SOCIAL NETWORKS: FACILITATORS EXPAND CAPACITY THROUGH RELATIONSHIPS

In our loneliness and isolation, there is a deep longing, a yearning...to be connected to a larger whole, to not be anonymous, to be seen and known...It is deeply satisfying to experience meaningful connection with others. We hunger for that feeling of belonging.

Jon Kabot-Zinn

The only disability is having no relationships.

Judith Snow

A person is a person through other persons. We can only be human, only be free, together.

Desmond Tutu

There is no idea of society more ancient than a circle of friends. And there is nothing more predictable than the discovery that the one in need is somehow helping the others.

John Ralston Saul

A Meaningful Process to Building a Network

→ Assisting vulnerable persons and significant others to gain awareness and understanding as a basis for commitment to a network approach is often the starting point.

It sometimes takes quite a bit of dialogue with individuals and families to show the power of planned network building. *Facilitator's nurture dialogue and conversations about possibilities with people.*

→ The next aspect of the process is often to be *extending invitations to others to be involved in a network*.

'Asking' people to get involved is important, but families may need support in asking. Sometimes people choose to have their network include only peers and no family. *Facilitator's encourage people to ask and sometimes do the asking*.

→ The network has *good process as part of learning to be together*.

At first the facilitator creates the opportunities for group development among the network members itself. *The facilitator assists the members with good group process*.

→ Mapping is another important part of the process of network building.

Some facilitators assist the network in making a pictorial representation or map of current networks as a basis for expanding connections. Most people are surprised that there are so many people in their lives and that they have lots of "potential relationships."

→ Places in the community where the person can participate are identified by the network.

These places and people are everywhere, but the challenge is to find real hospitality. The key to enhancing community connections is first identifying places and people that would understand and support the person's dream.

→ Monitoring and sustainability is the final component of the process of building a network.

Support networks, because of their ongoing nature, are in an ideal position to oversee how things are going with the person. However, governments and community agencies usually assume that monitoring of service quality needs to be formal and managed by a service system. Individuals and families with active support networks are teaching us that quality assurance is also about ongoing, informal, individualized attention.

Reflection

There are thousands of small groups across the country constructing social support with vulnerable citizens. They show us that families and communities can play a more significant role in safeguarding the quality of life of our fellow citizens. It is important to stress that social network interventions *do not* eliminate the demand for formal, paid support. Citizens with extensive support requirements continue to require both formal *and* informal support.

Those who believe in support networks as a mediating structure for social change stress that everyone in the social network can carry these attributes of caring into the wider world. In social science terms we might say that intentional support networks build social capital. Unlike economic capital, which involves money, social capital refers to trust, participation, and relationships.

Many people feel loneliness at the depths of their being. Isolation and rejection can have a devastating impact and leave people quite wounded. Building relationships and a network with someone can begin to soften the loneliness and begin to build trust. *Hospitality is the glue that makes this possible*. Networks and genuine hospitality take away some of the loneliness and can also begin to heal some of the wounds that people have experienced.

However, we must recognize that loneliness is part of the human condition and that it is natural that some loneliness may always remain. In a profound sense, support networks create hospitality so that loneliness can be accepted and even embraced. Meaningful relationships and participation in networks thereby enhance our compassion for ourselves and for others.

From John Lord and Peggy Hutchison, *Pathways to Inclusion: Building a New Story with People and Communities*. To be published in the spring of 2007.