

Investing in People

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Understanding Individualized Support: The Power of Independent Planning and Facilitation

For the last thirty years, agency driven services have been the main way that supports have been provided to citizens with disabilities. Although many people have benefited from agency programs and services, it is becoming clear in research and practice that many other people fail to benefit from this approach.

There is growing understanding that agency programs and services are very limited as the *only* form of community supports. Most families and people with disabilities know the criticisms first hand – too much compliance, limited opportunities for supports to be truly individualized and even greater frustration when supports must be accessed from more than one agency at the same time!

To insure that supports are individualized, options must be provided that enable individuals and families to have genuine choice and control over the supports they require. Supports that are individualized do *not* begin with a menu of programs. Rather, individualized supports begin with the person's dreams, strengths, and personal goals. They also involve family, friends and the wider community. They may include new arrangements or partnerships. They may also involve paid supports that are designed to assist the person in meeting their goals.

To develop supports that are truly individualized requires planning. Agencies have typically done lots of service planning,

but here we are talking about something quite different!

Individualized planning has various names, such as person-centred planning or lifestyle planning. I prefer "person-directed planning," a term coined by Richard Ruston, past president of Ontario People First. Person-directed planning means the person and their significant others determine what they want and need. I have found that this kind of planning is an intimate process that fully engages people in figuring out a meaningful life. This is not a simple process.

Because the planning of individualized supports can be challenging, research is showing that planning and facilitation need to be independent of service provision. Independent planning and facilitation enable families and individuals to take time to examine possibilities for genuine community participation. Independent planning and facilitation focuses on a range of options and opportunities, not just agency services. If formal supports are required, independent facilitators provide an array of information about community supports.

Some agencies argue that their staff can provide such planning. But, unless agencies make an intentional effort to separate the planning process for individuals from their formal services, such planning will simply emphasize service planning, not person-directed planning.

In order to understand why there is power in independent planning and facilitation, let us look at the role of facilitation in this new way of providing support. These insights come from personal experience as well as from other facilitators with whom I have worked.

First, facilitators listen deeply. They try to really understand the person. Many facilitators report that families appreciate the time taken to understand the person's strengths, interests, dreams, and capacities. Second, facilitators focus on building capacity, not just developing supports. This is a tricky process, whereby facilitators support the voice of the person, nurture the network of the person and family, and help families see the wider community as a valued resource that is rich in possibilities. Third, facilitators support the development of a plan that builds on the goals of the person. This may involve creatively working with others in the person's network or linking families to mentors in the community.

The idea of independent planning and facilitation is part of an emerging new approach or paradigm to disability and community. There is now growing research that supports this move as an option for individuals and families. A few agencies and innovative projects in Ontario have been demonstrating the power of this approach.

Unfortunately, the Ontario government has been very slow to provide

this option to families. In fact, both the Ministry of Community, Family, and Children's Services as well as the Ministry of Health and Long Term Care show little understanding or interest in this new, cost effective approach.

Fortunately, other provinces are stepping into the future with *In Unison* as their guide. *In Unison* is the federal-provincial agreement on disability supports that calls for more consumer control and individualized disability supports.

British Columbia, the most progressive of the provinces on this issue, is about to enact legislation that will provide independent planning centres in 17 communities. These centres will offer independent planning and facilitation to individuals and families. In an innovation whose time has come, individualized funding will be included in this legislation and will be key to insuring that planning and facilitation will contribute to genuine individualized support.

Advocates for the new paradigm or approach to disability and community need to watch and learn from the bold experiment underway in B.C., while continuing to demand movement in this direction from the Ontario government.

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The Individualized Funding Coalition supports the self-determination of persons with disabilities and their full participation in community life.

*To become a member of the Coalition, contact Barbara at 416-447-4348 ext. 240 or visit the website at www.individualizedfunding.ca

* changed from original publication to reflect current information