



TASH CONNECTIONS: July, 2003

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You Can't Give What You Don't Get ... *Making Sure Staff are Valued, Included and Respected so they Can Pass These Along to the People they Support*

I couldn't believe what I was hearing ...

"Just don't expect them to do a whole lot on their own. They need way more supervision than they get. Unfortunately, left to their own, they're just not going to work very hard ... and don't think they're going to use much common sense!"

Devaluing talk about people with disabilities?

No, devaluing talk about the staff who work with people with disabilities.

It has always amazed me that we think we can under-pay and under-value the people who work with the people for whom TASH advocates and then expect those same staff to turn around and treat the people with disabilities with whom they work as important, valued, and respected community participants.

My background is largely in providing supports for adults with disabilities in the community. How did we think we could ask community staff (and others, including teachers, paraeducators, etc.) to work autonomously in complex jobs that require high levels of judgement and expect them to:

- treat the people they support with value and respect;
- assist them to develop and maintain relationships with family members, friends and neighbors;
- help people make solid, informed choices; and,
- support people to have meaningful impact on the directions their lives take;

... when we offer them so little of the same in return?

I sat in on a community agency's training session for staff not too long ago. The trainer, the staff's supervisor, was explaining to a group of relatively new community workers that their job was to support people with disabilities through a fairly structured process of thinking about what they want their lives to be like in three to five years, what kinds of resources and supports would be needed to achieve those visions, and then to help the people they support achieve the lives they envision. "Gee", said one new worker, "I wish someone would sit me down, ask me all this stuff, and help *me* to figure out how to get where I want to go!". There were chuckles all around but the irony was not lost.

Many of the trainees were young, few had college degrees, most were people of color, most of the women in the room had children, many of them were single moms. They were being hired to do jobs that were complex, stressful, and required about as wide a range of skills as a job can ask of a person. And yet, they weren't going to make much money; they were going to be assigned long hours and difficult schedules; they were going to be on their own much of the time, without a supervisor to turn to directly if things got tough; they weren't likely to

be able to have much impact on the policies of the agency for which they worked, or certainly on the larger set of state and federal policies under which they would be expected to operate; and if they were typical, they wouldn't still be working in this job in eighteen months.

A recent study found the average starting wage for community-based direct support workers to be \$7.33/hour. In many states the average starting wage was below \$7/hour and in some states it was as low as \$5.25/hour.ⁱ Multiple research studies have found that it is common for staff turnover rates in community provider agencies to range from 45 -75% per year or moreⁱⁱ. One result of high turnover rates is that some agencies are less willing to invest in staff training and support – they feel that there is little point in providing training above what is required, when direct support staff are unlikely to still be around in a year. It is an unfortunate cycle. Staff who feel unsupported are more likely to move on, and managers feel they would be wasting limited resources if they were to invest more time and effort in staff who tend to be very transient. High turnover rates and the accompanying failure of community agencies to truly invest in their employees have serious deleterious results for people with disabilities. The lack of staff continuity and training has impact on the manner in which staff handle difficult situations and makes it difficult for the people receiving support to develop relationships of trust that foster independence and growth.ⁱⁱⁱ

I listened to the trainer telling the new staff members that the most important part of their job was to empower the people with whom they work, teach them to make choices, value their decisions, help them connect with people, include them in all aspects of planning and activities – in short, help them to achieve self-determined lives of mastery, satisfaction, and meaning. I looked around the room. Few of the new employees looked as if they felt that *they* were valued and included and I knew that their work as direct support staff, while satisfying in many ways, would unlikely leave them feeling more valued. How could we expect people who did not feel respected and empowered by the agency for which they worked, or by society at large, to pass the same sense of achievement and participation on to the people they supported? It is clear to me that services that support people with disabilities to be valued members of their communities need to start with personnel policies and management practices that offer direct support staff the opportunity to be respected, contributing members of their workplaces.

Most managers and mid-managers of community based agencies did not start out to be managers – direct support staff come from widely varying backgrounds, most often learn the skills that are needed on the job, and work themselves up through the ranks, often rising from direct support staff to management in a very short time as high turnover rates result in a quick climb up a short career ladder. Many managers report that they had little or no formal training in the kinds of skills that are now required by their jobs – staff selection; staff coaching, counseling, and support; conflict management; and ways to include staff in planning and decision making.

The solutions to the problems of workforce support are as complex as the contributing causes. The factors contributing to workers feeling devalued include low wages, unattractive schedules, low social status of direct support jobs, limited career paths, and comparatively poor benefits. Yet, we all know of truly incredible people who continue their work as direct support professionals over the long haul and are nothing short of a gift to both the people they support and their co-workers. It is a challenge to agencies to figure out ways to value and include staff at all levels of decision-making and to assure direct care staff the opportunity to be heard and have impact. Only when the people who work directly with people with disabilities are treated as valued, respected participants in work that society views as important, will they be able to give what they get on a consistent basis.

ⁱ Polister, B., Lakin, K.C., Prouty, R. (2003). *Wages of direct support professionals serving persons with intellectual and developmental disabilities: A survey of state agencies and private residential provider trade associations*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota, Research and Training Center on Community Living, Institute on Community Integration.

ⁱⁱ Braddock, D. & Mitchell, D. (1992). *Residential services and developmental disabilities in the United States: A national survey of staff compensation, turnover and related issues*. Washington, D.C: American Association on Mental Retardation.

Lakin, K.C. & Bruininks, R.H. (1981) *Occupational stability of direct-care staff of residential facilities for mentally retarded people*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota, Research and Training Center on Community Living, Institute on Community Integration.

Larson, S.A. & Lakin K.C. (1999). *Longitudinal study of recruitment and retention in small community homes supporting persons with developmental disabilities*. *Mental Retardation*, 40, 267-280.

ⁱⁱⁱ Hewitt, A. & Lakin, K.C. (2001). Issues in the direct support workforce and their connections to the growth, sustainability and quality of community supports. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota, Research and Training Center on Community Living, Institute on Community Integration.