

A Guide to Knowing Your Community

Every Neighbourhood has a network of social Relationships

Introduction

While most of us would agree that people with disabilities should be “integrated into the community”, we do not have a clear understanding of what “community” means. Too often, the term “community” is associated with non-institutional facilities and human service agencies. How often have you heard that people are “in the community,” when, in fact, they are lonely and cut off from other people?

Purpose

The purpose of this guide is to help increase your understanding of what community means and, specifically, to help you look at your own community – the places, associations, and activities in which community members participate. This guide is not intended to tell you how to connect people with disabilities to the community. In fact, we do not believe that connecting people to the community is a simple step-by-step matter. The guide is intended to help you see aspects of the community – hidden resources – you might otherwise overlook. Our assumption is that the better you know the community, the easier it will be to help someone become involved in that community.

Groundrules

There are four groundrules for using this guide.

1. Look beyond the “human service community,” facilities and agencies serving disabled or devalued groups. For the purpose of this guide, these do not count as community.
2. Put people with disabilities out of your mind when using this guide. People often get stuck when they attempt to look at the community with disabilities in mind. One tendency is to think up all of the reasons why someone could not participate somewhere rather than trying to understand a setting or activity in the first place.
3. This guide works best when you use it to look at your own community. The more involved you are in your community, the easier it will be to use the guide.
4. Use this guide as a starting point for knowing your community. Try to come up with your own strategies and approaches. Let us know about them.

Knowing your Community Neighbourhoods

Neighbourhoods, or geographical communities, vary tremendously from each other. Some are tightly-knit and have a strong “we-feeling.” People living there know or at least know of each other and share things in common. Others, of course, are more anonymous and may even be characterized by conflict. Yet, every neighbourhood has a network of social relationships.

1. Select a specific neighbourhood or community
2. Identify the approximate boundaries. Use a map or draw one.
3. Note: some neighbourhoods have a clear identity and boundaries, while others do not. A long-time resident of a neighbourhood may be able to help you draw boundaries.
4. Take a driving or walking tour of the neighbourhood. Identify the “places” in a neighbourhood: the variation in housing, stores, restaurants, bars, schools, libraries, parks, laundromats, organizations, churches, and or synagogues.
5. Observe the neighbourhood at different times of the day (for example, early morning, after-school, early evening), weekdays and weekends, and (over time of course) different times of year.
6. Talk to some long-time members of the neighbourhood. Ask them about the places: who spends time where and what do they do?
7. Draw a “social map” of the neighbourhood (a map indicating places and people). What does on where? Who uses what places? When?
8. Visit different places in the neighbourhood. How do people interact with one another (if at all)? What do people do? Do people seem to know each other? (Does the shop keeper know the shoppers?)
9. Talk to some people in the neighbourhood, both newcomers and long-time residents. Ask them whom they know in the neighbourhood and how they met them. Ask them about groups and associations in the neighbourhood they are involved with.

Organizations and Associations

Every community has a large number of groups, organizations, and associations. Some are formal, with strict criteria for membership. Others are informal and loosely organized.

Find an almanac and skim the section on societies and/or associations (most almanacs list major national groups). Which might be active in your community? Do they seem to have a strict or loose criterion for membership?

Select one or a few schools, community colleges, churches, libraries, and organizations like the YMCA and YWCA. Find out about groups sponsored by these organizations (for example, many schools sponsor adult recreational groups; churches usually sponsor many activities and groups).

Organizations and Associations....cont'd.....

Talk to a range of people, including young people and older people, long-term residents and newcomers, about the groups and associations to which they belong.

Ask about (for example):

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| √ Church groups | √ Political groups |
| √ Art clubs | √ Musical groups (choirs) |
| √ Women's centres and groups | √ Union or work societies |
| √ Sports teams and leagues | √ Collector's groups |
| √ Community Associations | √ Youth Groups |
| √ Film Societies | √ Membership at recreational centres |

Find out about membership in these groups:

- ✓ What are the criteria for membership?
- ✓ How does someone join?

Ask what the groups are like:

- ✓ Who are the key members of the group (formal or informal leaders)?
- ✓ How do different people participate in the groups?
- ✓ Are the groups tightly-knit or do members come and go?

Activities

Every community has nearly a limitless range of activities. While it would not be worthwhile to try to identify all of the activities people are involved in with any community, find out about recurring activities in which people meet and get to know each other. Many of these will be associated with neighbourhood activities or specific organizations and associations.

Look for activities in your neighbourhood or community paper. Examples include pancake breakfasts and barbeques sponsored by local civic organizations, volunteer fire departments and churches. Visit some of these. Do people seem to know each other?

Activities...cont'd...

Talk to a number of people – for example, friends, acquaintances, co-workers – about how they spend their free time. Where do they go and with whom? Ask them about activities in which they know other people.

Talk to a number of newcomers and long term residents of a community about where they buy gas, go out to eat or for coffee, grocery shop and shop for other things. Ask them about places they are recognized by the owners or proprietors or other customers.

Conclusion

After you have completed this guide, you can begin to think about how people with developmental disabilities can become part of neighbourhoods, organizations, associations and community activities. Think in terms of specific people and look for places, associations, and activities in which people know each other. Finally, keep in mind that becoming part of the community takes time.

A “*Guide to Knowing your Community*” was created by the Centre on Human Policy, Syracuse University.