IS OUR ORGANIZATION PERSON/FAMILY CENTERED AND COMMUNITY-BASED?

What to look for when gauging the quality of a service delivery center

Many government agencies and local social service providers are beginning to move toward adoption of principles and practices which encourage family and person-centered services and the use of informal community resources in organizing supports around people in communities who, in the past, have received only formal services from agencies. So what does it mean to be a community based organization? We have noticed that organizations which are grounded in these practices share the following characteristics:

•**Employees of the organization recognize that the primary underlying task of their work is to look for and create opportunities for people to belong in a wide variety of community places and relationships.**

Regardless of what "service" the organization is offering (ie. counseling, educational support, living skills , job training, food distribution, or public assistance), employees recognize that building relationships is the primary underlying task in all planning and interactions. They understand that service systems exist primarily because the people using the supports lack the network of relationships and associations that most other community members have, and that it is unlikely any substantial long-term change will occur in an individuals life unless careful attention and effort is focused on the individual expanding their network of friends and informal relationships.

•**The primary quality gauges are service-user standards, not compliance systems set up by regulatory agencies.**

Success is gauged by going back to individuals who are using the services and carefully measuring the success of the organizations in supporting movement towards the specific future which was identified by the individual and/or family. Measurements of success are directly connected to the persons expanded abilities to do two primary things: learn new skills and participate locally. The organizations spend little time measuring success in terms of group movements or percentages, or the compliance standards set up by funding and/or regulatory agencies.

•**The organization acts in a way that backs up or builds the strengths of existing community resources.....it never replaces them.**

Prior to the organization performing <u>any</u> activity on behalf of an individual, they are certain that there are no options which exist or <u>which can be created</u>, either in the persons network and connections or in the informal life of the community. Employees tend to have broad knowledge about the informal community resources available, and share this information back and forth with other employees who are brainstorming possibilities with other people using services.

•**The organization functions in ways that give dignity and status to everyone involved.**

In addition to having fully embraced the mandate to treat persons using services with dignity and respect, the organization has also looked within itself and considered how it treats employees. Movement in this direction is gauged by asking employees whether or not they are encouraged to speak out, take risks, and are encouraged to increase their decision making responsibility.

•The organization actively promotes individual choices.

The processes that the organization uses maximize the opportunities for people using services and the people working in the organization to be able to create and choose between options. There is no set menu of choices or services. These organizations structure their processes so that employees are encouraged to exercise considerable personal creativity in supporting service users choices. They have learned that creating opportunities for choice and creativity significantly decreases burnout and stagnancy in employees, and increases the willingness of customers to engage in real change.

•The actions of the organization directly increase the opportunities for individuals to participate in their community.

No activity takes place in the workplace which can take place in a local community setting. They find very few, if any, activities which need the confidentiality or privacy of a social service setting. It is common to call these organizations and find no-one in the office......they are all out working in the community. This is because they have recognized that in order to do community work, you actually have to be in the community nurturing opportunities for informal supports.

•The organization promotes individual growth.

There is a recognition that the function of the organization is to nurture growth in everyone who is participating, including staff, users of services, and other participants in the individuals life. They have found ways to provide incentives for support persons to nurture growth in users of services and themselves. Direct service employees indicate they believe the organization is actively rising up against rules which make if difficult to do what makes sense in a given situation.

•Has a physical presence, if one is necessary, at a scale that fits the neighborhood and welcomes all community members.

The physical characteristics of the building are similar to other buildings in the neighborhood, and presents itself in a way that encourages local citizens to drop in and see what's up. Many groups are now moving toward renting small houses or neighborhood storefronts, or housing themselves with other community groups in informal settings, thereby creating the image that people who use these supports are part of the neighborhood.

•Has a carefully defined and structured system for determining individual choices and supports, and has a clearly understood systemic capacity to follow through in working towards their contribution to that individuals life.

The organization has a documented planning process for determining individuals capacities and choices, which also carefully details all of the known opportunities for moving towards a desirable future. The organization has clear directives which allow staff persons the time flexibility and task flexibility to do whatever it takes to support a person or family. They work against the tendency of organizations who create detailed plans around an individual, but then often do not have the organizational ability to make the contributions necessary to move in a desired direction.

•The organization views itself as a learning organization, rather than a service delivery mechanism.

Organizations who embrace these values and intentions tend to grow and change at a rate that puts them in a constant state of intensive learning. They often do not engage in structured long-range planning processes, but rely on regular meetings and informal conversations between employees, people using supports, and other community members to work towards agreement on directions and to discover common learning. It is also common for these organizations to place great importance on having regular conversations with other groups who share these rapid-learning dynamics. They spend time watching and learning from other non-social service community groups.