

ILRU NetWork

Published by the IL Net, a collaboration of ILRU and NCIL

October 2003

Cultivating Cultural Competence

...by Richard Petty, IL Net Program Director

In this *ILRU NetWork*, we examine an issue that seems to be of perpetual interest to the independent living community—increasing diversity among the consumers we serve, the people who sit on our boards and the employees who define how we reflect and relate to our community. Some would say that cultivating diversity is simply a function of community outreach. Maybe so. But, as we talked with some of the folks in the IL community who appear to be the most successful in breaking through cultural barriers, it became evident to us that there's a little more to it than "just outreach."

We've chosen to call it "cultural competence"—a combination of philosophies, attitudes and skills that are developed *within* an organization through honest self-exploration/awareness and ongoing education. You'll get a sense of that through the stories presented here. And, in *NetNotes*, we'll provide a few resources we came across as we collected information for this newsletter. Frankly, our research didn't turn up much practical, general information about developing cultural competence. All the more reason, it seems, to share information and learn together through the IL Net.



IL's Early Days Hold Clues for Building Diversity

"The essence of being human—the thing that makes life really worth living—is difference."

Herb Levine embraces diversity as a personal philosophy and a guidepost for his work. He's executive director of the Independent Living Resource Center of San Francisco—a city that is synonymous with the word "diversity."

A CIL, Levine believes, must reflect the community it serves. In San Francisco, that could be considered a tall order. According to the last census, people of color comprise more than 50 percent of the population, and the city is home to more gay/lesbian/bisexual/transgender people than any other city in the United States.

A recent sampling of 1,000 ILRCSF consumers revealed that people of color comprise 65-70 percent of the whole. Levine says that's a "vast improvement from the old days" when only one-third of the center's consumers came from ethnic minorities. He points to the center's staff composition—more than 90 percent people with disabilities and almost 50 percent people of color—as another proud accomplishment, remembering the days when disability was the single biggest factor in defining diversity for center staff.

What made the difference? A conversation with Levine reveals it may not have been one big change—but a series of smaller shifts in the way the CIL views its role and relationship to the community it serves. It's a natural progression, he says, for a CIL that really wants to be an integral part of the community.

"Diversity isn't something to be tolerated or merely accepted," Levine says. "It's something to be celebrated. It's something we want to do. It connects us to our community and gives us deeper roots."

If you want your CIL to be *part* of the community, Levine suggests, your CIL must be *like* the community. "You have to go out your front door, look around and see who's out there. Then look at your center, at your board and staff." If what you see on the inside doesn't match what's happening on the outside, he says, you've found a pretty good place to start.

Levine recalls the early days when ILRCSF—like many CILs around the country—primarily focused on having diverse disabilities represented among board and staff members. The idea of peer support was new and it was important for consumers coming to the center to "see themselves" represented among the staff

and to feel comfortable in their dealings with the CIL.

Building cultural diversity beyond disability is not especially different. "It really returns you to your independent living roots," Levine observes. The basic concepts—especially the importance of peer relationships—are the same.

"For example, in the early days, we had to figure out things like how do you get people who are deaf to come to the center?" Levine recalls. "We learned that you hire a staff person who's Deaf and can communicate easily with peers and relate to their issues and their community."

"How many people came along who were Deaf *and* had all the necessary job skills? Not many. Back then, it wasn't unusual to hire somebody with a disability who didn't have all the skills for the job. We selected them on the basis of their disability experience, taught them the skills and created support systems to help them get going."

ILRCSF is relying on that approach—straight from the early days of independent living—to create more cultural diversity among center staff. For example, Levine says, staff recently welcomed a half-time

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Diversity and strong community relations go hand in hand



For Liz Sherwin, executive director of the Illinois/Iowa Center for Independent Living, the path to cultural competence begins at the front door of her center and leads straight out into the community. That's where, she says, you develop relationships that form the foundation for any effort to increase diversity. "Trust and respect are basic necessities if you want to increase diversity," Sherwin says, "and you develop them by developing relationships."

Sherwin says IICIL started to pay more attention to increasing the diversity of its board, staff and consumers in the late 1980s with a plan that she drafted herself. "Our staff back then had a lot of stereotypical views. When some suggested it was too dangerous to do outreach in black neighborhoods, I knew we had to do something to get educated," recalls Sherwin, herself an African American.

They started with training at staff meetings, inviting people representing different ethnic cultures and disabilities to share practical information about how to relate to their respective communities. Center staff started participating in an ongoing community diversity roundtable as well as courses offered by the local human rights commission.

Eventually, Sherwin says, things started to change and "through education and attrition" IICIL evolved into an organization that embraces diversity. She says the proof is in the cultural composition of IICIL's board, staff and consumer population—which now compares favorably to the community's demographics.

Sherwin is especially proud of the diverse composition of the center's board. The majority of members are people with disabilities, and there is a strong ethnic representation. "In this part of the state, Latino and African American people are the predominant ethnic groups," Sherwin says, "and they are well represented on our board."

"We are constantly on the lookout for prospective board members, volunteers, consumers and staff members when we're out hobnobbing in the community," Sherwin reports. In fact, "hobnobbing" may be the key to IICIL's success in diversifying.

Sherwin and her staff participate in a lot of community activities. "A number of our

staff members serve on boards that have nothing to do with disability," she says, "and they learn a lot about what's important to various groups. Sometimes we discover a way we can shape our services to help meet a need in a particular community that we might not have known about before. Or we find someone who would make a really good board member. This kind of stuff wouldn't happen if we just stayed in our offices."

When they are not circulating through the community, Sherwin and staff are busy with the parts of the community that are circulating through the center. At any given time at IICIL you are likely to walk in on a blind support group meeting, a deaf and hard of hearing youth group social, an adult computer education class or any number of activities for which the center has become home base.

Over time, Sherwin notes, these groups are also becoming more diverse. Once again, she says, it's a function of IICIL becoming more visible and relevant in the community's everyday life. "The more time we spend with our community, the more credible we become," says Sherwin. "The more credible we are, the more people trust and talk to us. And the more they talk to us, the better we are able to respond to our community's diverse needs for independent living services."

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employee to coordinate services to the Latino community—a population the center has found somewhat hard to reach. The young man had taken the center's peer counselor training program, but otherwise had no previous independent living experience and no college education. But he brings to the job energy, enthusiasm and strong ties to the Latino community—"the kind of things you can't teach," Levine says. Meanwhile, a number of his coworkers are working closely with him as he learns the ropes of independent living.

In addition to the Latino community coordinator, there are also coordinators for the Chinese and Deaf communities. Much of their work takes place outside the center in their respective communities and goes beyond traditional outreach activities. Through their presence, the center becomes more a part of those communities, Levine says. "We get involved in issues that are important to them which, in turn helps us learn and grow and be more relevant."

As pleased as he is with ILRCSF's cultural makeup, Levine believes that true diversity is not just about demographics. "We could be at one hundred percent and still not be diverse," he says. "It's also about what people see and how they feel when they come to the center. It's about creating a genuinely welcoming and comfortable atmosphere."

It's not enough, Levine says, to get folks to come through the door once. The real test is if they feel welcome enough to come back. If they perceive you're just paying lip service to diversity, he adds, you may not see them again.

Says Levine, "Our morning receptionist has learned enough of the language to tell Chinese callers 'hang on, I'll get somebody for you.' Our afternoon receptionist is Chinese, blind and has learned sign language. We have dedicated voice mail boxes for several languages—just in case bilingual staff members are not immediately available to take a call. Our publication

displays are full of materials translated into different languages, written for specific cultures and available in all kinds of accessible formats. Our walls are covered with pictures and posters for a wide variety of cultural causes and events. It would be hard for a person from almost any culture to come into our offices and not see themselves here."

For all its progress, Levine says ILRCSF is far from being "done" with diversity. For example, he says, there is still much work to be done at the board level in terms of increasing the diversity of its membership and strengthening ties with various cultural communities.

"It's a process, not an event. You don't finish," says Levine. "It's constantly looking at each new person and making sure that he or she feels included."

For more information, call Herb Levine at 415-543-6222 or send e-mail to herb@ilrcsf.org

Dr. Jean Latting: Leaders must accept responsibility for their organization's cultural competence and growth

"The first thing to know about developing your organization's 'cultural competence' is that you will never know it all," says University of Houston Professor Jean K. Latting.

"The organizations that are the most competent in advancing cultural diversity are the ones that recognize learning about different cultures is an ongoing—and often ambiguous—process," says Latting, whose research areas include workplace diversity and organizational change. "They are the ones that can be comfortable knowing they can't know it all, have developed a capacity for asking good questions, and value and enjoy continued learning."

Any organization that is open to some honest self-exploration is a candidate to develop cultural competence. When asked if there's a way to identify an organization that will be especially successful, Latting is quick to say "yes!"

"Take a good look at the people at the top," she advises. You are quite likely to find an organization with a strong commitment to diversity if you see leaders who:

- are committed to their own personal growth,
- recognize that their values and attitudes permeate the organization,
- assume 100 percent responsibility for the organization's cultural competence, and
- foster a work environment that welcomes differences and encourages open discussion and learning.

Bottom line—the organization's values are often a reflection of the leaders' values. And if you're a leader—and you're wondering why your organization isn't attracting more diverse employees or clients—it may be time to find out how you come across to others who are different from yourself, Latting suggests. Not being at the top doesn't let you off the hook either. Latting says that determining how others perceive you will be beneficial no matter where you fit on the organizational chart.

It's not all that uncommon, she says, for people to "leak" biases without even knowing it. "How diverse are the staff members you spend the most time with every day? Who do you usually go to for advice? Who do you eat lunch with?" Latting asks. People can say whatever they want, she says, but if they eat, talk, and meet mostly with people who look and think like themselves, they have a

limited view of others' reality and their behavior may reflect that limited view. It's their routine behavior that folks are paying attention to. And, however inadvertent, it may be showing a bias or insensitivity.

If you're a leader, you might be able to ask staff members how they perceive your cultural "attitudes" and if they think you're accidentally showing a bias. Short of that, you might be able to find out if they would even feel comfortable having that kind of discussion. In either case, "no response" does not necessarily mean "no problem"—especially if it's possible that people don't feel safe expressing their feelings or concerns.

While it might be tempting to "let sleeping dogs lie," Latting advises leaders to be on the alert for any sign of cultural tensions among staff members. For one thing, she says, it makes for a miserable work environment. For another, it could be filtering down to clients and others that the organization associates with.

Latting works with a variety of agencies to help them evaluate their overall cultural competence and promote their growth as diverse and dynamic organizations. One approach is to identify differences within the group that are creating tension based on some "diversity dimensions"—age, gender, race, marital status, religion, education, sexual orientation, parental status and job status. For example, people in some cultural groups believe in speaking up directly as an individual ("the squeaky wheel gets the oil"). Others believe in reflective listening to demonstrate respect for the group as a whole ("the nail sticking up gets hammered down"). Then she leads the group through a process of examining such differences and how both perspectives may be "correct" from the vantage point of the cultural or familial norms in which the person was raised.

The ultimate goal, Latting says, is for people to learn how easily they judge those who are different from themselves. "Most people assume that if they don't get along with another person, it's because the other person is mean, stupid, controlling, selfish, or apathetic. The idea that the other person actually does believe that she is doing the right thing doesn't cross their minds", she explains. This exercise helps people break that myth and encourages people to gain respect for each other's working styles.

When handled with skill and sensitivity, this process can lead to fruitful

discussions that can enlighten staff members and create a safe environment to discuss perceptions and differences. All of which, she says, must occur for the organization to realize the benefits that come with becoming more diverse.

However they choose to go about it—be it structured training or more informal staff and community activities—Latting encourages leaders to be on the lookout for opportunities to make cultural awareness an ongoing element of their organization's routine. "When openness and discussion about difference becomes routine and people are comfortable with it," Latting says, "organizations can become very effective in their efforts to reflect the diversity of the world around them."

For more information, contact Dr. Jean Kantambu Latting at the University of Houston by telephone at 713-743-8097 or via e-mail: jlatting@uh.edu.

Be Careful!

A word to the wise manager from Professor Jean Latting. Carefully select a qualified diversity trainer or other experienced facilitator if you are considering diversity training for your staff—especially if you suspect there are cultural tensions that need to be worked out. Lacking a sensitive facilitator with demonstrated skills in bringing people in diverse groups together, a small misunderstanding can quickly escalate to a big problem. You can find professional diversity trainers listed in the local telephone book and on the Internet. State and/or local human resources associations are also likely to know of some prospects.



NetNotes

■■■ **Language Matters:** Did you know that in many languages the term “independent living” suggests living away from one’s family? Clarifying that family members are welcome participants in the independent living community may be an important first step in breaking down cultural barriers.

■■■ A 1995 study conducted by the **Statewide Independent Living Council of Illinois** indicated the state’s CILs were having only “nominal success” in their efforts to reach out to unserved

and underserved populations. The SILC organized an ad-hoc work group comprised of staff from Illinois CILs and statewide minority organizations to develop an **Outreach Planning Manual** to give centers some ideas for developing, implementing and evaluating effective outreach efforts. The result of this two-year effort is available on the SILC of Illinois’ website: www.silcofillinois.org/reach.htm.

■■■ Our hands-down favorite website for resources related to diversity and developing cultural competence is www.pbs.org/race. We found an impressive collection of articles, slide shows, teachers’ guides, reading lists, interactive quizzes and a lot more information that serve as electronic companions to a documentary produced by California Newsreel for PBS. The three-part series—**Race: The Power of an Illusion**—began airing on PBS stations nationwide in late April. Check your local public television website for scheduling information. Or—if you want it for your very own—there’s information about how to order the videos on the program’s website.

■■■ For that matter, **California Newsreel’s** website is another good resource. According to its website, the organization specializes in “educational videos on African American life and history, race relations and diversity training, African cinema, media and society, labor studies, campus life and much more.” Check it out at www.newsreel.org.

■■■ Another site we recommend is www.diversityweb.org. Produced by the American Association of Colleges and Universities, **DiversityWeb** is promoted as “an interactive resource hub for higher education.” You don’t have to be an institution of higher ed to find something useful there, though.

■■■ We asked the folks at the Independent Living Resource Center of San Francisco for some of their favorite diversity resources. Here are their top picks:

• **Proyecto Visión:** www.proyectovision.net/index.html

• **BlackWebPortal.com:** www.blackwebportal.com

• **Gay Asian Pacific Alliance:** www.gapa.org

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ILRU NetWork is published quarterly by IL Net, a collaborative project between ILRU and the National Council on Independent Living to provide training and technical assistance to centers for independent living and statewide independent living councils nationwide.

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Substantial support for development of this publication was provided by the Rehabilitation Services Administration, U.S. Department of Education. The content is the responsibility of ILRU and no official endorsement of the Department of Education should be inferred.