

Region 10 Quality Council Community Conversations Report of Findings and Recommendation

2021 COMMUNITY CONVERSATIONS REPORT

Background

Region 10 Quality Council implemented its second series of community conversations on the topic of natural supports in 2021 with the intent of generating both awareness and deeper understanding of public perceptions of individuals with disabilities. Data gathered from the process will provide context for the work of the Council in improving service delivery to individuals with disabilities and developing an advocacy agenda.

The Council held five of eight planned community conversations beginning in January 2021. Attendance ranged from 12 to 27, with 87 participants in total. Three of the conversations took place in Olmsted County with service organizations based in Rochester and Byron. A fourth was held in the town of Spring Valley in Fillmore County. The fifth, a conversation in Wabasha County, was the second with the Rotary Club there and a follow-up to a 2019 dialog. Unlike previous efforts, the audiences engaged were not immediately associated with the disability community. Participants were predominantly over the age of 55 and white.

Occurring as they did during the COVID-19 pandemic, the conversations were nuanced by participants' personal experiences with social isolation and delimited access. This context was intentionally woven into the dialogs as a way to facilitate discussion and build empathy. All of the conversations were held virtually, which most likely affected attendance and impacted engagement levels.

Methodology

This second series of conversations was developed to extend information gathering beyond the disability realm and into general society. Like the initial Wabasha conversation, the initiative shifted from convening random participants to aligning with affinity groups already gathering. This shift provided for greater group synergy and trust.

All individual responses were encoded by two separate data analysts, with disparities resolved through discussion. Each record was also marked by conversation date, providing the opportunity to cross tabulate data with consideration of geographic location. The sample is not large, but the conversations produced insights into public perceptions while providing an opportunity to increase awareness of disability support issues.

Again with this series, the focus was on quality of life and opportunities for engagement and participation facilitated through organic interventions. Analysts looked particularly for statements acknowledging quality issues.

Slate of Questions

Region 10 Quality Council Community Conversations

Report of Findings and Recommendation

What brings people into communities?

What keeps people as part of community?

What separates people from communities they are a part of?

Do you think that is the same for people with disabilities?

What We Learned

QUESTION 1: What brings people into communities?

At the outset of each conversation, with the first question as context, participants focused primarily on attributes of community such as activities or services as significant to them. There was consensus around the importance of communal provisions, like schools and public spaces, as well as personal factors like jobs. As in the first series of conversations, dialog progressed to include qualities like shared values and sense of belonging. Focus on the provision of material or transactional benefits versus abstract values was greater in the second conversation series. **61 percent** of responses to Question 1 described tangible **attributes** with **39 percent** defining **qualities**. Some prompting was necessary to shift focus to abstract values.

QUESTION 2: What keeps people as part of community?

As conversations moved into thoughts about sustaining oneself in community, participants contributed abstract ideas more readily. **71 percent** of responses featured **qualities** rather than attributes. There was an underlying tenor of assimilation in both quality and attribute statements. Existing attitudes and activities were mentioned frequently with limited sense of learning about what is needed versus accessing what exists. This is reflected in responses like “reinforce values that are important to people” and “when I moved to town, I had to start to meet new people to see how I fit in.” As with dialog on Question 1, it took longer to illicit more inclusive approaches - things that are done with rather than for or to others. There is a consistent perception that the onus for belonging falls more heavily on the individual than the community.

It was also apparent that for many participants these were new considerations.

QUESTION 3: What separates people from communities they are a part of?

In direct contrast to perceptions of how one joins or remains in community, responses to the separation question were largely quality oriented – what people feel and experience. **63 percent** were **abstract** versus transactional.

Participants noted not only their own feelings, but attitudinal barriers that exist in communities and groups. Invisibility, prejudice, fear, mistrust were mentioned frequently. By this point in the conversations more projection was evident. Perhaps because of the social context of the pandemic, people appeared to more fully recognize the importance of social connectivity for everyone. The number of comments that represented the viewpoints of others was 33 percent higher than earlier in discussion.

Region 10 Quality Council Community Conversations

Report of Findings and Recommendation

QUESTION 4: Do you think that is the same for people with disabilities?

There was a great deal of empathy indicated in responses to Question 4, building on that tendency as exhibited in the previous segment. **Four out of every five statements were value based.** This demonstrated that a burgeoning understanding of the need for natural supports exists, as tangible attributes fell to just 21 percent of responses.

Without diminishing the importance of the service efforts of these organizations, participants appear to perceive the inadequacy of their outreach efforts. The several comments about invitation show insight and concern and reflect true commitment to a service orientation. Reflecting on the progression of the dialogs, an increased awareness of the core issues is clearly visible, meeting the objectives of the Quality Council's Community Conversation initiative.

What We Recommend

In reviewing the data collected through this process, analysts noted that there is willingness among participants to think about and act on inclusivity ideas. The confluence of the pandemic and social upheaval appears to have increased receptiveness among group members. Aligned with ongoing struggles around organizational sustainability, this presents an opportunity to compel further dialog and learning with civic groups.

Based on these data it is possible to help organizations like the five that participated begin to see their work and their communities from a different vantage point. When the idea of inclusion shifts from one of "passively inviting in" to "actively seeking out," the benefits are three-fold:

1. service organizations begin to address their persistent attrition and attraction issues;
2. opportunities to participate increase for individuals with disabilities and others with diverse identities; and
3. service organization members begin to foster relationships and friendships that translate into stronger natural supports, the true goal of this initiative.

It is necessary for members of established service organizations to identify, acknowledge, and address the organizational norms (structures, practices, attitudes) that result in tangible and intangible rewards for specific people exclusively. Established organizational and community cultures are Euro-American, middle class, and full-ability centric by default. It takes intention and commitment to see and solve for this centrality.

As one participant stated, "Rotary looks at businesspeople and retired people for membership and hadn't thought to include people with disabilities." There are two levels of disenfranchisement reflected in this statement: 1) the organization's current outreach practices are not intentionally inclusive of people with disabilities; and 2) awareness of the complexity and intersectionality of human identity is missing (a person with a disability may also be a professional or retired). Facilitating a paradigm shift would mean creating universal and authentic invitation into networks that have been redesigned to be inclusive and responsive.

Region 10 Quality Council Community Conversations Report of Findings and Recommendation

Region 10 Quality Council is charged with developing a tool kit for organizations to use to begin to transform themselves and the communities they exist within. These tools exist and can be compiled and shared by the Council. Sources are available through the Commitment to Racial Justice group and others. Following up on this request is critical to continuing the conversation and building relationships.

Finally, these groups, others similar to them, and broader community would benefit greatly from hearing directly from individuals with disabilities and their families about exclusion. Building on previous efforts and considering additional ways to amplify these voices could be significant going forward.

For additional information on this report, please address questions or remarks to:

Diversity Council
1130 ½ 7th Street NW, #204
Rochester MN 55901
507.282.9951
info@diversitycouncil.org