiatives:** Audible light buzzers installed for people who are blind or visually impaired make streets and crosswalks safer for everyone.

**Training:** One participant suggested arranging awareness training opportunities for municipal employees to enable them to feel more comfortable with residents with

disabilities, and help them be included; another participant noted that this is a double edged sword. If you have municipal employees assume a disability for a day, the result may be a focus on how difficult it must be to be disabled, rather than an understanding of the barriers that exist in the environment around them

Share ideas with other communities: Several participants described the accommodations that their towns had provided for residents with disabilities:

- one town provides trash collection at the house of residents with disabilities, not requiring them to put their trash at the curb
- another town reported receiving an award for its diligence in ensuring the voting process was accessible to people with disabilities, including the accessibility of its polling places
- another explained how it had made access to fishing areas and the town beach a reality
- one participant reviewed how it used parents of children with disabilities as trainers for town recreation employees who work with children with disabilities
- another town emphasized the training of all staff, not just the “inclusion specialist” in how to support the participation of children with disabilities

Get involved: Go to another town's Commission or Committee meeting to get different ideas. Go to commissions and committees in your own town. Volunteer on town event committees, like a Memorial Day Parade committee. How many outsiders come to Disability Commission meetings? Bring a friend, knock away at the wall!

Visitability: A number of communities throughout the United States have adopted ordinances that require a minimum degree of accessibility in all housing that is newly constructed, including single family homes. Visitability means that one grade level entrance is provided, as well as sufficiently wide hallways and that one bathroom can be entered and used by someone in a wheelchair.

Help people with language: Don't back away from a conversation or issue because you are not sure what to say or how to approach the problem; one participant said "give people permission to fumble a little bit, maybe use the wrong words or make a mistake."

## The Bottom Line

Disability is a natural part of the human condition: helping people realize we are all disabled, or differently-abled, is a long term goal to work toward. After all, what is "normalcy?" It is "normal" for all of us to be different. Inclusion comes with time - "the more we're out there, visible, the more people see you as a human- they're not looking at your wheelchair; they're looking in your eyes." There are so many diverse disabilities- "sew that all together and make one tapestry."

## Handouts

A number of handouts were made available to meeting attendees:

- Copies of local ordinances creating disability commissions or committees from Bridgeport, New Haven, New Britain, and Middletown
- Information about Title II of the Americans with Disabilities Act
- List of various useful internet resources

## Next Steps

Everyone attending agreed that networking, sharing ideas and information with other communities, and learning from each others' successes were valuable reasons to keep the process going. A second meeting was enthusiastically supported, and Newington agreed to host it.