IL-NET, a project of ILRU presents

Disability, Diversity and Intersectionality  
in Centers for Independent Living

August 20, 2019  
Atlanta, Georgia

Creating a Welcoming and Supportive CIL for Diverse Populations  
Presenters: Kim Gibson, Liz Sherwin

KIM GIBSON: So, our segment is ‑‑ I'm Kim Gibson from disABILITY LINK and talking about welcoming environment. We have a bunch of slides and Liz and I kind of do a lot of things similar. One thing that I want to point out, when you're creating a welcoming environment, you want to take a look at other people's perspectives. And so, that's really important when I had talked about how important teamwork is. And putting yourself in those situations. Some activities that we do with our staff to really take a look at are we really welcoming, is to do activities such as using a wheelchair. If you're using a wheelchair, is our environment active, or accessible? Many times, I'll have staff say: Oh, can I put a rug here? I'm like, okay, if you can roll over that with a wheelchair with ease, I'll be more than welcome to let you put that rug there.

Or: Can I move this file cabinet here? And I take the yardstick and say if you can maneuver around here or if you can do it in a wheelchair, so it's really becoming more aware.

I can tell you, we start with our Center, a voice message at the ‑‑ to welcome to the office. So we have a strip mall, as the face front, and my Assistant Director is also blind. You guys met him yesterday, Ken Mitchell. And every day, we would get out of the car and I watched him go to the front door, bumping into the different ‑‑ and trying to figure out where the front door was. And so, me I'm a researcher and I said, what can I do to make our environment accessible? Because obviously it's not. And I went on to Amazon and I went and looked and I thought to myself: There's this Halloween greeter, there's got to be some kind of greeter out there that does the same thing as Halloween does.

Well, for $9.97, I found this voice memo thing that says: Welcome to disABILITY LINK. And so, it's an identifier for individuals with low vision or who are blind to know that this is the front door. But not only that, it welcomes every single person to our door, right off the bat. And we change that voice to different staff members and stuff like that to make it more.

So when you first walk right in our door, right off the bat, we have signage that says: Black Lives Matter, women's rights are human rights, love is love, and trying to create that environment before you even open up the door. And then, once you're in there, we have signage that's reflective of different communities, everything from actors who have different types of disabilities, cross‑disabilities, hidden disabilities, so that when you're walking in the door, you can connect whether you're White, Black, Asian, a wheelchair user, mental health, right at the front door. And we have a greeter at a front door. We have signage that says, we're a scent‑free environment. And we train our front‑desk people to say: Hey, you know, you're wearing perfume. Here's a towelette, go to the bathroom, wipe off. I have to say we have a really funny, big guy that he's funny the way he says things. He's just like: Hey, man, whoo, that cologne is something else and nobody gets offended because it's the way he approaches things.

So, it's really important to talk to your staff and train them on what the expectations are. That way, nobody's left out, but feeling comfortable.

All through our hallways is covered with everything from getting the right to vote. This is what disability looks like, LGBTQIAP. Our bathrooms are neutral, gender‑neutral bathrooms. So, you also have to start thinking about what your environment outside of your office kind of looks like. So, we moved to a new location, and the very first thing we identified was: The street, the sidewalk where MARTA mobility or MARTA transportation, which is the buses here. Public transportation had no curb cuts, no sidewalk. All they had was a sign saying: Here's the bus stop. Good luck. And it crossed over kind of a busy street.

The very first thing I did before we even moved there, was I went to the City of Tucker. And, I always say: Ask first, ask politely. And sometimes you'll get the results. Sometimes you won't and then you have to go back. Luckily, with this, I went to the City, and I said: Look, we're a disability organization that's moving there. However, it's not only about people with disabilities, this is something the City should be looking at anyhow.

I talked about the curb cuts, I talked about the sidewalk. And they said: What would you like to see? I said I would like you to do what you're supposed to do and do the curb cuts and sidewalk, and I know that it's not a requirement for this busy area, but I would love to have a push‑button flashing light there so people will stop, or slow down.

And two days later, they did it all. So sometimes asking politely works. Sometimes not.

At our front door, we also have different things right there. We have the UbiDuo for different language barriers. Let's see. In our main conference room where we post all of our messages, we have an iPod. Now it's not an iPod, because after 5 years, somebody decided to take off with that iPod. But now we have a recorder, MP3 player, which isn't as attractive for people, but the buttons, we have that that everything that's in the case is also read on to there, also in large print, and we have headphones for people to be able to listen to everything that's in there. We have our social media person reads every piece of information he puts in there.

And we don't say: Oh, well, this is so troublesome that we're only going to put one piece of paper there. We put our Board minutes there. We put special events there, all those kinds of things, to ensure that that same information that everybody else is getting, is getting out there.

You know, as a Center for Independent Living, you know large print's available, should be available. One thing that we do do, and we asked around, and we came to a conclusion, based on our vision, that no matter what we do, all of our handbooks, our employee books, all of our forms, our email sent out, is in no less than Verdana 14‑point. We have a computer to make it more inviting -- we have a computer lab that is set up Monday through Friday. People sign in and out to go use it. They have Wi-Fi. They can print. If it's for related goals, but if it's just for printing for the sake of printing, then they have a small fee that they have ‑‑ the individuals have to pay.

And we train individuals on computers. The only thing that they can't do, they can't do ‑‑ access porn on it, right? Other than that, they can access social media, whatever. It's supposed to be an interactive social thing.

Front desk. It’s often hard to justify why am I using a staff member for the front desk. Well, number one, it's information and referral. Great opportunity for information and referral, but we also use volunteers and we also have agreements with other organizations. Like Reyma, I think she said she does the AARP senior program, so we get several individuals for 18 hours using that. We have wonderful volunteers like Rhonda back there that come in and are trained.

We have different levels of volunteers, depending on what their screening level and their experience so we don't throw somebody brand new in there. Some have to get background checks according to what we're having them volunteer at. Very thoughtful, mindful process that we did.

I have to mention that all of our computers for public access have accessibility features and you don't necessarily have to utilize Jaws. There are other programs that are free out there. Just so you know.

Learning experiences, I kind of talked about this yesterday a little bit, but really using your staff members to bring forth different things and different groups so that you can identify where the weakness is, or what gap is being missed. We also ‑‑ I have my degree as an MSW, so our Georgia State University, we have an IMS site supervisor, so we have interns from Georgia State University. So we have them doing studies to see what gaps might be, and reaching out to the communities, and utilizing that to make a welcoming environment, what's missing.

So, it's really important, as you're doing the learning experiences, to make sure that materials are provided in different formats. We do have a request from consumers that if they plan on attending and there's a special accommodation, there's a time frame, and that's really important to know that there's too time frame because when somebody shows up, how do you handle that situation if it's not available?

I'll talk about how we do that in a minute. We use Zoom technology, and it's very cheap. Talk about money. If you go into Zoom room and you look at that and you see the cost as a Center, you'd be like: I can't afford this.

But as an individual single user, it's $14.99 a month and that's what we utilize. So that helps us. And then we do captioning, contact companies to do it off‑site. They don't have to come in, because Zoom technology allows the captioner to do that, so that's very mindful.

And regardless of, we use a microphone at every single event, and that's important because why should someone who has a hearing impairment have to request for a microphone that everybody can use, right? So, if you start thinking about things, making it inviting to all, it also more than likely benefits everyone, not just one person.

And like I said, we really engage with our consumers, our staff, our Board, and our community to really find out: What is their interest? We try really hard to ask that. We ask the consumers when we're doing the intake: Is there anything here that you would like to see happen?

Now, some consumers have been there for a long time, so they're very boisterous about what they would like to see, and some are brand new, and just don't know what they'd like to see.

Peer support classes are often led by Board members. Our Respect Institute, we really don't have much to do with that, except for we support that event to happen at our Center, and it's led by a Board member that happens to be very invested in that project.

We have domestic support groups that happen from a consumer wanting to do that. So truly, we invest in what peer support means. We actually host a certification training, one of the only ones in the United States that does cross‑training. We did a project; we were certified to do that. We go out to other CILs and certify their staff and go through that peer support program for them.

But we use our certified peer supporters in that fashion, but it also brings an awareness to your staff. Individuals who have disabilities, believe it or not, still don't have ‑‑ may have never been in the community for Independent Living. What does that mean? Or how to be a peer supporter, so that really helps in creating that welcoming environment, training your staff. I can't say enough about that.

Every Friday from 11:00 to 12:00, one staff member signs up on the topic of their program, and they talk about how they run or manage that program. And the Board members are invited to listen in, so they can understand what the programs are in the organization, which is a great tool for building your Board to understand what you're doing on a day‑to‑day basis. Because our Board meets quarterly, you know? I'm one of the lucky, quarterly, 2 hours limit, woo hoo! Thank you, Board.

[ Laughter ]

So, it really tunes the Board members in to understanding and your staff.

Using visuals to convey the messages is important for people to see around the office, and identify with the Olmstead Act, right? disABILITY LINK was part of that, and we're proud of that and so we have signage of that.

Using different communication devices like I talked about UbiDuo. We do have on‑demand interpreters for different languages. Some people don't like to use on‑demand interpreters. We have found that with the on‑demand Sign Language, that they have been able to switch to the different person's personality. So we have one consumer who is deaf that came in, and he wasn't quite connecting with the interpreter, and they said: Wait a minute, he utilizes a different type of ASL, even though it's ASL, it's more a learned ASL.

So, they switched to the interpreter and they had a great connection, so that was really great for us. We do utilize when appropriate or when we have time ‑‑ have time and resources to pull in a live interpreter. We try not to use so much of staff, because things are sometimes missed there, but we do have staff who are ‑‑ can do Sign Language.

And we have staff who speak different languages. Languages I can't even pronounce that I don't even know, but we have, like I said, a lot of refugee population, so we have Spanish. We have ‑‑ oh my gosh, I can't even think of some of the names, but individuals who came from Florida, from Haiti, so we have those kinds of different languages when available. Otherwise, we use the language line, and we use interpreter lines.

And then we really take regular self‑assessments, pre‑ and post surveys are very important, online feedback, outcome surveys, really listening to staff and consumers and taking a proactive rather than reactive is important. Okay, an afterthought, an afterthought is I should be diverse. What should I do? It's great to think about ahead of time, and then adjusting to what works and making the changes.

So maybe the youth group wasn't working well on Wednesday night. What do we need to do to change? Do we need to even change the location? I had somebody call me and say: You know, IL Centers should just move to being a community Center. I said, that's not what IL Centers are for.

Well, because we need to draw youth to our Center. Well, that's not necessarily true. We want to provide the same core services, and it does not necessarily mean that they're going to come to a senior service center and sit there and hang out, because it may not be that connection there. It may be a connection out in the community somewhere, bowling or whatever.

Our volunteer program, the volunteers meet up once a week on Wednesdays to go bowling. That's their extracurricular activity that they do together. So, thinking outside the box.

Just quickly, reaching out to the community and being part of it. MLK Parade, you would think, what group really started that? Well, again, disABILITY LINK was an integral part of actually starting that because they said: Hey, you know, Civil Rights are everybody's rights, right? Disability Rights are Civil Rights. And so being part of that and starting that and we're part of the Pride Parade. We collaborate with different groups, Black Lives Matter, NAACP, Latino, Korean, Muslim, Jewish, the LGBTQIAP. We reach out to the community using support groups, VR, Senior citizens, churches, international days, and health fairs. I'm sure, especially if you're from the rural part, that's probably the primary area that you're hitting those health fairs, transition fairs. And we use partnerships for meeting spaces. So, our 12 counties, you can't be everywhere. We only have one location, so we ask for meeting spaces at different places. Our summer program next year, we're going to be hosting it in a different County at a different location free of charge. So really using meeting spaces. In case I didn't mention, Zoom technology, all of our classes are open to anybody to come in, so even if they live in Idaho, they can call in and view our workshop that we're having for LEAPS, which is Locating Employment Avenues Through Peer Support.

Okay.

My time is also up. So, we do make sure that we use a sign‑in sheet that lists that the Zoom technology is being used and video, and we state this at the beginning of the classes. And one thing that we do do is for certain groups, the LGBTQIAP, the youth groups, everybody has to identify who they are there, if they're on the Zoom, and we'll boot them off if they don't. Because you want to create that safety space, that safe space, and we do have cameras throughout the office for safety, for being able to create that safe space.

I talked about on‑demand and all the staff are trained on all of the different devices, and we encourage our staff to attend other people's workshops, to learn how to do assistive technology, or maybe there's computer classes, so that's how we provide training to the staff.

Okay, and then when ‑‑ I'm going to rush, I'm sorry, Liz. When we're looking at hiring staff, we're looking at hiring staff reflective of the community that is qualified, okay. And the same process for the Board reflective of the community. One important aspect for our Board is we provide a Board training before they can even apply to be on the Board, which has helped understand what being a Board member is, so those Board members that did not have that opportunity before they came on the Board and they're like I didn't know what being on a Board is and now I'm just now learning and now I'm about ready to roll off? We try to do that. And I talked about the weekly staff meetings.

And we definitely provide cultural diversity trainings and what's really cool is we let our staff lead the trainings. So staff are assigned to areas of their expertise saying hey, you're on, this is your presentation for the staff meeting, and that really helps. It also helps staff take ownership of their own programs.

I think that developing a strategic plan, we kind of talked about yesterday. Well, I did talk about that and bringing forth and that's it. I hope I didn't rush too much. But little time. I'll turn it over to Liz.

[ Applause ]

LIZ SHERWIN: Good morning, everyone.

AUDIENCE: Good morning!

LIZ SHERWIN: I don't feel the love.

AUDIENCE: Good morning.

LIZ SHERWIN: Since I dated myself earlier, I told you I was 70‑plus, I'm going to take senior privilege, and I'm going to sit and I'm going to let Kim assist in terms of the technology.

[ Laughter ]

And I agree with all the things she said in terms of making your office accessible, but I'm probably in a different space than many of you guys in terms of your office, because my staff and myself were able to design our own office based on what we felt the needs of our consumers were, and the needs of the staff. We got, like, $1.5 million to build a new building, because I had cursed the City Council and they were afraid of me.

AUDIENCE: Good, good!

[ Laughter ]

LIZ SHERWIN: Anyway, they gave us this money so we were able to sit down and look at what we really needed in office space and how we wanted to design it to make sure that it was fully accessible, and we were able to do that which is fortunate and we thank the City of Rock Island for that. So, the offices are accessible. We have a library that's a computer lab where people from the community can come in and use computers. We have a fully accessible library with Jaws and all the technology. We have Braillers, you name it. We have all those types of things at our office.

And so, we're fortunate, and we looked at, you know, making the spaces welcoming. We have all sorts of art on the walls that depict different ethnicities and that sort of thing, and so we are fortunate in that way, but we have been other places that didn't look like that, so we gnaw what we wanted in terms of our space and we were able to design it ourselves.

But what we're moving now is I'm going to talk briefly about, because we have an exercise that we're doing, and I think it's probably more important than me running on forever about, you know, different aspects of serving people in rural communities. When I came to the Center about 30 years ago, I had no idea what a Center for Independent Living was. How many of us knew what a Center was when we came to a Center?

Probably very few of us. So anyway, the lady that hired me, she was rambling on about it was a place where people with disabilities worked. We helped people with disabilities and so on and so forth. But she wanted me to be the outreach person that went out into the communities and served people. And she was rambling on about these strange counties that we had been approved to serve.

We had three counties in Illinois, and three in Iowa and outside of the metropolitan area where our County ‑‑ where our Center is located, which is around 400,000 people -- were these rural counties with farms and soybeans and corn and pigs and cows. So, anyway she was rambling on about, she wanted me to go out there and do outreach to these places and let them know about the services of the Center.

And I was concerned, because obviously this woman was blind, because she didn't know that I was an African American. So finally, during the interview, I did this in front of her. And she says, why are you doing that? I said, I assumed that you were blind.

She says why did you think that? I said, because you want an African American to go out to Klan country and talk about your services and programs?

And she said Liz, is the Klan out there? I said, how the hell would I know?

[ Laughter ]

So anyway, that began our relationship. So, the issue was, I mean, I had worked on a Congressional staff, so at least I understood about Illinois and their issues in rural areas, but I had no concept of Iowa.

So anyway, I said, well, why do you think that I can do this? How can I accomplish this? The Center was just 6 months old. She says: Because I don't think you take yourself too seriously, and you don't take other people too seriously either, you have a sense of humor, and I think that will go over well with anyone.

I said: Well, okay, if that's my qualifications, I fit those. So anyway, I was hired, and one of the things when I found, I started working in these rural communities, some of the issues were quite the same as in the urban communities, but some of them were quite different. I found that there were far more people with disabilities especially in some of the farming communities, because they had had issues with accidents and so forth and so on.

And also, there is the infrastructure in terms of health care, transportation, and a lot of those things were nonexistent, so my charge was: How do you work within these communities, with the barriers that are already there, to ensure that you bring information about Independent Living, Independent Living philosophy, and that sort of thing, to these people. In fact, many of them had no concept of the IL philosophy, as I did when I started working for the Center. And I think most of us, if we started in Centers, we know nothing about IL philosophy. These are things that we learn later on.

So, going into these communities and developing a trust with these people was probably one of the major issues of going out and then of course, the barrier of my color, because there was nobody there that looked like me. So I remember one experience, I was told, because I had worked on the Congressional staff in the 17th Congressional District of Illinois, and a lot of that is rural, so I was told in one of the counties that there was a woman there that managed all services for the poor and disreputable people. I'm like what in the world is that? So, I was told that this was ‑‑ well, back then, even now I think they don't accept United Way. They call it Community Chest. How many remember Community Chest? So, you guys are dating your ages.

So anyway, they said that there have been instances where service providers have gone to that County to assist people, and if they get on this woman's wrong side, they can't come back.

[ Laughter ]

I was like, they can't come back? They said, no. If you piss her off, you're done. You're not going to be doing any services in that County.

So anyway, I found out who she was, and I went to visit her. So, she gave me a lecture on how to deal with these undesirables in the County because they've always got their hands out for the dole. They're never going to be anybody. They're useless, they're just a dredge on society. And we're not talking about African Americans. We're talking about poor White people.

So anyway, I talked to her, I explained about what we wanted to do with people with disabilities, and how we wanted to reach them and support them, because there was limited access to health care, and just all kinds of things in the community. So eventually, she gave me a pass, and my pass was: Liz, you have a good heart, which was great with me. So finally, the first time I went out to one of the counties it was Keithsburg. It’s right on one of the little rivers and there was a family there. The woman was newly disabled. She was in a wheelchair and she needed a ramp for her home, so I was like, you know, is there anything in this town? Is there anyone that can build ramps? Do you have any resources?

No.

So of course, I had to go back to my mentor, the disreputable people, her definition. So, I went back to her and I told her, I said, well, I found a family in Keithsburg. The mother is disabled, and she needs a ramp. I was wondering – I know you control Community Chest, Veterans assistance, the township and all of this. Is there anything that you could do for the family? She said oh, sure, we have money. I control all of that.

She said who would be this family? So, I gave her the name. She said: Oh, Liz, I told you, those people are disreputable. You can't serve them. They're on the dole, they've been on the dole for the last 100 years in the County. I said yeah, I understand, but this is a person with a disability, and our agency is here. As you know when I came out and talked to you, you said that you were willing to help people with disabilities if you controlled any of the resources.

And so, I listened to her for a while. She gave me the money, and each time that I needed specific services, she never turned me down; but of course, I had to listen to her lecture if I wanted the money.

[ Laughter ]

So those are the types of relationships that you have to develop in rural communities in order to even provide services.

On the Iowa side, it was a little bit different.

[ Laughter ]

We had people that we were serving in some of those counties, like Muscatine and Clinton, those are the most rural in Iowa, so actually, in some instances, there were actually no infrastructure there to support and help these people, so we reached out to organizations in those communities that already existed, and kind of that was our pathway into reaching and serving consumers in those communities.

And in order to identify consumers in those communities, a lot of times if they had business bureaus or Chambers of Commerce or whatever the infrastructure is, and it depends on the community, because most always there are community action Agencies or various other Agencies in those communities that have some form of support for those communities, because most of them do not have formal structures, like, a lot of them may not have a hospital in their community. Therefore, you have to work with whatever the infrastructure is in order to be able to serve those people.

And in Iowa, we had a lot of times it's our staff that are issues. We had a staff person that actually went out ‑‑ I can't say that he was in a situation where he actually was doing things wrong, or doing things that impacted people in a negative way ‑‑ but he actually would go out to these communities and promise people a lot of things, and he did not fulfill those obligations. Therefore, once the staff person left, it was very difficult for us to go back into those communities and work, because we had developed a reputation that way. So, it was very difficult for us to mend those fences and that sort of thing.

So what we're going to talk about today, hopefully in our session, and most of the information is in your notebooks, or your curriculum here, we're going to talk about how we can identify people in those communities, what are ways that as an organization we can create plans to work with those people, how if certain plans don't work, how we can go back and regroup ourselves and do things, because at our agency, we work in what we call teams. So, nothing is ever etched in stone. On a day's notice or an hour's notice, we can revamp how we're doing things if we find out that they are not doing things, and that we're not getting the successes that we want.

And we continually get feedback from the consumers and the community, and our organization has not always been a stellar organization. In fact, prior to my being Director, we had hundreds of people coming in and tell us what we looked like, and it wasn't a pretty sight. One legislator in Iowa told me, he said: I had a different impression of Centers. My impression was that it was a bunch of people with disabilities that didn't know anything, and it was just a way for them to get a job.

So, you know, so what we're talking about here is the attitude. And I think that's worse than many things. And a lot of providing services in communities, not only in rural areas, it’s everywhere, is the idea and the perception of who people with disabilities are, and what they can do. So, a lot of it is addressing those issues.

And what we're going to try to do with our breakout sessions is have discussions about how we can reach out to those communities and work in those communities based on the needs of those communities, and we do a lot of things, and I think we're able to accomplish a lot. Because when people look at my staff, they're part of the community, I'm part of the community.

Right now, to serve 6 counties in any place is quite a bit, but we serve very rural communities, and one of the things we have to make sure we have resources to get to those places, because a lot of them don't have transportation options. We have to look at who we're sending out and who is working in those areas.

I have 10 staff. 2 of them mainly are office. The other 8 of us are out in the community. And they are people of color. We have Latino people on staff, so we have a very, very diverse staff, and it came by the fact that we reach out and we are part of the community, and when people see us, they know we are their community. Thank you.

[ Applause ]