
Professional Helping Organizations: Why focus on welcoming?

During the last few years, diversity advocates and professional helpers of all kinds have found themselves at a major crossroads. We are calling this critical new stage “creating general welcoming capacity”. While working alongside and on behalf of citizens who have traditionally not had as much access to places and activities as most other citizens, we have come up against the reality that many times, frankly, it’s not the person who is the genuine “issue.” Many of our community places including schools, workplaces, associations, stores, and neighborhoods can be unwelcoming, even to the citizens who are already part of the group. Because of this, we recognize that we often have to work with a group to create a hospitable and welcoming environment for all current group members before we can focus on bringing in new citizens. We have repeatedly seen that members of a group who do not feel welcome or valued will not reach out and welcome any new person, disenfranchised or not. This understanding has made it impossible to separate out the task of creating welcoming places from other important goals such as housing and employment.

There are four reasons why we believe an increased focus on “welcoming” is critical to our learning and action. First, a person asking for help while in the midst of a difficult life situation often feels excluded, devalued, and not worthy of the love of others. Creating welcoming places is a vital step in being sure that all citizens experience the feeling of belonging, worthiness, and inclusion. Second, the need to feel welcome is important to all of us—disenfranchised or not. If we show courage and honesty in talking about our own experiences, it will bind us together and help create powerful opportunities for people being helped, helpers, and the surrounding community. Third, ideas and practices relating to welcoming have mostly been lost or reduced to insignificant gestures in the predominant customs and practices of our country today. Our learning will produce vantage points that will help us see the pathways to rebuilding community life. And fourth, learning about welcoming will directly impact our ability to support community members in finding jobs, places to live, and building relationships.

“Long ago, in the village, a person was welcomed in the womb, welcomed coming out of the womb, and again re-welcomed at each new stage of life. It was said then, and still spoken by some today, that if we do not receive these welcomes there is a part of us that always feels exiled. A part of us is homeless and looking for the fullness that comes from being seen. Some of us who have been more severely pushed aside and left out because of the current condition of our lives feel this lack of welcoming more intensely. These citizens can be seen as messengers—informing us about the welcoming nature of our community.”

A focus on welcoming requires professional helpers to widen their scope of work by beginning to utilize a language and skill base that is often not a part of their professional training. This includes increasing community organizing skills, developing and using powerful personal stories of both belonging and not belonging, aligning ourselves with other marginalized groups, honing our skills of helping individuals identify and give their gifts and increasing the ability of a broader range of groups to acknowledge and utilize those gifts, encouraging and facilitating productive conflict, and supporting individual and group healing processes.