

A Quarterly Newsletter of the National  
Alliance for Direct Support Professionals

# Frontline Initiative

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## Embracing Diversity A Cornerstone to New Support Models

Fifteen-year-old Ahmad just completed his first individual session with a counselor. Although he accepted a second appointment, he asked if the counselor could see him on any day besides Friday.

The counselor indicated that she only had Fridays open. Since Friday was his Sabbath, Ahmad failed to show up for his next appointment. In this situation, the counselor missed an opportunity to effectively support Ahmad and gain credibility and respect because she didn't try to accommodate his special needs that come from his religious background.

In the last decade, our country has been grappling with "increasing," "understanding," "respecting," "supporting," and "defining" diversity. Out of this dialogue, many definitions have appeared, but one way diversity can be defined is as the sum total of the potential to be found in any group of people because of their differences.

In direct support services, the increased understanding of the value that differing per-

spectives bear is a boon in a time when services are being more consistently offered to people in their own communities and homes, and where connection to commu-

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Mentor Loretta Wilson provides instruction to new employee, Amanda Brewer, on implementing a domestic program with a consumer. See the story on page 6.

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# Frontline Notes

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Since the 1990s, diversity has been a hot topic and the discussion will continue well into the new millennium. For Direct Support Professionals (DSPs), knowledge of diversity issues is becoming a critical component of providing respectful and individualized quality supports to people with disabilities. For organizations that provide community services, there will be an increasing emphasis on helping their employees and supervisors work effectively as a team in a diverse environment.

The articles in this issue of *Frontline Initiative* intend to share personal experiences and offer varied perspectives related to working for and with people from different backgrounds. What is it like for a new immigrant to begin a career as a DSP? What does a consumer from

outside of the dominant culture want from a community service agency? What can DSPs and organizations do to create a culturally sensitive and welcoming workplace? We hope that by reading this issue, you will find some helpful ideas or at least recognize the importance of exploring these questions.

Our next issue will focus on credentialing of DSPs. It will feature articles regarding various types of credentialing and certification processes around the country and how they affect the roles and status of DSPs. If you know of something exciting going on at your agency or in your state related to credentialing, we'd love to hear from you.

The Editors

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# NADSP Member Organizations and State Contacts

**Frontline Initiative** is a product of the National Alliance for Direct Support Professionals. The NADSP is a collaboration of organizations who are committed to promoting the development of a highly competent human services workforce that supports individuals in achieving their life goals. The following are some of those organizations—

- Administration on Developmental Disabilities
- American Association on Mental Retardation
- American Association of University Affiliated Programs
- American Network of Community Options and Resources
- The Arc of the United States
- Association of Public Developmental Disabilities Administrators
- Association for Persons in Supported Employment
- CARF...The Rehabilitation Accreditation Commission
- Consortium for Citizens with Disabilities
- CUNY Consortium for the Study of Disabilities
- Council for Standards in Human Service Education
- Human Services Research Institute
- Institute on Community Integration (UAP), University of Minnesota
- International Association of Psychosocial Rehabilitation Services
- Irwin Siegel Agency Inc.
- National Association of State Directors on Developmental Disabilities
- National Association of State Directors of Vocational Technical Education
- National Center for Educational Restructuring and Inclusion
- National Center for Paraprofessionals in Education
- National Organization of Child Care Workers Association
- National Organization for Human Service Educators
- National Resource Center for Paraprofessionals
- New Jersey Association of Community Providers
- President's Committee on Mental Retardation
- Program in Child Development and Child Care, University of Pittsburgh, School of Social Work
- Reaching Up
- Self-Advocates Becoming Empowered
- TASH
- United Cerebral Palsy of America

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# A New American's Story as a DSP

My name is Josephine Uwazurike. I was born in Nigeria and came to the United States in 1980. After my husband Kevin completed his doctoral degree in engineering and found employment, we decided to stay in the United States. I was a registered nurse in Nigeria. With a BSN degree and a RN license earned in the U.S., I worked as a general hospital nurse and later as an assistant director of nursing. It was at a job in public health where I learned about people with developmental disabilities and the services they receive. Knowing that I had a lot to offer in this field, I became a Direct Support Professional (DSP) in 1993. I am now an administrator of several small homes for people with developmental disabilities.

I support 26 people with severe disabilities and mental illnesses. Although my role is to supervise the DSPs who provide services, I still spend between 6 and 40 hours per week providing direct support. Not only do I enjoy supporting consumers, I strongly believe that I should be able to perform any duty that I ask of others. This helps with my administrative role because I know what DSPs in the agency are experiencing and what they need to be able to achieve the highest possible quality of service.

Beyond my job, there are other things I enjoy in this country, such as political stability. Political violence is unlikely here. My experience is that there are crimes in the U.S. too, but in Nigeria, innocent people could face far more frequent and serious threats. Perhaps what I like most is the equal opportunities this

country offers. If you are willing to work very hard, chances are you will succeed!

However, there are times when my American dream still seems far away. To me, people here are much more distant towards each other than what I was used to in Nigeria. Sometimes I find it easy to say something wrong. People may assume that I am being offensive, when all I am trying to do is to extend my friendship and concern. Very often, people are so focused on my accent that they don't pay attention to the message I am trying to convey.

Fortunately, English is a national language in Nigeria along with four other languages. This made my transition to the U.S. easier. I believe that companies that employ immigrants whose native language is not English can offer English classes to facilitate their transition to the new culture and ultimately to assure that quality services are provided. At the same time, they could improve things by embracing the uniqueness that immigrant workers bring to their organizations and creating a welcoming environment.

I have found ways to maintain my culture in the U.S. I belong to a Nigerian cultural group whose members get together regularly to celebrate traditional festivals and perform ceremonies and rituals. One thing I like about this group is that we cook our traditional food,

though many Nigerian ingredients are not available here.

It is important for me to share my culture with my non-Nigerian friends and coworkers. Whenever

my group has a major event, I invite both coworkers and consumers. When the African Art Museum opened in Detroit, our cultural group put on a folk dance at the event, and many staff and

consumers were invited to join the celebration.

From my experience, I believe that communication is the key to everything we do in human services. Coworkers, supervisors, families, and all others should make efforts to improve mutual understanding by recognizing our common goals, respecting our differences, and exchanging expectations and concerns. As a new American, I am working as hard as I can to succeed in my life and contribute to the welfare of my consumers, coworkers, and organization. I am trying to overcome my limitations and cherish every warm helping hand that reaches out from people around me. The more we try to understand and embrace diversity in the workplace, the better off everyone will be.

Josephine Uwazurike worked as a DSP for six years. She is now an executive director at ADA Homes Inc. in Detroit, Michigan. She can be reached at 248.569.1040.

Very often, people are so focused on my accent that they don't pay attention to the message I am trying to convey.

# The Real Scoop

Welcome to *The Real Scoop*. Clifford is a self-advocate who has been politically active for years. He's ready to give you his spin on how to deal with issues you face as you forge ahead in your role as a Direct Support Professional (DSP). Seth has been a DSP for many years, and he loves to give advice. He may ruffle your feathers, but hey, it's for your own good! Clifford and Seth tackle this one with a few suggestions.

## "Excuse me. What did you say?"

*Dear Clifford and Seth,*

*The agency I work for is hiring more and more workers who came from other countries. I feel frustrated sometimes because my coworkers don't always understand what I am trying to tell them or how to do things that seem like common sense to me. How do I deal with this situation?*

— *Frustrated in CA*

## Dear Frustrated in CA,

You may be frustrated with the language barrier but try to remember when you first started, you also had questions to ask about the various tasks of your job. Focus on how to help people do their job and be patient. Remember that it isn't easy for them either to come to a new country or speak a whole new language. Most of them are eager to do a good job so they might be even more frustrated by not being able to communicate well with you. I believe that with patience and understanding from both sides, things will get better.

— **Cliff**

## Dear Frustrated,

I don't think you have to be from another country to lack common sense in community services. However, I do understand and respect your concern. I would like to add to the cause of your frustration the possibility of a coworker's completely different mindset based on cultural background. This issue really has to be looked at from varied perspectives.

Let's first look at the situation from your coworker's eyes. You know what it's like to step into a new job, but do you know what it's like to start a new life in a new country? Your coworkers do. They are 1) settling down in a new country (probably without families); 2) starting such an important job where the responsibility is to help others to achieve daily tasks and life goals; and 3) in need of new friendships and support.

Now step into the shoes of the consumers and their families. They are also likely to experience the initial difficulty in communicating with new immigrant workers. Looking at a new face and not knowing if this DSP can help, they may expect you, a senior, to help your new coworker to learn his/her job more quickly.

From your agency recruiter's standpoint, filling positions quickly with qualified people is difficult. No matter how hard recruiters try to use selective screening techniques and follow up on references, the possibility is that the person recruited doesn't have ALL the skills needed for the job.

As supervisors are concerned, it's their job to make sure that new employees learn to fit in and understand their roles and responsibilities. Supervisors may not always have access to resources to provide mentoring and training to guide and support the new employees, though they should definitely try hard to do so.

Now back to you. Talk to your supervisor with concerns and suggestions. Work with your coworkers instead of expecting them to become fully competent automatically. It takes time, patience, and guidance to adapt. You will be a better person because of contributing to this process. A skill like yours, to help people adapt, will be badly needed in this new century.

— **Seth**

## Ask Clifford and Seth

Do you have a burning question about direct support, but didn't know who to ask?

Submit it to —

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Please include your name, day phone for verification, and alias, if desired.

# Employee Mentoring

## A Program That Paves Way for Success

Nine years ago, Montgomery Developmental Center (MDC), a residential training center in the state of Ohio that supports 104 adults with mental retardation/developmental disabilities, recognized a growing need to provide additional job-specific training for new direct support staff. In 1991, a comprehensive peer mentoring program was developed and implemented in an effort to enhance quality service to clients while bridging the gap between initial staff orientation and the abilities and skills required by the actual job. The program has yielded invaluable benefits for both employees and the entire organization.

The Mentor Program is operated on a selective and volunteer basis. Employees who demonstrate superior job skills and leadership potential are identified and asked to participate. If an employee chooses to become a mentor, he/she is then provided training on related areas such as operating guidelines (e.g., mentor program schedule and feedback) and specific coaching methods. The organization believes that mentoring can be an essential component in helping new employees with diverse backgrounds find their niche more quickly in the organization. Mentors are typically paired with those employees they will be working with in the same work areas. This motivates them to provide the best mentorship possible.

Once selected, the mentor plays an important role in orienting and training new employees. During an orientation period, the mentor provides one-on-one specific instruction to the new employee on such areas as documentation, scheduling,

community outings, implementation of procedures, and special needs of their shift. The new employee is exposed to all shifts so that he or she has a concise picture of the roles of each shift. This allows the new employee to learn by doing while capitalizing on the mentor's experience.

The mentoring program has resulted in more promotion opportunities for direct service staff, and hence, improved retention.

The MDC mentoring program includes a process for ongoing evaluation of its effectiveness. The mentor uses feedback forms to assess specific skills demonstrated by the new employee and the information is shared with the new employee and his or her supervisor. Meanwhile, the new employee provides an evaluation of the mentor's instruction, and it is shared with the staff development coordinator. Further, mentors periodically meet to discuss both positive aspects and problem areas to ensure continuous program refinements. Personal experiences and thoughts are also shared at these meetings. This reflective process facilitates professional development of the new employees and their mentors, and continuing improvement of the training program itself.

One of the most beneficial aspects of this peer-mentoring program is that it enhances the skills of all those involved and enriches overall services. New employees have stated that blended with hands-on job experience, the mentoring program provides a real sense of community and eases the transition into the job responsibilities. In addition, mentors are afforded the opportunity to attend job-related seminars in a continuing effort to polish their skills, e.g., communication, coordination, feedback, adult learning, etc.

From an organizational perspective, the mentoring program has resulted in more promotion opportunities for direct service staff, and hence, improved retention. For example, because of their excellent performance as mentors, several direct service staff have gone on to supervisory and management positions. Further, individuals receiving support ultimately benefit from better trained direct service staff and supervisors.

The Mentor Program is a great enhancement to MDC's services, and an expression of its core values of community, dignity, and respect. It is a cornerstone of our vision, which views our employees and clients as part of an extended loving family, and does everything possible to help them succeed.

Brenda Haskin is a therapeutic program worker and mentor. For additional information on the MDC Mentor Program, contact Pete Emmons, Staff Development Coordinator, at [emmonsp@montgomery.mr.state.oh.us](mailto:emmonsp@montgomery.mr.state.oh.us)

# Member Profile

## The President's Committee on Mental Retardation

At the time that John F. Kennedy took office as President of the United States in January of 1961, people with mental retardation were largely ignored, kept out of sight in large congregate institutions or tucked away in family homes in communities that offered little or no service options other than what parents were able to cobble together themselves. The advocacy movement, in the form of what was then known as the National Association for Retarded Children, had been active since 1950, but the availability of services in schools and workshops to educate people about mental retardation were in embryonic stages.

President Kennedy had a younger sister with mental retardation, and aided by the vision and initiative of his sister Eunice Kennedy Shriver, he called together a President's Panel on Mental Retardation to take stock of the service situation and make recommendations about what could be done. There followed a small but mighty explosion of funding and service expansion that provided funds for construction of residential facilities and research through the establishment of the National Institute on Child Health and Human Development.

In 1966, President Lyndon Johnson issued an Executive Order that formally created the President's Committee on Mental Retardation (PCMR), which has advised every President since that time. Twenty-one Presidentially appointed Committee members and ex-officio members representing all the key departments of government (i.e., Health and Human Services, Education, Labor, Transportation, Justice,

etc.) strive to promote the welfare of American citizens with mental retardation and other intellectual disabilities. Some of the field's most distinguished figures, including Elizabeth Boggs and Gunnar Dybwad, have served as PCMR members or consultants. PCMR served as the cradle for the newborn system of developmental disabilities services during the early 1970s.

During the Clinton Administration, PCMR has taken up the cause of direct support professionals. President Clinton appointed John F. Kennedy, Jr. to the PCMR in 1995. With his lead in the work of Reaching Up, Inc., and under the direction of Committee Chair Valerie Bradley, PCMR collaborated with Kennedy's New York based group to initiate the National Alliance of Direct Support Professionals. Reaching Up, Inc. has provided funding for the PCMR publications *Opportunities for Excellence: Supporting the Frontline Workforce* and the five-part series, *With a Little Help from My Friends: A Series on Contemporary Supports to People with Mental Retardation*.

In honor of John F. Kennedy, Jr. and the work he chose in enhancing opportunities for DSPs, PCMR created a new John F. Kennedy, Jr. Award for Excellence in Direct Support, an honor that carries a \$500 cash award. It was presented to Mr. Lathan Simmons, Jr., an exemplary professional life coach from Raleigh, North Carolina, at the PCMR/ Reaching Up Conference on Poverty and Disability in New York City, on February 23, 2000. In this first year of competition, no fewer than 145 exceptionally qualified candidates were nominated.

In addition to the national organization and helpful publications, PCMR initiated The Next Generation of Leadership Symposium in 1996 to promote career and advocacy development among leaders who are 35 and younger from all across the spectrum of the developmental disabilities field. New self-advocates, young families, teachers, advocates, DSPs, researchers, agency administrators, and service providers gather together in Washington D.C. to engage in forums where their voices can be heard. At this symposium, the Next Generation is the venue for recognizing yet another PCMR award—the Elizabeth Monroe Boggs Young Leader Award, is given to an individual to recognize his or her advocacy achievements. This year's competition will open during the month of March.

PCMR is planning The Next Generation of Leadership Millennium Summit to take place August 17-19, 2000 at the Washington Court Hotel in Washington D.C. This fifth annual meeting promises to focus on career planning, workforce development issues, and skill building for the workplace and for life. We hope to see a lot of direct support professionals there including YOU! (See page 15 for more information.)

To keep in touch with the President's Committee on Mental Retardation (PCMR), its events and publications, visit the PCMR Website at [www.acf.dhhs.gov/programs/pcmr](http://www.acf.dhhs.gov/programs/pcmr), or email [pcmr@acf.dhhs.gov](mailto:pcmr@acf.dhhs.gov). *Frontline Initiative* will feature the DSPs nominated for the JFK, Jr. Award in the future issues.

# Searching for Harmony and Balance

## A Navajo Perspective on Direct Support

Understanding the Navajo people and their views of disabilities requires a different perspective than many non-Navajos have. The word “disability” is absent in the Navajo language. An individual who may appear to have disabilities in a structured setting (e.g., classroom) often are not considered to have a disability by family members. Navajo people have a strong spiritual belief in and emotional attachment to Dine Bi Keyah—the Navajo land. However, in the past, many Navajo children with disabilities had been placed into distant, off-reservation institutions or confined to their families.

Beginning in the late 1960s and the early 1970s, four reservation-based not-for-profit organizations had been created to provide special education and services for Navajo children with disabilities. The new organizations were located right in the Navajo land so that consumers could be close to their families and embraced by the Navajo culture. These organizations also provided a base for the development of other disability service programs on the Navajo reservation including schools, independent living, advocacy, partnerships, vocational training and rehabilitation. With increased public awareness and acceptance came a broader effort to facilitate the inclusion of Navajo people with disabilities into all aspects of the Navajo life.

The distinct culture of the Navajo people profoundly affects the way they perceive and use paid support services. Therefore, it is important to implement the programs in a

culturally sensitive manner. Navajo people depend on their providers to explain and deliver the support services that are culturally relevant. Many deep-rooted traditions are expected to be integrated into individual support plans when appropriate, and providers must be conscious of behavioral taboos. For example, tribal members perform healing ceremonies to bring an ill individual

Every effort should be made to keep services close to home to help enhancing families' own capacity of providing proper care.

back into harmony with nature and the universe. A person observes this process shall not wash or bath for four days and can only eat certain types of food. Another example is that Navajo individuals identify themselves with a maternal clan, a paternal clan, a maternal grandparent clan, and a paternal grandparent clan. Navajo people may not want anyone beyond their extended family to come and see their homes. As a provider, it is vital to understand and respect this clan structure and the kinship system as a whole.

Closely related to the kinship system, there is a hierarchy of preferred service providers for Navajo people with disabilities. Typically, a

first-choice provider would be a Navajo individual who speaks the language, understands and respects the culture — the tribal kinship system, in particular. Second in the hierarchy would be another Native American outside of Navajo tribes. Providing support services within their own tribal communities is part of the tribal sovereignty, which is not only a political issue but an effort to preserve a different way of life in reservation based programs.

As Navajo families prefer support services provided by their own people or at least those they have established a relationship with, non-Navajo support providers are likely at a natural disadvantage. They usually don't have prior knowledge of the Navajo culture and haven't had the time to develop rapport with those they support. Therefore, non-Navajo providers are expected to be properly trained not only in supporting people with disabilities, but also in communicating the cultural appropriateness of the service. They can learn by studying the structures and values of the Navajo society. Listening, observing, and showing interest and respect would be appropriate behaviors for non-Navajo providers to be accepted. Talking too much would not be, though making genuine efforts to speak the Navajo language might give a non-Navajo provider an inside track. The providers are also expected to help tribal members recognize the strengths of their culture. And most importantly, every effort should be made to keep services close to home to help enhance family own capacity of providing proper care. Traditional

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# Alliance Update

## Searching for Harmony and Ballance

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Navajo people do not open up immediately to outsiders before observing them for a period of time. However, once you are accepted by a Navajo person, you have a friend for life.

Eugene R. Thompson is Executive Director of St. Michaels Association for Special Education, Inc., a school and home for Navajo people with disabilities located in St. Michaels, Arizona. Mr. Thompson has 23 years of experience in special education, administration, and not-for-profit management for Navajo people. He can be contacted at 520. 871.2800 or by email at [dethomp@cia-g.com](mailto:dethomp@cia-g.com)

- The National Alliance for Direct Support Professionals (NADSP) recently sponsored a two-day working meeting in Washington D.C. to develop the initial draft of a national code of ethics for Direct Support Professionals (DSPs). Attended by DSPs from the states of New Hampshire, New York, Minnesota, and Missouri, this spectacular event generated amazingly productive discussion and resulted in a draft code of ethics and preamble. The NADSP Steering Committee is reviewing the initial draft and hopes to disseminate the draft to members soon for feedback and input. Look for this draft version in the next issue of *Frontline Initiative*.
- We welcome Cliff Poetz as a new NADSP Co-Chair. Cliff has been involved in NADSP-related issues for years including as a columnist for *Frontline Initiative's* "The Real Scoop" and a Steering Committee member. We are thrilled by the rich experience in DSP policy development and training that Cliff brings to his co-chair position.
- Regretfully, Tom Gannon, the NADSP State Representative from the Ohio Alliance for Direct Support Professionals, has left his position due to acceptance of a new challenge. We will greatly miss his leadership role and want to thank him for all his contributions on national and regional levels. Tom has committed to staying involved and in particular, to move forward his efforts in building an Ohio coalition eager to address direct support work-force issues including development of a DSP credentialing program.
- Tony Thomas, Executive Director for Welcome House, has agreed to serve as the Ohio State Representative and as a Steering Committee member. Tony brings excellent experience, ideas, and enthusiasm in addressing issues of recruitment, retention, and training for agencies which hire DSPs. He has developed creative partnerships with other organizations within the Cleveland area to increase the status and image of DSPs and to provide cost-effective competency-based DSP training. We are thrilled to have him on board.
- We are excited to announce that an internet e-mail service is now available to NADSP members. The NADSP list service is a way for members to keep in contact with each other and share ideas and information that relate to the NADSP mission and activities. Subscribers to the listserv can post NADSP news and submit information requests. This service is not used for personal communication or sharing any information irrelevant to NADSP. However, individual career networking is welcome at a Web-based NADSP discussion forum at <http://ici2.umn.edu/rtc/dsp/discussion.html>. The NADSP list service is maintained by staff at the Institute on Community Integration (ICI) at the University of Minnesota. To subscribe, call Kurtis at 612.624.1349 or email [scale001@tc.umn.edu](mailto:scale001@tc.umn.edu).

# Happily Employed With Help From DSPs

Hello, my name is Milena Petrocek and I was born the day after Christmas in 1958, in Tuzla, Bosnia. Fifteen days after my birth, I developed a very high fever.

The illness went undiagnosed and its cause was undetermined until three years later when a doctor diagnosed me with meningitis. At this point, some permanent damage had already been done, which requires me to use a wheelchair and limits my ability to use my hands.

Growing up in Bosnia, I was surrounded by a loving family and many caring friends. I felt entirely included in my community. To me, it was a beautiful life and usually I didn't feel handicapped at all. I went to school in a hospital and was helped with school work by my mother, a teacher. Because of this continuing support, I was able to succeed in high school. However, after I graduated from high school, my life became somewhat boring as I stayed at home while everyone else in the family went to work. There were no programs in place that would offer transportation or employment opportunities to people with disabilities. Often my daily routine did not require me to even change out of my pajamas.

When the Bosnian war began, my parents and I happened to be in the United States visiting my brother. We decided to stay away from the violence and begin a new

life here. Immediately, I started missing all of my friends left behind in Bosnia. I couldn't speak English at all and felt very isolated due to

my disability.

I wanted to work and do something that would take my mind off the people that used to be in my life. Because of my experience in Bosnia, where people with disabilities are not

typically employed, I didn't really believe that I would get a job. But Owobopte, a company that specializes in finding employment for people with disabilities in Eagan, Minnesota, thought otherwise.

I first went to Owobopte in October of 1994. The company evaluated my work abilities and direct support professionals trained me to develop job skills. Shortly after that, I served in a five-day-a-week position at Owobopte as an on-site production assembly worker. I was elated, and the happiness showed in my upbeat attitudes and strong work ethic. For me, the job took away much of my loneliness and gave me new strength to reach even higher. I was already learning English through watching TV, and I took English classes in the evening for two years. As my job skills and spoken English improved, my new goal was to work in the community,

which Owobopte immediately supported. The help from Owobopte and my perseverance paid off when I got a job at Best Buy as a Media Supply Specialist. I was ecstatic when my interviewer said "Welcome aboard!" The direct support professionals at Owobopte then gave me several days of one-on-one job coaching to help me get comfortable with my new position. My supervisor at Best Buy now tells me that I am doing a great job.

I love to work. I love contributing to my community and enjoy the things that a job gives me. Still, I would like to find another job in the community that would bring me up to 40 hours of work per week or even a little more. Although I always miss Bosnia and the people I left behind, I could never go back now. I could not work in Bosnia! While I love Bosnia, I would not give up my jobs and a whole new life here in the U.S.

Milena Petrocek lives and works in Minneapolis, Minnesota. She can be reached through Owobopte, Inc. at 651.686.0405.

I didn't really believe that I would get a job. But Owobopte, a company that specializes in finding employment for people with disabilities, thought otherwise.

# Proud to be Different

To many, if not all, immigrants, the United States of American is known as the melting pot of nations, making one out of many (as our national motto had it: e pluribus unum). Of late, an alternative adage is emerging: cultural diversity. Since its borders have become open to all five continents, the U.S. exhibits an unprecedented diversity of people and cultures, each putting their imprint on our country.

I, a native of Amsterdam, the Netherlands, know well what it takes to come to the U.S. and to accommodate its diversity. For example, I had to learn English as the first step toward becoming a fully accepted resident of Michigan. I became a DSP after a rewarding career as a college teacher. I am pleased to belong to a community that has a genuine concern for the welfare of its diverse workforce.

The company I work for is Spectrum Community Services, Western Regional Office (WRO), established in 1993. Shortly after it opened, the company took note of the cultural diversity among its West-Michigan's employees and appointed a task force to better understand and nurture diversity. Headed by a capable employee who was not originally from the U.S., the task force provided a forum for employees to look at their own potential prejudice and to respect workers from other cultures. These forums made it clear that the company was always interested in our opinions and made it its aim to help us accept and embrace differences — cultural, ethnic, or communal.

These diversity forums were held bimonthly during morning sessions at various group homes. Videos, group discussions, and guest speakers were used to facilitate focused discussions. One session revealed the marked differences between people who work in rural homes and those in metro areas, and between long-

A recent employee is grateful that Spectrum respects his African background (specifically his accent). He is sharing with his U.S. born co-workers some of the Kenyan ways to show respect for the consumers.

established work teams and those recently formed. Another session vividly portrayed the persistence of sheer discrimination in some parts of our country, while still another session outlined a model that can be used to resolve culture-related conflicts.

Measuring the effectiveness of these sessions is exciting. Through interviewing staff members, I discovered some rewarding changes that occurred in various homes as a result of the diversity forums. One

employee has observed a positive attitudinal change in some of his coworkers toward his sexual orientation. Spectrum, he added, has always been understanding and supportive during his three years of employment, even if some of his coworkers were not. A more recent employee is grateful that Spectrum respects his African background (specifically his accent). He is sharing with his U.S. born coworkers some of the Kenyan ways to show respect for the consumers. The mutually beneficial interaction among various cultures has positively affected daily operation of group homes as well. African coworkers are assisted to become familiar with American culinary recipes, while Americans are introduced to African cooking.

Since its inception in 1993, Spectrum (WRO) has encouraged cultural diversity and promoted respect for and appreciation of contributions from those who came from other parts of the globe. The company is still working hard to further improve cultural diversity in its workers and consumers. We have strong leadership that leads to unified organizational efforts. In the coming years, our goal will be figuring out how to best balance diversity and unity, fluidity and cohesion. In this uncharted course, we expect challenges, but feel we are up to the task.

Ralph Vunderink works for Spectrum Community Services (899 Village Lane, Jenison, MI 49428). He can be reached by email at [vunderal@aquinas.edu](mailto:vunderal@aquinas.edu)

# The DSP's Role in Developing a Culturally Competent Workplace

Organizational culture usually reflects the beliefs, priorities, and preferences of the founders and administrators. For many social service organizations as well as their funding systems and the surrounding regulations, the cultural foundation is primarily European American. Their structures, language, processes, hiring practices, foods, etc. are usually based on those that are perceived to be comfortable and "normal" by people with a European American background. Yet what is comfortable for some can be very uncomfortable for others. To effectively reach and serve a wide variety of consumer and employee needs, organizations need to enhance their cultural competency by welcoming and nurturing diversity.

In order to survive, most consumers of social services have developed some skills in negotiating the majority culture systems in the United States, regardless of their cultural backgrounds. However, they are more likely to learn, cooperate, and give trust if organizations are open to their needs and they feel understood and welcome. The same is true of employees from different backgrounds. While they may accommodate to survive, they'd have more to contribute if their cultures were truly respected and nurtured by organizations.

Creating openness in an organization is a gradual process which unfolds as the sensitivity of its members increases. Strong commitment from leaders of the organization is needed for achieving this change, however, DSPs can take it upon themselves to begin a personal jour-

ney toward cultural competence that can improve their service quality and interpersonal work skills. To do so, DSPs need to start by reflecting on their own cultural beliefs and biases.

You may begin by asking yourself questions such as "What makes me feel welcome or unwelcome?"; "How do I decide to whom to speak?"; "Does this person have any special features (appearance, clothing, decorations in his/her work space) that influence my decision?"; and "If I had power, how would I change the organization to make it more welcoming to me?"

Now imagine that you are a consumer receiving supports from your organization. Do you feel you fit in? Consider the following. If you spoke a language other than the dominant one or used alternative communication systems, how comfortable would you be communicating with others? Are the furnishing and decorations comfortable for you? Is the food familiar? Can you get some of your favorite "comfort foods"? Are there verbal and nonverbal expressions that made you feel uncomfortable? Are there any mixed gender and/or race groups?

These are only a few of the things that make up the organizational "flavor" or "culture." While you are thinking about these issues pay par-

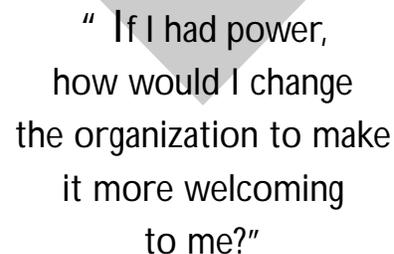
ticular attention to the "4 isms" of cultural behavior: racism, heterosexism, sexism, and handicapism.

Racism can be defined as the belief that certain races, especially one's own, are inherently superior to others'. Anytime an assumption is made about a person's abilities, desires, or intentions based on ethnicity alone, racism is being expressed. Institutional racism is prejudice plus power. For example, are personal care products for European Americans readily available to consumers of residential services, but do personal care products for African-American consumers have to be purchased out of their individual budgets?

Heterosexism is the societal and institutional belief system that values heterosexuality as superior and/or more natural or normal than gay, lesbian, bisexual, and transgender sexual orientations. It also includes the presumption that mainstream society should only consist of heterosexually identified people.

This can be illustrated in agency materials, such as applications which ask "Who is your spouse?" rather than a more inclusive word like *partner*.

Sexism can be defined as oppression based on gender, characterized in our society by systemic exclusion, presumptions, and practices that subjugate, disadvantage, and devalue one gender (typically women). An



" If I had power, how would I change the organization to make it more welcoming to me?"

Continued next page

## State-of-the-Art Definition:

### The DSP in Action continued from page 12

example may be when a female client complains about an ailment, she may be told to try resting for awhile, whereas a male client may be encouraged to go to the doctor.

Finally, handicapism promotes unequal and unjust treatment of people because of an apparent or assumed physical or mental disability. It assumes that people with disabilities are dependent regardless of their potential to live independent lives. People who exhibit handicapism often assume that a person with a handicap does not desire or deserve to be treated equally.

While you explore these various aspects about yourself and your organization, you may find that it may be helpful to keep a journal with your reflections and discoveries. Share your insights and your discoveries with administrators, co-workers, and consumers. As a DSP, you are in the unique position of knowing in what ways your organization can support diversity on a daily basis. The journey of the organization toward cultural competence needs your input.

Information for this article was adopted from the training module *Providing Cross-Cultural Support Services to Individuals with Disabilities and Their Families*. Information on how to order this module is listed in the resource section on page.

### Person-Centered Planning

If there is anything that we have learned about providing services and supports to people with developmental disabilities and their families, it is that people with mental retardation and other related disabilities are unique. No two persons need or desire exactly the same things in the exact same way. Because of this, there is more than one right way to provide supports to them.

As more has been learned about what people need and want and how supports can best be provided, new processes that involve person-centered planning (PCP) have been used successfully to develop individualized strategies and supports. These planning processes are particularly useful in figuring out how to best plan supports for people with specialized needs (e.g., challenging behavior, limited communication skills).

Person-centered planning is different from the traditional interdisciplinary (IDT) processes. It focuses on people's gifts, strengths, preferences, and what they are doing right instead of their deficits, weaknesses, limitations, and what they are doing wrong. In PCP, an emphasis is placed on the individual, his or her

family, and the specific supports they need to become full citizens in their communities of choice. PCP

meetings involve people who know and care about the person for whom the plan is being created, such as the DSPs who know the client best. The tone of these meetings tends to be more personalized, creative, and fun. PCP has dramatically changed the lives of many people receiving supports. The more these pro-

cesses can be used in developing supports and services for people, the better their quality of life will be.

It focuses on people's gifts, strengths, preferences, and what they are doing right instead of their deficits, weaknesses, limitations, and what they are doing wrong.

# Frontline Resources

## **Providing Cross-Cultural Support Services to Individuals with Disabilities and Their Families**

Slobof, J., Brown, M., Hewitt, A. and O'Neil, S., 1999

This module is one of a five-part series aimed at DSPs in community and educational settings. It includes a working guide to becoming a more culturally tolerant and aware of diversity issues. Topics include cultural self-definition, examining cultural competence at the individual and institutional levels, how to be a culturally competent DSP, and how to promote support for cultural diversity where you work. It also includes a set of references and resources about cultural competence.

Cost: \$25.00 for both facilitator and learner copies. To order, contact: Publication Office, Institute on Community Integration, University of Minnesota, 109 Pattee Hall, 150 Pillsbury Dr. SE, Minneapolis, MN 55455, Tel. 612.624.4512

## **Culturally Competent Services: Bibliography of Materials from the NCEMCH Library**

National Center for Education in Maternal and Child Health (NCEMCH), 1999

This selective annotated bibliography provides a list of print resources published between 1990 and 1999 that focus on assessing and developing cultural competencies in health care services.

To order, contact NCEMCH at 1100 West 49th Street, Austin, TX 78756, Tel. 1.800.434.4453, 1.888.434.4624, Web: <http://www.ncemch.org>

## **Developing Cross-Cultural Competence: A Guide for Working With Young Children and Their Families**

Lynch, E.W. & Hanson, M.J. 1998

This is only one of many publications distributed by Brookes publishing which help social service practitioners and educators understand how to meet the needs of consumers from various backgrounds.

Cost: \$39.95. Publisher: Paul H. Brooks Publishing Company, P.O. Box 10624, Baltimore, Maryland, 21285-0624. Phone: 1-800-638-3775, Fax: 1-410-337-8539, Web: <http://www.brookespublishing.com>

## **50 Activities for Diversity Training**

This training package is one of many offered through HR Press to help business support diversity awareness — from cultural diversity, to issues of sexual harassment, to hiring and employing the Gen X worker.

Cost: \$139.00. Order from: HR press, P.O. Box 28, Fredonia, NY 14063. Phone: 1-800-444-7154, Fax: 716-679-3177, Web: <http://www.hrpress-diversity.com>

## **Acceptance: Developing Support for Change**

Kennedy, D., 1999

This book has received good reviews from editors and readers alike as being practical, easy to apply, motivating, and helpful to both novices as well as those who are knowledgeable about diversity.

Cost \$11.00 (approximate). Available at most bookstores.

## **Embracing Diversity**

continued from cover

nity and respect for individual needs are becoming cornerstones to contemporary services. In addition, the direct support workforce is increasingly made up of people of differing backgrounds, partially due to the fact that organizations are drawing from the pool of immigrants to fill critical positions.

Trying to understand the worldview of others is the hallmark of embracing diversity. As a Peace Corps volunteer 20 years ago, I worked in Malaysia as a counselor providing services to biracial children who were having difficulty dealing with the implications of being from two different cultures. The population I worked with was composed of three distinct ethnic groups: Malays, Chinese, and Asian Indians. I was constantly challenged to understand the views of these individuals based on their cultures. Fortunately, all Peace Corps volunteers went through a cultural training program. Had it not been for this training that helped us develop the right attitude and skills, our work would have been totally ineffective. I found that the best way to be helpful in counseling was to acknowledge and respect the differences between myself and the other person, and accommodate my counseling style to the person's uniqueness. The need to adjust certainly holds true for direct support situations in today's community support.

Embracing, rather than merely tolerating diversity generates greater respect, understanding, and cooperation among people. Usually when

Continued back page

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Thank you again for this incredible opportunity. I have left the symposium informed, inspired, and motivated to PIONEER CHANGE.  
— encouraging words from a 1999 participant

For more information, contact PCMR c/o *jbrowning@acf.dhhs.gov* or call 202-619-0634 and keep an eye on our Website, *www.acf.dhhs.gov/programs/pcmr*

\*The young at heart are also welcome.

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## Embracing Diversity

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first encountering people different from ourselves, we have certain assumptions about them. We may choose to continue to hold on to our assumptions or grow personally and professionally by challenging our assumptions and seeking well-rounded information. For instance, if you suspect that a coworker might be unhappy with you because she does not look directly at you when speaking, you may want to tell her how you feel. You might find out that in her culture, this is a signal of politeness.

Despite our differences, we are more similar than we think. Oftentimes, it is easier to accept differences once we understand what we have in common. There are values shared universally. We all need to be loved, accepted, and respected. However, the way in which these desires are expressed may be different across cultural groups and individuals.

How do we move beyond our own experiences to embrace diver-

sity? We need to realize that there is merit in honoring differences. While there is no handbook on the right way to become sensitive to diversity, there are things that might be helpful in this process. Some recommended strategies to start a journey toward understanding and appreciation are as follows. Remember, no matter how much you have learned, be prepared to make mistakes and learn from them.

- Join a local folk dancing group.
- Take a culinary arts class to learn about food and eating habits around the world.
- Watch movies about cultures that are different from your own.
- Surf the internet for sites that focus on diversity and multiculturalism issues.
- Attend celebrations that honor contributions made by people of various backgrounds, e.g., the Martin Luther King Celebration.

- Consider hosting an exchange student in your home.
- Volunteer for community programs that support culturally diverse population.

As international boundaries continue to diminish, we will be interacting more with various cultures than ever before. To succeed in this environment, direct support professionals need to strive to not only accept diversity, but to be knowledgeable and competent in supporting others in the diverse workplaces and communities.

Alan D. Lewis, MSW, Ed.D., is Chair and Field Director of the Social Service Program at Pima Community College, Tucson, AZ. He teaches a course on diversity and multiculturalism at various universities and colleges and has presented extensively throughout the United States on these issues. Currently he is working on his second book on Biracial children. Dr. Lewis may be contacted at 520.206.6030.

Visit the DSP Website at <http://ici2.umn.edu/rtc/dsp/>

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