

## Make a Difference Report – 7/2013 – 6/2014

(6/27/14) Joanne Drewsen

***Make a Difference, A Guidebook for Person-Centered Direct Support*** provides tools, exercises, and stories that help us get at the heart of our work –supporting people with disabilities to have rich lives in their neighborhoods and communities, so they belong and are valued for what talents and interests they have to share and contribute.

John O'Brien summarized from discussions of people involved: *"It turns out to be easier for people to think they get the main idea of Make a Difference –supporting individuals to connect with contributing community roles that reflects their interests and capacities– than it is to put it into practice."* John O'Brien adds, *"This is important because so many competing demands pull organizations into maintaining settled routines and complying with system demands and away from the satisfactions of supporting people to develop new roles and relationships. The imbalance that results when maintenance overwhelms development can show up in a number of related ways: low investment in the work and heightened turn-over and associated costs; disengagement of people with disabilities and, for some people, recurrent incidents; a lack of confidence in ability to solve problems and overcome obstacles that leads to stagnation."* ***Make a Difference*** contributes to righting the balance by encouraging creative and courageous action. That is why the on-going workshops, with opportunities to try things out and come back and share with the group, have been identified by Learning Partners as being effective.

The **Make a Difference** workshops are an extension of the John O'Brien workshops on Valued Social Roles sponsored by DDA Roads to Community Living. Agencies who had participated in the Valued Social Roles workshops were asked by RCL if they wanted to extend their participation to a series of workshops based on ***Make a Difference, A Guidebook for Person-Centered Direct Support*** by John O'Brien and Beth Mount. Aacres, Service Alternatives, and VOAWW all made the commitment to send staff partnered with a person they support (**Learning Partners**) to these on-going workshops. The workshops were facilitated by Joanne Drewsen with John O'Brien as on-going mentor and facilitator of 2 sessions. The stories of people being involved and contributing in their communities used as examples at these first workshops came from the Federal Real Choices grant, Building Careers and Community and the work done in Snohomish County. The workshops started 7/31/13 with 10 Learning Partners and the current last session was 5/14/14. At that time there were 7-8 Learning Partners who were still actively participating.

***Learning Partners*** made an agreement to work together to take part in an on-going ***Learning Journey*** by:

- Discovering ways they wanted to use their interests and talents to contribute and increase their participation, relationships and valued roles in the community.
- Getting to know their community to find opportunities where theses talents and interests might lead to valued social roles;

- Trying out these community opportunities and then determining what worked well and what might need to be adjusted, so the valued roles can be shared on an on-going basis.

**Agencies** involved made a commitment to figure out how to make sustainable within their agency the learnings from the Make a Difference workshops using the journey and stories of the Learning Partners who participated as starting points. To provide support to participating agencies:

- Joanne Drewsen, the facilitator, met individually with each agency and their managers and Learning Partners at least 2 – 4 times depending on the agency.
- She also met individually with Learning Partners as needed. This included help with connecting them with Department and Office of Neighborhoods in Shoreline and Seattle to get help with local resources, places, and neighbors who were welcoming and shared similar interests. At least once, she assisted Learning Partners to make their first connection

The first part of the series was nine- two and a half hour teaching, discussion, and facilitated sessions, including one facilitated by John and Connie O’Brien. The last part of the series was four one and a half hour sessions focused on facilitation and discussion with shared learning, with one longer session facilitated and taught by John O’Brien. PowerPoints and agendas were developed for each session that can be used and adapted by future facilitators.

## **Outcomes**

### **Learning Partners receiving support**

- All ten Learning Partners explored at least one and up to ten or more organizations, groups, or places where people had common interests and they thought would be places to belong and contribute in some way. Often this was done by talking to a person involved and visiting the place.
  - Four Learning Partners are currently volunteering on a regular basis. **Examples are:** delivering food to people, helping at PAWS.
  - Two people are connected with a church and getting to know church members and their pastor. One of these people is getting guitar lessons through his church and hopes to join the church band. The other has expanded his relationships extensively with the pastor and other church members.
  - Three other people have identified a group they want to join. **Examples are:** a science fiction book club, a bible study group, a fishing group.
- Some Learning Partners report feeling proud of how they have contributed and are interested in taking leadership roles.
- Two pairs of Learning Partners have told their stories from Make a Difference which were written and shared through the Community Inclusion Newsletter distributed every

two months by Service Alternatives. Another pair of Learning Partners is ready to share their story in the next Community Inclusion Newsletter.

- Three pairs of Learning Partners and their Manager, one from each agency, are sharing their stories in a presentation at the Community Summit.
- One pair of Learning Partners has created a video of their journey that was shared at one of the workshops with John O'Brien. John O'Brien has asked permission to show this video in Europe and that is being arranged.

### **Learning partners providing support –**

#### ***We learned that:***

- We come from different agencies, but we have a common goal: supporting people to connect to our communities in meaningful ways.
- We can't do anything without good communication and good communication begins with listening and respecting each other's rights and feelings.
- We can only share our real concerns and what we really care about when we feel safe. This group has become a place where many of us feel safe.
- We felt it was too hard at first and we could never do the work to connect to our communities in new ways. But because Joanne and our managers had confidence that we could, we have.
- We have gotten to know our Learning Partner in different and deeper ways, which has changed our perspective of our job and perception of what is possible as a direct support staff.
- We have seen many different gifts and talents in our Learning Partner, some of which were hidden.
- We know how to approach organizations (such as fishing groups) in the community with our Learning Partners, to find out more about what they do and if their interests fit.
- It is more than just being present in your community but belonging and being part of your community because people value who you are and how you contribute.
- We have learned how to "Think big and start small." Little steps lead to bigger steps.
- We know how to work around the barriers and never give up.
- It is ok to try something and fail if we use what we learned from the failure to try again and move forward.
- You need persistence to get where you want to be – assisting people to have valued roles in their neighborhoods and communities.
- Coming together at the workshops kept the spirit going, and helped us continue the Make a Difference work at our agency

- We want to continue to meet as a group with our Learning Partners to assist us in continuing our stories about how we are contributing in our neighborhoods and communities.

### Agencies

- One manager has said that there have been significantly fewer incident reports since a person they support has been connected and contributing in their community and participating in the Make a Difference workshops.
- The same manager reports that their team of staff has been invigorated and inspired by being involved with Make a Difference and the Learning Partner's journey.
- Service Alternatives has a plan how to continue the Make a Difference workshops within their agency and is willing to involve the other agencies who participated. The staff and managers have been sharing the video created by a pair of Learning Partners that shares their journey. This video has inspired many other staff and managers to want to figure out how to be involved in a Make a Difference journey.
- Aacres is interested in partnering with Service Alternatives in figuring out how to ensure the Make a Difference work is sustainable within their agency.
- VOAWW has been going through a reorganization and feel they need to complete that before figuring out how best to ensure the Make a Difference work is sustainable within their agency.

### **Excerpts from John O'Brien's summary of Make a Difference workshop on 3/19/14 about Sustainability:**

#### **"This is not the end of our journey, it is the beginning!"**

- These words conclude the video that Learning Partners Seth & Lee produced to vividly tell the story of the good work they have done so far. They capture the sentiment of the group: there is strong interest in continuing to support the learning partnerships that have developed during the course and in expanding opportunities for participation in *Make a Difference*.
- Learning partners make it clear that *Make a Difference* is not magic but hard work that takes time and a willingness to confront failures and keep on through frustration and disappointment. Steps forward are often small but, when they are taken by partners together, small steps strengthen relationships and shift perceptions of people's capacities, interests and possibilities.
- Within an organization, *Make a Difference* is most effective when it is incorporated into the life of the team that includes the direct support staff partner. This makes selecting a team for *Make a Difference* as important as selecting learning partners. A team that

owns the process will provide better support and learn more from team investment in making the learning partnership successful.

- The process is challenging for managers and team leaders, who are under considerable strain from coping with staff turnover, managing in a system 2 with many years of a “do more with less money” policy, and dealing with the increasing demands of a compliance driven, risk adverse system of inspection. The process will be just one more extra thing on a too full plate unless the leadership can see and communicate that the work that is in danger of being neglected as something extra is something that it’s good to work on every day.
- Facilitation involves even more than communicating the ideas and practices and guiding the development of a learning group. It also includes checking in with learning partners and their managers and coaching between group sessions.
- Facilitator development can include mentoring, shadowing someone more experienced, and, as numbers of facilitators grow, a facilitator learning group.
- Skillful facilitation by people who are committed to learning how to support people with developmental disabilities to be community builders is a key to offering *Make a Difference* to more agencies. Service Alternatives is already committed to facilitating the course internally and is open to exploring ways to open its learning group to others, beginning with Acres and, if they are interested, VOAWW.

In addition, there is interest in collaboration between Region 2 DDA and DDA RCL to continue more cross agency *Make a Difference* workshops. There are some residential agencies who have not previously been involved who are already interested. In addition, there are new skilled teachers and facilitators who are interested in facilitating the *Make a Difference* workshop and could be mentored by Joanne Drewsen.