Community Conversations and Transition Systems Change

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Abstract

Within the sphere of transition to integrated employment, systems change impacts all aspects of services and supports from broad-based policies addressing funding and contracting to performance management. Although the policymaking obligations of employment systems change rests with governmental agencies, the actual implementation of policies is dependent on those either delivering the services (e.g., such as teachers, transition specialists, service coordinators, and vocational rehabilitation counselors) or those experiencing services (e.g., individuals with disabilities and their families and businesses). The purpose of the Partnerships in Employment National Transition to Employment Systems Change Project was to address state policies and practices to improve transition to postsecondary education and employment outcomes for youth with intellectual and developmental disabilities. Several states incorporated community conversations as a strategy to build consensus for systems change at the grassroots level. We provide an overview of this work and address the ways community conversations contributed to state policy and practice development. We also offer recommendations for how this approach can be used to inform and spur policy change.

Keywords

systems change, transition, employment

Public sentiment is everything. With public sentiment, nothing can fail; without it nothing can succeed. Consequently, he who molds public sentiment, goes deeper than he who enacts statutes or pronounces decisions.

—Abraham Lincoln

Frameworks for Systems Change

Systems change in the social sector is a fundamental alteration in policies, processes, relationships, and power structures, as well as deeply held values and goals (Gopal & Kania, 2015). Large-scale systems change results in a new field of knowledge, action, tools, strategies, and methods, while small-scale systems change consists of changes to a societal system (Waddell, 2016). At its heart, it is social change that requires commitment across stakeholders and is adopted in policy, infrastructure, attitude, practice, and behavior.

Several frameworks and indicators have emerged from research and analysis into the processes that yield systems change results—each emphasizing the need for fostering support through internal and external coalitions. For example, Gopal and Kania (2015) speak to five "simple rules" for changing systems within large-scale foundations: (a) build on existing trends and momentum in the system, (b) pay greater attention to connections and interdependence, (c) employ rigor after the strategy has been developed, (d) be systematic about measuring systems change, and (e) "be the change" by building internal adaptive capacity. The theme of connections and interdependence is fundamental to systems change. In their description of the Collective Impact approach to social change, Hanleybrown, Kania, and Kramer (2012) emphasize the importance of community leaders abandoning individual agendas in favor of a collective approach and the need for a common agenda. Kotter (1995) highlighted forming a powerful guiding coalition and empowering others.

More specific to employment systems change, Wehman, Kregel, and Shafer (1989) conducted an analysis of emerging trends in one of the first national employment systems change projects, a 1987 Rehabilitation Services Administration initiative involving 27 states. In addition to

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the role of a focused federal initiative, they noted the importance of grassroots consumer and family involvement as a factor that led to supported employment outcomes. Nationally, the promise of the supported employment systems change investment did not lead to realignment of services and state funding. Analysis suggests this is partly because change efforts were focused on delivery of employment supports but not on a cross-stakeholder perspective that affected policy, expectations, and funding (Butterworth et al., 2016; Mank, 1994). Case study research on state intellectual and developmental disabilities (IDD) agencies with higher levels of participation in integrated employment supports this notion (Hall, Butterworth, Winsor, Gilmore, & Metzel, 2007). Successful states had a holistic focus on employment that was present across seven essential system elements: leadership, interagency collaboration, strategic goals, and operating policies, financing and contracting, performance measurement, training and technical assistance, and service innovation. Our systems change projects and consultation with states across the country use this framework to solicit input from stakeholders (e.g., individuals who receive services, family members, employment provider organizations, and state agency personnel) to focus action and establish priorities.

Each of these frameworks recognizes the necessity of building and using coalitions to inform and implement systems change. The reality of making change within large, legacy systems—such as state developmental disability (DD), education, and vocational rehabilitation service systems—steeped in tradition and status quo can be challenging because of the layers of policies developed over time and the bureaucracies embedded within the departments. However, systems are designed by, acted on, and used by people (Kendrick, Jones, Bezanson, & Petty, 2006). For this reason, the people who are most effected by the transformation must be at the very center of the process from beginning to end. This stakeholder involvement will minimize assumptions and erroneous information, tamp down resistance, offer new insights into what needs to be changed from those involved, and build consensus.

Partnerships in Employment Project National Transition Systems Change Project

In 2011, the Administration on Intellectual and Developmental Disabilities (AIDD) in the Administration on Community Living funded state projects to support systems change with an explicit focus on policies, infrastructure, and collaboration across state agencies and other stakeholders. The request for proposals stated that,

> The purpose of this effort is to enhance collaboration across existing State systems, including programs administered by State Developmental Disabilities agencies, State Vocational Rehabilitation agencies, State Educational agencies and other entities to increase competitive employment outcomes for youth and young adults with developmental disabilities, including intellectual disabilities.

Proposal objectives included implementing strategies and best practices to improve employment outcomes for youth and young adults with DDs including intellectual disabilities (IDs) and creating or enhancing statewide collaborations to facilitate the transition process from secondary and post-secondary education, or other prevocational training settings, to competitive integrated employment. States were required to form a consortium that included at a minimum (but not limited to) the state DD, vocational rehabilitation, and education agencies, and to develop a memorandum of understanding prior to application. Six states were funded in 2011 (California, Iowa, Mississippi, Missouri, New York, and Wisconsin) with an additional two added in 2012 (Alaska and Tennessee).

Partnerships in Employment projects realized early on that their effectiveness would be predicated on their ability to generate support from state legislators and state agency leaders who have responsibility for drafting regulations, guidelines, and legislation. However, the enactment of these policies depends on the practices of teachers, principals, support coordinators, transition specialists, along with the support of families, friends, neighbors, businesses, and civic leaders. For education, vocational rehabilitation, and DDs agencies to show performance changes, particularly for youth with intellectual and DDs, changes in community attitude and awareness would be required. State consortia used intentional strategies to engage stakeholders, including using independent facilitators for meetings, coaching self-advocates to be full participants in consortia events, and implementing community conversations as a strategy for informing their work and engaging stakeholders.

Community Conversations

Swedeen, Cooney, Moss, and Carter (2012) define community conversations as

> a way to bring a diverse set of community members together to collectively brainstorm strategies and resources that can be used to address a challenge facing the community . . . In short, it provides a fun and creative way to find local solutions and new partners to address issues that matter most in a community. (p. 4)

Community conversations are a nontraditional approach for systems change and shift the power dynamic from individuals and institutions that tell us what to do and have the authority to do so, to one that gives power to the community as those responsible for turning the policy into a practice. Community conversations reinforce the concept that participants are drivers for change. Those attending have a

vested interest in the issue, and their perspectives are valued. These conversations speak to ideas and alternatives. Participants are encouraged to listen, reflect, and contribute to the discussion without any judgment.

Community conversations evolve from the World Café model (Brown & Isaacs, 2005) in which a group of individuals come together to discuss an area of common interest. Facilitators make sure that every person has the opportunity to respond to a guiding question. After a short period of time, individuals are asked to move to another table where they are introduced to a new group of people and are asked to share what they learned from the conversations at their first table. Since participants are asked to move to different tables, they are able to make acquaintances with people they may not have met before. Cross-fertilization of experiences, recommendations, and resources is likely to occur because the format is structured, yet informal and welcoming. It is egalitarian as no special status is conferred upon any of the participants. Its purpose is to brainstorm practical solutions to a challenge. This process recognizes that there is more than one way to approach a situation. Community conversations are solutions oriented, and typically progress from the guiding questions that frame or explore an issue or priority to questions that ask for solutions. As the conversations deepen, ideas build on one another, and participants come away from these events with more knowledge about an issue, they develop new relationships with others in their community, and they are inspired to take action.

In the domain of disability and employment, individuals may have been told they are too disabled to work, parents may have received the same message, and businesses may believe that it will cost them too much to hire someone with a disability because of accommodations or an incorrect assumption that the person cannot perform required tasks (Butterworth, Christensen, & Flippo, 2017). It is not accurate to assume that all community members are aware of successful employment experiences of people with disabilities. Community conversations offer a platform to become more familiar about all facets of employment from the perspectives of individuals, families, businesses, and allies such as neighbors, friends, and civic leaders. The conversations are personal, factual, and informal.

Partnerships Projects and Community Conversations

While most Partnerships state projects intentionally engaged stakeholders as consortia members and informants, two states (Wisconsin and Tennessee) explicitly incorporated community conversations as a strategy for systems change in their work plan. This approach effectively expanded their work to include hundreds of stakeholders, and so the strategy was adopted by California. The Wisconsin Let's Get to Work Project Director, Beth Swedeen and the Co-Principal Investigator for the TennesseeWorks Project, Erik Carter, previously worked together at the Waisman Center, a University Center for Excellence in Developmental Disabilities at the University of Wisconsin–Madison. They had experience employing community conversations to change perceptions about employment for teenagers with disabilities and developing tactics to build community support for these practices (Trainor, Carter, Swedeen, & Pickett, 2011). Their colleagues' analyses of the process in several Wisconsin communities revealed that these conversations were beneficial to the growth of employment of youth and a promising approach to follow in future initiatives.

The simplicity of a community conversation allows it to be easily adaptable depending on the participants and the objectives of the host. Partnership projects began to recognize that their attention to transition systems change needed to expand beyond involvement with state agencies and into the community (see Bumble, Carter, McMillan, Manikos, & Bethune, 2018; Molfenter et al., 2018; Raynor, Hayward, Semenza, & Stoffmacher, 2018).

Questions and concerns such as family support for employment, business engagement, community life engagement, and transportation are matters that are ripe for a local dialogue. Because the environment for the conversations is one of trust and disclosure, sensitive problems were discussed and alternatives presented. In several of the community conversations conducted, youth with IDs met with employers who immediately expressed interest in hiring the youth. It is this type of connection between people in a short period of time that makes community conversations effective.

Civic and government officials attended community conversations too, which gave them the context of the complete and complex transition to employment process. As an example, the exchange of information during a Wisconsin community conversation helped a state legislator gather ideas for legislation that would encourage employment by giving a monetary incentive to schools with students having a job on exiting high school.

The California Partnerships Project, California Employment Consortium for Youth (CECY), funded seven model demonstration projects located in different regions throughout the state. Sites included school districts, employment service agencies, and high schools. In their funding agreement, the schools and organizations were asked to recruit participants and host one community conversation. There was extensive outreach to the business community, particularly in Glenn County, California, where the unemployment rate for people without disabilities ranged between 9% and 14%. CECY staff believed that community conversations helped entice businesses to support youth employment and begin relationships that could eventually lead to job development and placement. Four hundred eighty community members (60 employers) participated in seven community conversations including youth with ID,

representatives from chambers of commerce, higher education, local businesses, service organizations, civic groups, elected and local officials, religious leaders, and families. These conversations promoted awareness of the demonstration projects, California's Employment First policy, and CECY's goals and objectives.

Wisconsin's Let's Get to Work Project funded nine schools as pilot sites and provided coaching to teachers to negotiate work-based learning practices, such as arranging for work experiences and career counseling. Coaches assisted teachers in mentoring students, helped them solve problems, and assisted them in adding tools and resources within their curriculum that would build student skills and confidence. Each of the nine schools hosted at least one community conversation during the 5-year project period. Participants included youth, family members, employers, and others who could be instrumental in the students' successes. Evaluations were conducted with community conversation participants asking whether they believed that young adults with significant IDD were capable of working. It is noteworthy that several business people attending did not have prior experience working with or hiring individuals with disabilities. The Wisconsin project staff felt that an important factor leading to increased employment outcomes in their pilots was the community engagement that was accelerated by the community conversations in the pilot school communities. At the project's conclusion, 73% of students participating in the school pilot program had at least one paid community job experience. Such experiences are a predictor of postschool employment.

The TennesseeWorks Partnerships Project sought to foster community commitment to employment for youth with ID and respect the aspirations of these youth to be fully engaged in competitive employment. Tennessee used the conversations to gather impressions from a variety of stakeholders while building their trust and commitment to expanding employment opportunities locally. More than 25 community conversations were held over a 4-year period, and hundreds of ideas generated from over 1,500 participants. Project staff organized the ideas into major topics and used these as inputs for policy systems change such as the need for more employment opportunities and strengthening high school transition services. They also created resources in response to the conversations for families and businesses as well as shared success stories about individuals with ID and the businesses who employed them.

Community Conversations as a Catalyst for Systems Change

The central goal of the Partnerships initiative was to establish systems change—sustainable changes in policy or infrastructure that support employment as the priority outcome for youth and young adults, and continue these beyond project funding (Butterworth et al., 2017). At the

conclusion of the first cycle of the Partnerships in Employment Project, staff from the Partnerships in Employment Technical Assistance Center conducted key informant interviews with staff from the eight state projects (Institute for Community Inclusion, 2016). The purpose of these interviews was to pinpoint the activities that led to changes in perception about employment of youth and young adults with ID and the generation of ideas for new policies and practices. Among the key lessons learned from these three state projects are that community conversations dispel myths about employing people with IDs, can be a nonthreatening way to introduce job seekers to businesses, allow participants to fully understand what is meant by competitive integrated employment, build community support around an individual's employment success, and galvanize support for local or state transition and employment practice and policy. The personal experiences shared between stakeholders during these events helped identify unmet needs and innovative ideas for new policy development. Community conversations are effective strategies that inform and invigorate the grassroots, and can lead to developing permanent coalitions that will help shape transition to employment systems change and have influence in assuring that the changes are implemented.

The community conversations also influenced and informed change in policy and infrastructure including high level statements of policy intent such as legislation, regulations, executive orders, and state agency operational policy. But they also changed the way services are defined in state Home and Community Based Services waivers, the braiding of IDD and vocational rehabilitation services, provider qualification standards, funding structure and rates, or inclusion of employment in the annual service plan. Infrastructure changes accomplished by states included interagency managing committees, sustained support for training and technical assistance resources, and the development of employment data systems.

These findings suggest several uses for community conversations in systems change work. First, community conversations support defining both the problem and the goal, assisting stakeholders to use common language and definitions, and to ensure all perspectives are included. Second, a key element of community conversations is brainstorming solutions to identified barriers and challenges. Community conversations in the Partnerships states helped identify specific action steps such as creating a professional development portal in Tennessee. Third, community conversations engage stakeholders and expand the network of advocates for change implementation. The California project reported that attendees were willing to "contribute their skills and resources, as well as identify existing opportunities for employment in their local communities," providing an opportunity to enroll new leaders (Raynor, Hayward, & Rice, 2017). Fourth, community conversations support changing expectations for participants. The Wisconsin project found that participants had

uniformly high expectations for employment outcomes following the events (Molfenter, Neugart, Hartman, & Webb, 2017). Finally, community conversations strengthen local implementation of changing policy and goals.

Conclusion

Accomplishing sustainable systems change requires a holistic approach that engages all stakeholders affected by the issue. Entities involved in systems change will benefit from soliciting community support for the change. Seeking to improve the employment rates of individuals with disabilities will require not only policy change but also changes in awareness and attitudes on the part of families, businesses, and civic leaders. Community conversations offer the opportunity for diverse stakeholders to speak honestly and without judgment, to learn from others, and build support for employment. Ideas gathered from the conversations can be used as recommendations to policymakers to further the change initiative and to justify its implementation.

Declaration of Conflicting Interests

Funding

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