IL-NET, a project of ILRU presents

Disability, Diversity and Intersectionality  
in Centers for Independent Living

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An American Journey for CILs, Overview  
Presenter: Jesse Bethke Gomez

JESSE BETHKE GOMEZ: Thanks, Tim. Thank you so much. It's a pleasure to be here with you. Since we are going to end on time on this one, 2:15. We're going to modify this a little bit so I'm going to need your help. It's about the power of you, and it's about our collective insights, so there's some modifications we're going to make on the fly. I wanted to ‑‑ there's kind of a universal theme that I want to get to, so we've got three exercises and you will see in your book there is this document that I put in here for this presentation.

It's the last page. It says: Disability, Diversity and Intersectionality, training program, insight mapping. We're actually going to come back to this in a couple of the exercises but if you look at this, it has some really cool ways that ties into insights for the CIL, insights for the self and insights for the community and in fact, I had no idea that ILRU was going to put that together because it came out the same way I did for me, my CIL and my community.

AUDIENCE MEMBER: That's where we got the idea from.

[ Laughter ]

JESSE BETHKE GOMEZ: Oops, okay. But we'll come back to this because so much of this work as painful as it is and as exciting as it is, it's about discovery, and even in the session, we've been talking about things that are about discovery. This is a quote that was in our portion of the ILRU fund on behalf of MCIL and one of the things I just want to get to here is the very bottom of this statement that I'll read to you, about aspirations of people, but the culture and language context by which a person makes known those aspirations that really matters, because 90% of our thinking is based on our unconscious beliefs, and we learn 90% of our values by age 6, so reflection is really key for us as we're taking things in.

So, throughout the next couple of days, those insight items, where do you energize? Where do you spark? What is it that's a glow? Like: Whoa, wait a minute, I need to write that down? The fun part of this, I always do this ‑‑ last year I did this and I dated it, and I came back, we did this presentation last year, and I looked at it and I was like: Oh, wow, I've changed.

So, the fun part, if you date it, you come back to it, you say: Wow, look through time we've gone through some things. A little bit about us. We serve over 7,000 people. What's not in the disability linkage line. We're part of a statewide Call Center. We serve 25,000 people with 73,000 follow‑ups about who we are. I wanted to get to this right away, so I’m going to skip who we are.

I need to ask if those Post‑It notes, we want to take advantage of that. Because we want to spend at just five minutes, maybe 10 minutes, but if we can ask you to identify at your table two Post‑It notes with this idea: Small group discussion, this awareness about humanity, what we share. What is universal about Independent Living for all people? What's Independent Living? What's that philosophy? What's universal? Can we ask you to spend maybe 5 minutes, come up with two or three Post‑It notes of some big ideas, like: Well, this is what we discovered that's in common. Now, we'll call on just a couple of tables. We did this last time at all the tables and it was a very cool experience. If we can call on a couple of tables, and then ask you to put them over here on these insights for CILs or community or self, this way we get the collective power of your knowledge that help us to review.

And when we do the write‑up, I'm very interested in reading those because again for me, that means I can go back and say: Wow, wait a minute, that's something I hadn't thought about so let's take 5 minutes.

The question is this ‑‑

What is or what are universal items or themes or stuff that jumps out at us about Independent Living for all people? Let's start right now. The clock starts right now. Reconvene in 5 minutes. Thanks.

Okay, here we go. Time's up. Can we get a couple of tables to volunteer what's on your Post‑It note? And the answer to this question about what's universal for all people with Independent Living. Who'd like to go first?

Shall we volunteer people? Okay, great. Here you go.

AUDIENCE MEMBER: So this is Asha, and we wrote down: Meeting consumers where they are. Youth empowerment. And living in community, not in institutions. Also, making one's own choices about life.

JESSE BETHKE GOMEZ: So universal. Other folks? Who else? Who else would like to go? Who would like to go next? Over here.

AUDIENCE MEMBER: We said that everyone has the right to live in a barrier‑free environment and that Independent Living differs from person to person.

JESSE BETHKE GOMEZ: Independent Living is different from person to person. Over in this table.

AUDIENCE MEMBER: Thank you. What we came up with is: Everybody needs access to transportation and housing. Repeating what someone said earlier, having choices and control over your own life, and understanding that everyone is interdependent.

JESSE BETHKE GOMEZ: Everyone is interdependent. We've got a little bit more time. How about one more table?

How about this table right here?

AUDIENCE MEMBER: Well, we have to agree with what's been said. We also noted a place to call home, freedom of choice, financial stability, respect, acceptance, and valued.

JESSE BETHKE GOMEZ: Accepted, respected and valued. Why do you think it's important in a conversation about DDI is that we start to figure out that it is through language and culture by which we understand one another, but what we all have in common is that our nature's is one and the same, is human nature. That's the broader sense of connectivity that we have.

And so, we've talked about structure. We've talked about hardwiring an organization that perpetuates itself, so how do we bring in meaning? How do we bring in language and culture that can create this universal space of mindfulness? And I won't go through this too much, because we're actually going to learn more from one another in an exercise that comes up. But that magnetic north pole will always pull the needle of a compass to true north.

And that is the discovery and the exciting part of what MCIL has been on its own journey so we're going to go through this. We know about mission, we know about vision, and we know about values, and as much as we talked about structure, it's this combination that leads to culture, which is about human emotion. It’s about human energy. Emotion is energy.

And so, to get to that space where people are energized, where people are excited, where people make this conscious connection, yeah, that's how we can make a difference in the lives of people. It's an important part. If you're a front‑line person, if you're a volunteer, if you're a program coordinator, a program manager or Chief Operating Officer, Executive Director, or President, a Board member, or Board Chair, we're going to come back to this in this last exercise and I think we're going to be just fine on time, as well.

So, every one of us: Yeah, yeah, yeah mission, vision, we've been there, right? But how do we bring in this notion of intersectionality on disability and diversity? How do we think about stepping back and asking those forthright questions about: Does our mission reflect what is universal? And how people understand that journey of what's universal through language and culture. That's a different conversation than we've been through before, but you know it when you've had that conversation.

I worked for Red Cross many years ago, and when we had National or local disasters and how was it that everyone came together in a way that were energized? And disaster, God forbid, it also brings the best out of us. So, it's within our possibilities for what we do. It's within us to find the power from within to unleash that into what that means.

And so, you're going to hear a number of Centers talk about their strategic journey and it's really amazing stuff. I'm just so honored to be here with you. But we really, when we look at mission and vision, and commitment to DDI, we want to find a pathway forward about the universality that all people seek in their lives towards life, liberty, and pursuit of happiness, through language and culture and beliefs. How they express what matters to them. So, for our organizations, how do we nurture empathy? What matters to people?

Okay, so for MCIL, we had a long mission statement. I can't ever remember it, but our mission statement is four words: Removing barriers, promoting choices, and we thought if we can pull that right back to when we're assisting people, what matters to them, we're redefining that in ways that has right‑now meaning.

And it took us a long time to get there, but we did that as a journey with our full complement of people internally and people externally. We came up with this vision that said: We believe in a world of opportunities, choices, and the freedom to live those choices. And you could add in: Through language and culture of what matters to the person, not what we think, or not even what I think. But what they think, what they feel. What matters to them.

And so, the value system we came up with at MCIL, the number‑one value that really we always come back to is mindfulness. Mindfulness. Isn't that something? Because we're able to when you sit down with people to create that emotional breathing space, if people can just "be." If we can help be with people with their hopes, and find ways that matter to them, that's just a different journey, isn't it? So currently from last ‑‑ this is new from last year. We're working on our brand position to better understand how do we promote who we are.

So, our current brand position or working draft, and everything is always in working draft, is Metropolitan Center for Independent Living assists people with disabilities to live lives of independent living. Our mission is removing barriers, promoting choices. It's about Independent. Follow your path. Your path, and that means language. That means culture. That means home life. That means community. That means what matters to you as a person, when you walk into our doors.

Or when you come to us or we visit you electronically.

So, here's the other exercise that I wanted to also share, and this notion about bringing that universality in, discovering what's their mission and their values. Because one thing I can share with you, I did a strategic planning 25 years ago for a university, helped them understand their values. Then I went back 25 years later did their strategic plan. They had an 80% overlap in the set of values. And organizations have values that are discoverable, that are from within. They rarely change. So nurturing change. I always call it slow tai chi, and ways that people can take that in. It's sometimes important. Sometimes it has to be disruptive.

But looking at our mission, vision, and values and this is the part that this matters here, too. This form. Because it collectively, if we're open on reflection, how do we really lead? How is it that our policies realign -- align well with DDI? And then action. As my mom says, she'll love this when I tell her this. She's from the Human Rights commission for the state of Minnesota. My Mom has always said, and she just said this the other day: You know talk is cheap; it's what you do that counts. Isn't that right?

So, reflection. And action. And review of that, and being ‑‑ the book we're reading at MCIL is Fierce Conversation. Courageous Conversation. Being open to saying: Perpetually, how do we improve? Where do you start/stop change. Can you give us examples of how you've taken your learning ‑‑ do we have an example where you've said: This is my mission or this is my value or this is something that we decided to do with data, and we thought about it and that helped to provide change? Do we have an example of that? Even if you're a presenter or not. Anyone wants to give us an example of a mission, vision, values or data or something that you said: We have to think about change. Do you have an example from within the room? Okay, right here.

AUDIENCE MEMBER: I don't know for sure if it's really sort of mission driven, other than we're trying to serve obviously as many people, and we thought a lot about outreach. But I recently did using some mapping. Our Center covers the entire state from two different grants. There's 14 counties in Vermont, so I was able using data from our 704 report, was able to actually look, and I have a graphic on the wall of towns. I broke this up into actually individual towns ‑‑ I didn't break it down to ZIP Codes, but that's another idea ‑‑ of where we've never heard of anybody in a town. We don't even have an I&R call from that town, and then to where we have different programs in those towns, and different graphics for how many people served in each of those towns.

So now I can really look at the data and say we need to do outreach in those areas because we haven't served anybody.

JESSE BETHKE GOMEZ: That's a great example, and Darrell had referenced this. Once you start figuring this out for one group, you just start changing institutionally. Other examples? Any other examples folks want to mention?

Well, let me give you something that we're working on here in HR. When we were looking at our holidays, we decided a while ago to have a Jewish holiday, as we are celebrating diversity of the journey. I'm so honored that we have a growing Muslim staff and our HR Director came to me about a month ago and said you know what? We need to switch out one of our holidays and find a religious day that we can honor our Muslim staff. I said great idea. Go ask them. What did they say? One of the staff persons wrote back: You make my heart sing! You're asking me something that matters so much to me! That's what I mean about finding that energy, that idea of reflection and building that into a structure. So, you restructure meaning, therefore you redirect energy.

Does that make sense? I mean, ultimately that's what organizations do. So, change the organization, change the energy. Change the energy, get different results.

Okay, other exercise: Bridging Welcome for Board, Management and Employees. This is the other part here, too. When we talk about examples for Board members -- I gave you this example like reaching out to the Muslim community. I wanted to mention this ‑‑ folks were talking about I think over here, half of the Board is diverse; and someone is talking about a top‑down. Do you want to expound upon that, who had mentioned that over here?

AUDIENCE MEMBER: That was us.

JESSE BETHKE GOMEZ: Is there something you'd like to say further about that, about what ‑‑ that's changing the organization from the top‑down but why don't you elaborate on that a little bit.

AUDIENCE MEMBER: I don't really know how to elaborate on that. We have, as I mentioned earlier, a non‑diverse community so we are bringing that into the organization through our Board. It's a 7‑person Board, and three of the people on the Board are people of color. Two of them are in officer positions on the Board, so the vice chair and the Treasurer.

I'm hoping that they can help bring strategies for bringing in more consumers or supporters of the organization and help us bring in more people that way.

JESSE BETHKE GOMEZ: Great, thank you. Could I ask on this: Maybe you don't want to talk in front of folks, but for those Post‑It notes that you have, if you could post those here, and if you could think about, if you have examples on this one, as well, we'd really like for you to post that, because these are examples that sometimes just moving a little bit over, getting ‑‑ we're not comfortable; I don't know if we should do this; we've got to be courageous.

I don't know if my Executive Director is going to go for this. Or oh my gosh, my Board of Directors. Or I'm a staff person, my program Manager ain't never gonna... But we've got to have that sense of let's move the little bit slow tai chi over and find success and bring energy to celebrate that success.

I wanted to also put some examples up here for the time left that we have. We have some time, to talk a little bit about again, organizational culture is as important as strategy, and in some cases, more important. Because that's where the energy is for an organization. And so how do we help nurture? Some folks say rather than, like, an organization that's, if you turn it upside‑down and you ask front‑line people, what's going on? I ask front‑line people all the time: How's it going? What do we start, stop, change? What's your career interests? How can we better assist you? When people hear that, people get energized. Why? Because we're continually improving our environment and when we ask those questions and we ask our leaders to ask those questions, with a kind of tone, a sense of constitution or temperament that's welcoming. Our leaders are welcoming and listening to how people feel. That's a big change right there to creating this environment. So, leadership internalize discovery, being inviting and more welcoming. Intentionally hire people who bring intrinsic alliance with mission, vision, and values, and this notion of disability, diversity and intersectionality. And recognize that intersectional issues are disability issues. Sometimes a scene where a staff person, a client, we create the space, the person will say: You know, I never was going to say this, but this is how I've been feeling, can we do something about it? You can see the energy that they feel safe. They're creating a sense of contribution and that's part of that creating that. Not only is it courageous conversation, but how much do we nurture that emotional breathing space for people to just "be." Does that make sense?

That's where the reenergizing our Centers are going to come from, with the change in who we are as a democracy. Recognize that intersectional issues are disability issues. Bring positive energy, openness to learning, seek to understand and adjust along the way.

I want to -- before I go into conversations, I want to give you an example in Minnesota that for the past 10 years, there have been 38 to 40,000 new workers to the work force in Minnesota. The next 10 years is two dynamics that we know. One, we'll have a projected 5,000 new workers, not 38 to 40,000, per year for the next 10 years.

And the number of people at age 65 and above throughout all of America doubles by 2030. So, as our populations are changing and we are becoming more diverse, as we're becoming ‑‑ in St. Paul alone, there's over 100 languages. Our budget for interpreter services continues to grow, because it matters for us not only to understand language but culture. Does that make sense?

So, before we go into this, I wanted to give you an example. Long‑time disability advocate from the Latino community, Rick Cardenas, intersectionality, having a conversation with him about a month ago. He said: You know, Jesse, I've been working on the State Capitol to have accessible ramps forever. He said: They're about to do good on that.

And the question I asked is: Rick, how can we help you promote that and celebrate that? We brought in a communications expert. We reached out to the Governor's Office. We helped organize, last Thursday as a matter of fact, a State Capitol accessible ramp ribbon‑cutting ceremony. Rick was the master of ceremonies. It was the Governor and myself and the Executive Director for the Minnesota State Council on disability.

But that's creating a space where people can come in and say: You know what? We've been working on this. Say, how can we help? That to me is creating, when you've got that energy where people feel that. You know, removing barriers, promoting choices. The next opportunity that comes to us, I might not speak the language of that person. I may not know about their culture, but that's the opportunity for me to learn and grow. How can I reach out? What can I do to make a difference in that person's life? So that we're more universal in what we do, of actualizing, not only to address the tough issues, but helping people in a way that's where they're at. One of the comments that I made at the State Capitol last week was that the accessible ramps represent a Minnesota that is committed to the American ideal of: We hold these truths to be self‑evident. That's the universal journey there, that we recognize, in language, in culture, in orientation, in however it is that people understand their relationship with the supreme being, if they believe in a supreme being, and their relationship with one another.

But given that, recruitment and selection of people into this field, of assisting people with Independent Living, our competitors, our counties, our states, our human service organizations, often much larger than ours. So, how do we create that welcoming space and nurturing diversity, and nurturing employee engagement. I wanted to give you some examples. Rethink human resources as an enterprise platform.

If you are a small CIL, how can you gain ‑‑ not that you don't ‑‑ if you don't have a Human Resource volunteer, a Human Resource outsourced organization. If you're a larger Center, how can you grow your admin, your capacity building, to get an HR Director who lives and breathes mission, vision, and values in ways that run far past or bring ideas far past you?

I'm always amazed at our HR Director, it's like the next opportunity, they're very exciting. But mission, vision, and values. Disability, Diversity and Intersectionality, that has to be part of our agenda as a Center. We go far past an affirmative action plan. That's just like the baseline. We want to be -- how do we help the employee get to where they want to go in terms of intrinsic motivation of what matters to them? Every year, 100% of our work performance reviews: Tell us what you want to do.

Talent management. And if we can do that, we attract people. They say, hey, I've heard this is a nice place to work at. Best practices for recruiting, hiring, retaining and supporting diverse employees. You know, I really appreciate like for me, I'm always like oh, you're Hispanic. You must really like tacos. I'm like well not really, actually. I'm as much German and Swedish, so I actually grew up on lutefisk. True story, my great grandfather spoke Swedish. True story. But I do like tacos, too. Just had some. Just kidding.

Grow beyond affirmative action plans. Create welcome, opportunities to grow. Mentoring and support. Reach out to establish ongoing relationships with diverse communities, and hosting events that reach to diversity, affinity, disability, in ways that… Okay, if you can bring a mindfulness to that, and you're afraid, you've got to let go of the control, things might not go the way they planned. But if you bring an authentic care and concern for people, people feel it before you say it. People remember how you made them feel versus what you actually said anyways.

But creating your Center to be a place that people are safe, they have freedom of expression, they have a sense of conscious connection. They create their own sense of community, that maybe doesn't exist anywhere else, because you recognize what their journey is on the intersectionality of this, this, this, this, and that, those are the things that we can do.

And so, we always want to think about training. We always want to think about what we can do. Our onboarding process, we threw it out. It just wasn't working for us. Over 50‑plus percent of the 7,000‑plus people we assist at our Center are from diverse communities. Different languages. Multiple languages. So, we want to look like, we want to reflect, who we are, who we assist.

Ask questions in interviews with prospective staff to let them know this is important to identify an alignment, in terms of value systems. I had trained 100 years ago with a guy named Edwards Deming who helped rebuild Japan after World War II. True story. And I asked him one time. I said Dr. Deming – He had helped them create the quality improvement movement worldwide. And I said Dr. Deming -- the guy was a business consultant back in the day -- I said tell me about your view of American management. And Dr. Deming, he was in his 90s, tears welled up in his eyes. He shook his head, he said: American management, always shooting people out of the saddle, blaming the worker versus fixing the system, versus revisiting the mission, versus redefining those values, versus how do we make certain that we add value to every single person who comes through our doors?

That's what we can be. That's what you can be. As human beings, we have an infinite level of possibilities. In empowering ourselves, we can energize others for what their journey's about. Our Centers can be all that we choose to be. By our own sense of what I started with, and what I'll end with: Reflection. Thank you very much.

[ Applause ]

TIM FUCHS: Any questions? We've got a few minutes. Mike?

AUDIENCE MEMBER: I'm going to stand up because I hate talking over my shoulder to everybody. More of a thought than anything else. Is there anybody in this room that disagrees with what we just heard? Are we all on board with this? Our passions are aligned. 100% agree with you.

I'm frustrated because I see all the talent in this room, which is just a very small microcosm of what we actually represent for other people that have dedicated their lives to helping other people. And we will go home from here, and we will deal with our poor budgets, and heavy workloads, and we'll give it the old college try, because that’s what we’re in it for, we're in it for the satisfaction of helping other people. What I'd like to have is a conversation not necessarily in today, but in the future, of how we drive this uphill. So with over 400 CILs that are out there, you know what, I see commercials all the time, and I don't watch a lot of TV, but I see commercials all the time on abused animals. And rightly so. I get it. What I don't see is any commercials for what we do and who we represent. I don't see anybody stepping up. I don't see any celebrities with high dollars stepping up and saying hey, this is wrong. We need to level the playing field.

The reason I'm frustrated is because we'll all go back and we'll lean into the wheel, and we'll do our grassroots approach, and we'll press the flesh, and call it whatever you want. But you hit on a term that hit me right between the eyes, which is mindfulness. And in marketing it's called top‑of‑mind awareness. What that means is making sure that when people see an icon or they hear a word, they understand: Hey, that's CORD which is what we try to do on Cape Cod. What we need is a universal understanding of the plight that the people we represent fight and how hard we're fighting for them. And what I don't see is any general unity on a National scale to be able to represent all of the good works and all of the great people that we help.

And I don't know whether that's IL‑NET that can work to up its game and bring in… We need another level to be able to represent on a larger scale, because I think what we're talking about is making changes on a local level, which is important, but this needs to be a National consciousness. This needs to be better organized, with a lot more marketing dollars behind it. Because most of us in here have been doing this for decades and are probably going to be doing it until they nail the lid shut. I'd like to start seeing some real marketing money in people's faces, on TV, online, representing everything that we do and who we do it for.

Anyways, I'll get off my soap box. I love what's happening here. I love being in this room.

JESSE BETHKE GOMEZ: All in favor say aye. Aye! Thank you. We have a Board member from the NCIL here, there's others, Tim and others in IL. Here's what I ask you. Insights, like, how do we stay energized? We need to. So, to your point, I know there's, like, diamonds on those Post‑It notes that we need to have over here. We really do. Because this is the start of a new day.

It's the regeneration of a movement that has more relevancy today than at any other point. Because the convergence of people with disabilities and our aging community means how do we grow more mindful as a civil society for who we are as a democracy?

Not a platitude but thank you so much. Again, all in favor, say aye.

AUDIENCE: Aye.

JESSE BETHKE GOMEZ: Any other questions or comments?

STAN HOLBROOK: I appreciate your comment. Movements usually start from a micro‑level, and so we don't have a lot of resource but what we have is ourselves. And I think marketing dollars and all that's great and energizing into a National movement is great. Reality is: Let's change ourself; let's change what we can do. Let's change what our Center can do. And then we mobilize.

So, I'm all with you, but I don't want us to leave here saying: Wow, we need A, B, C, and D for this to happen. It happens within you right now. It happens within you right now. It happens within your Center. It's not going to mobilize everybody. But for those in this room, and those that are in decision‑making roles, if you truly get what's going on here, and you truly want to make a difference, you've got to take Step 1. That's all I'm saying.

I agree with you, sir. I agree with everybody. Yeah, I'm all for it but we don't take Step 1, we don't get to Step 20 and so I just want to be mindful that you can affect change right now. You can affect it right now. In yourself. Because if you don't…

[ Applause ]

Transformation only happens when it begins with you. So, I love transforming the system, but let's transform ourselves. Let's transform our Centers. Let's transform the community. Let's transform the nation.

[ Applause ]

JESSE BETHKE GOMEZ: Ladies and gentlemen, a toast to the comments by Stan. No really. Honestly, Stan, on behalf of all of us, thank you. That is poignantly said more than I ever could have attempted to. Thank you, everyone. I'll pass it back to Tim. Thank you, Tim. I think we made it on time.

TIM FUCHS: You nailed it. Thank you, Jesse. Thank you, Stan. And I want to acknowledge, too, that this all looks ‑‑ this journey is true, this commitment, this change is a matter of fact of this work, but we are likely all at different points in this journey. Our organizations are at different points and our communities look different, too.

So being wholly inclusive in one community is going to look different from another community, and that's why, I'm going to go back to that action plan, too. I really want you all to start thinking about those concrete steps that are going to need to happen. Whether Step 1 is you as an individual on paper, or whether it's a meeting that you want to hold when you get back or connections that you want to make, communications and marketing tactics, fundraising, outreach, whatever, it's all part of this work. And so, I think that's going to be helpful, A, for what I alluded to earlier which is getting past this awkward stage, where we're introducing topics but we're not offering all the solutions yet.

And also helping to develop the questions that you all are going to come up with, so that when we do get specific, we can help drill down to the things that are going to help your individual organizations, so use that action plan. Let us know how we can help. For right now though, we get to take a break.