IL-NET, a project of ILRU presents

Disability, Diversity and Intersectionality  
in Centers for Independent Living

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Creating a Welcoming and Supportive CIL for Diverse Populations – Small Group Activity  
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KIM GIBSON: So, for the next 10 minutes within your individual tables, we're going to ask the question: What can you do at your Center to create a welcoming and supportive CIL for diverse populations? And also, kind of discuss how you're going to ‑‑ how you make those connections in the community, and when we come back, we'll hear from different tables what the results were.

LIZ SHERWIN: And what we’re mainly going to talk about is how you can make connections and that sort of thing and create a welcoming environment in your center.

KIM GIBSON: Where's the mic? Mic runner. All right, right there. Which table would like to start? Oh, let's see. Let's start with Zan's table right here.

AUDIENCE MEMBER: So, as I've mentioned a couple times already in this conference, we do not have a very diverse population. So, we just do what we can to be welcoming to those people that do come through the door. And we are committed to keeping the front door staffed with a person, and the phone answered by a person, because we feel that that is the most welcoming, and the most accommodating to people with disabilities who may not be able to maneuver through an automated phone system. That's about all we came up, isn't it? Anything else?

AUDIENCE MEMBER: Targeting.

I had a question. My name is Zan. With our group, we go to a different group's meetings every month and try to continue those relationships, but how do you say that? I mean, like, the word I use is, we target specific groups like deaf‑blind group or the deaf Black deaf associates. What's a better word to say than "target"? Because we have an outreach, I think is a better word. I'm asking.

KIM GIBSON: Maybe collaborate.

LIZ SHERWIN: Collaborate and partner with these groups, if there are activities that they're doing. The deaf in our community do a deaf Thanksgiving event and we've been able to partner with them, maybe allow them to use our space, or maybe support them in some of the activities they're doing.

AUDIENCE MEMBER: One of the things we're doing is when we lost our Deaf contract, there's a large Deaf organization that serves most of the state is we then sublet office space to that organization so the people that are deaf or hard of hearing do still come through our doors and then get their services through our Center, that organization through our Center. And then there's a peer group, a peer to peer group for mental health disabilities that is struggling in the community and we'll be pulling them into our Center, as well.

KIM GIBSON: That's nice. I know that we host groups like Just US Blind Girls.

AUDIENCE MEMBER: Just US Blind Girls.

KIM GIBSON: Just US Blind girls. I couldn't think of the name. Thank you, Bridgette. James in the red shirt.

AUDIENCE MEMBER: Well, with our group, and I'm not copying off of Kim because I work there ‑‑ .

[ Laughter ]

‑‑ but, well, I'm just saying this, because when I started at disABILITY LINK, I started as a volunteer, and when I walked into the ‑‑ well, rolled into the door, I noticed the family atmosphere, where everybody was welcoming and inviting, and I said I wanted to be a part of this.

So, as things started happening, you know, I saw: Well, what could I do to help others and let people know what disABILITY LINK is all about? Like Kim was saying, when you walk in our door, we're welcoming.

"Good morning, welcome to disABILITY LINK. How may I assist you?" That's what I have to say when I'm on the phone too.

But we're welcoming. We're there to ‑‑ what are your needs? What are your wants? I will never tell you what you need. I don't use my mouth, I use my ears because it's very important that we listen to everybody's concerns.

KIM GIBSON: And I want to piggyback that it's not only important for the doors, right? Because I don't know about you, but we have a mix of urban, rural, metro area, so we have to take that welcoming atmosphere to the community as we do.

And I think that there was somebody over here with their hand raised. No? No? Who's next. Oh, right here. Sorry, right there. I knew I'd seen it.

AUDIENCE MEMBER: Hi. I'm Anita from Rochester, she/hers. So, back when I was working at the CIL, one of the things, we did a few things. We have a large LGBTQIA2S plus community and so what we would do is we would get the publications in -- the gay newspapers. We had signs up indicating that we were queer community friendly. A lot of our folks are from the Somali and the Ukrainian and Latinx communities, so we would have stuff available in those languages out there already, Spanish language publications, things of that nature, just to show. We had some of the queer groups -- we gave them space to have meetings in our spaces.

We have Deaf game night and Deaf club events and stuff, so just ways. We go out into the community as well, but I think it was really important that, you know, we show in our space that we're welcoming and safe community.

KIM GIBSON: Okay, I know that this table right behind had ‑‑ right behind this table, this second one, had some stuff about safety that I'd like to hear about.

And another, as we're throwing out different things, we do ‑‑ we've done speed‑dating for the different communities, so that's been fun, too.

AUDIENCE MEMBER: Okay, good morning. My name is Arlene. Before we get to the creating a safe space, we noticed that at our CIL, we have a higher Deaf community, and they come through the door and request services all the time, but there's only two people in the building that know Sign Language, and we think that it's important that all staff should be trained in Sign Language or be offered Sign Language classes so we could be able to communicate better with the Deaf population. Because a lot of times they try to communicate with us and we aren't able to I feel bad, as well, because I'm not able to do that, but getting that resource.

And then also at the table, another CIL, there are a higher immigration, or immigrant population, and so we were talking about the Know Your Rights classes that are taught there, that can be beneficial. And going out, like, reaching out to those communities, and going there to offer what we can give to them, instead of having them come to us.

KIM GIBSON: I do want to just for a second… On your topic about Sign Language, sometimes that's not feasible for everybody to know. It takes longer than just a class to learn Sign Language. We do offer basic Sign Language in our organization, but there's other tools that can be utilized, the on‑demand interpretation services are relatively inexpensive, where our staff are trained. It's accessible by Smartphone, computer, tablet, and each staff member is assigned a code so that we can tie it into the consumer that we're working with. We can do on‑demand, and then we can set up a longer one, longer sessions or intakes or whatever for longer periods, also. We have that capability.

So, if even if someone did not know ASL or a language. Because it's not only ASL you're going to come up with. Someone may come in and speak a totally different language than any of your staff. You may have 20 different languages there and somebody else comes in with a different language, so knowing your resources with Language Line and also with access ‑‑ we use access interpreting, I think it's through Avia. I cannot exactly remember, but that's what we use, so there's different services, and it's just billable per person. It's not something I have to pay for every month or anything like that.

But every one of us should have a portion of our budget that's for accessibility and so that piece comes with it. And using those services appropriately and not making someone wait.

LIZ SHERWIN: We actually have people on staff that have taught us basic sign, so if someone entering the door, even the Receptionist. We have a class where the new staff coming on Board ‑‑ well, of course, the community calls it "baby sign," I'm not sure what that is, but simple Sign Language that we can at least communicate and get the information as to what they need and what they want to see. And also, we have a relationship with the refugee or immigrant community that they provide Sign Language ‑‑ or not Sign Language. I think in our school they said there are like 90 different dialects that are spoken, so there's no way that we're going to learn all that and have access to interpreters that can do that. But this group, they've come together and formed some type of little coalition where if their members in the community are having issues, if you call this number or whatever, you can reach them and they'll send someone out to assist, at least in the provision of services and in identifying what it is or how you can help them. So, those are the things that we do.

And plus, we have a Sign Language interpreter business that is a fee‑for‑service program that Centers can start. And actually, I have a staff person that is the Coordinator, and she's one of the highest level interpreters in the nation. She can do all those technical situations, like doctors and courts and so forth, and we have, like, 12 contractuals on staff that we go out to hospitals and all kinds of situations.

They do things, procedures in the hospitals, the sleep apnea test, all those kinds of things. They deliver babies, they're there for that, all kinds of situations.

So, we do have that program, and that's a fee‑for‑service program for us.

AUDIENCE MEMBER: I see. Thank you.

LIZ SHERWIN: And we do Brailling for the community. There are all sorts of things that Centers can do to increase communication.

AUDIENCE MEMBER: My name is Deji Morgan. I work with Everybody Counts in northwest Indiana. Some of the things that we did was to identify the needs of our community, and in Northwest Indiana, we identified transportation and housing as the basic challenges that we have.

And one of the things that we did was to organize a debate and it was coordinated by Lorrell Kilpatrick, the advocacy coordinator. What we did was to organize a debate for the Mayoral candidates in the city of Gary and invited everybody to witness the debate. In the debate, we made sure that the candidates actually talked about things that mattered to people living with disability. What were they going to do if they were elected?

And as a result of that, the electorate, people living with disabilities got to understand who has knowledge and who's willing to assist, provide services for people living with disability. Another thing that we did was to ‑‑ yeah, the transition program.

We organized a Transition Program for the high school students, students living with disability, to provide them with skills, independence skills they would need when they go to college or when they find employment. So by getting into schools, by identifying the services, the community needs, and by talking to the people who have official power or influence, then you can do some more things for the people in your community. And the people in the community see this, they know you're advocating on their behalf, so they feel more comfortable to come to you for information, questions, and services. Thank you.

AUDIENCE MEMBER: So, our table piggy backed on what James was talking about with how important that reception and welcome area is in our Centers, and making sure that we have the right person in that position up front, and that they're fully trained on the expectations of the Center and our philosophy, and what we want that to look like when someone walks in the door and is looking for services or just information in their community.

We had conversation, some of us own our buildings and so we rent space to other non‑profits in town that may not be able to afford commercial real estate but can get a lower rate of rent with another nonprofit. And that way, when people are coming in our door, there's other service providers that they may benefit from, and that we collaborate with on an ongoing basis.

Some of the Centers at our table talked about the fact that they have a medical equipment loan bank for individuals, or that they may have a food bank or a clothing type bank for interview clothes so that people when they're venturing out for employment know that they have clothing that is appropriate for that situation.

And just talked a lot about building those partnerships with our other community members, and how do we connect with them, making sure that we're part of the outreach that they do in their communities, so that we're visible.

KIM GIBSON: I'd be interested to know what your CILs are – and maybe one of your tables did this -- CILs are doing to reach out to the underserved populations and the populations of diversity, what you're doing with that.

AUDIENCE MEMBER: Kim, disABILITY LINK has provided some really important stuff, and I just want to give you kudos on this, all of y'all. You did a speech training, Toastmasters, taking something that usually is so expensive and just kind of outside, y'all brought it in and included everybody and you outreached to everybody so that was one way that you outreached and it was wonderful so I just wanted to say thank you.

LIZ SHERWIN: I was going to talk briefly about some of the outreach we've done. We're involved in the pulse of the community and what's going on. We've been involved in all sorts of activities. One of the places I mentioned that we had a new building, well, my son came in, and looked at the building. He was quite impressed with it. Then he said mom, why would you build a brand-new building like this in the ghetto? And I was like, excuse me?

So, anyway, what it did, it was a way for the community to look around and try to improve the looks of the community. So, all the non‑profits got together to create something called NPC 11th, that's the street we're on. And so, they wanted to upgrade the neighborhood so we talked about ways of upgrading the neighborhood and how the Center could be involved. So, anyway, one of the things they wanted to do was a cleanup of the whole corridor one Saturday, so I ended up and my staff ended up being the chairs of this particular event.

And so, how we got our name out was the newspaper actually came and did a whole page spread on NPC 11th Street and then they talked about how the Illinois‑Iowa Center for Independent Living was organizing this major event. The group wanted to do a billboard with a sign that indicated this was going to happen. So, permanently on the sign, the Center was listed as the place of contact for the event, and so that kind of got our name out there.

In many communities, what do you call it where they're tearing down houses and whatever, and making the communities better?

AUDIENCE MEMBER: Gentrification.

LIZ SHERWIN: Re‑gentrification, yes, that's the term. So, anyway, one of the housing projects in our community is being demolished and then they're bringing something new in. And a group was very concerned about who the new would be. Would poor people be displaced? Where would they go? Would there be any room for them to live in this new community?

So, we came together with a group called The Village People. Actually, it's going on now. What happened was a group of the former residents had a concern about what the future would be. So, we came together with a group to kind of bring attention to the needs of low‑income people to have affordable, accessible housing, and the theme became was: This village raised me as to these were people that formerly lived there and they were concerned about what would happen in the future.

So, anyway, we were able to ‑‑ the Housing Authority was working on a plan to introduce this concept to the community, so we wanted to know how we could have a voice in this activity. So, subsequently, I think it was last Friday, the Housing Authority put forth their plan, but they let us participate in this press conference that talked about the vision or the residents' vision for how it would be inclusive, it would be accessible, it would be available and affordable for all people in the community that needed housing. So that was kind of the focus that the press conference took, even with the Housing Authority.

And several of the former residents that had lived there were there, and we were able to talk about our view and what we expected the community to look like, if this is what their intents were.

And so, we ended up getting front‑page coverage, and of course, the Center, as I being their Director, was mentioned in the article and we got front‑page color coverage in the paper for our Center.

So, those are just some ways that you can take advantage of situations, and get the Center's name out there, not only for people with disabilities, but for the community to make sure that you are recognized as a viable part of the community.

KIM GIBSON: Okay. We're almost out of time but I want to have this gentleman.

AUDIENCE MEMBER: Hello. My name is Ricardo from Laredo, Texas. Prior to starting my employment with my Center, I was working at a mental health clinic. I had a small case load, but intense case load, and one of my jobs was to help them find different community resources out in the community. The Center I'm currently working for I had never heard of them. They had been there about 8 years, but nobody knew -- my supervisors didn't know what we offered. So, when I started working for them one of my jobs is to increase the outreach.

What I ended up finding successful is start reaching out to first all the bigger organizations around, so I started out with whether it be with the State of Texas, whether it be my own mental health clinic I used to work for or different rehabilitation Centers around the city. And then I started working my way down to different adult day care Centers. For rural communities what I ended up doing is reaching out to the different community Centers and different adult day care Centers and to start spreading out the word. We host a lot of bingos for the adult daycare centers where we take them door prizes or we take them food just to increase the awareness. But what I found recently the most successful is and I'm pretty sure your Centers have this social media. There's a lot of groups within Facebook. I myself don't have a Facebook, but we're creating a page locally for my Center, so people can find us through social media. I found groups I didn't know existed, with the help of my co‑worker, a group called Laredo Peppers. This is a group that is available for the Deaf community and they do a lot of work. They host a lot of, I guess, entertainment events, so we go out to their events whether it be bowling nights or whether it just be a card night that they have. And we go and spread out information that we have. I found groups where it might just be family members or a mom or a dad that has a group in terms of downs syndrome awareness or an autism group and just reaching out to them and just let them know what type of information we have. Some of the stuff we have done in our area.

LIZ SHERWIN: And I think what we take away is that there are all sorts of groups in the community, and we just need to reach out. Because for many years, we were kind of like an island within our community. Nobody knew what we did. They knew we were there but what we did or how we conducted business, they had no knowledge. Only they knew we were somehow affiliated with people with disabilities.

So, in order to bridge the gap and provide services to everyone, you have to be a part of the community, and you have to work with all groups. And in our community, we work with the Chambers; we work in the rural areas with all of the groups, our focus groups or whatever groups they have out in those communities, so you have to reach out. You cannot stay within your own area. You have to reach out to other communities to make sure that they know about you.

KIM GIBSON: So, we're not going to be the ones holding up the lunch.

[ Laughter ]

Hopefully this conversation continues. And remembering there's so many different groups reaching out to the refugee immigrants, different communities that's in your area. Thank you guys for listening to us.

[ Applause ]

And participating.

[End of Session]