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# Wisconsin's Community Conversations: Building a Youth Employment Coalition Through Structured Opportunities to Communicate

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## Background

Wisconsin's Developmental Disabilities Services agency and Vocational Rehabilitation agency, in conjunction with the Wisconsin Board for People with Developmental Disabilities and Wisconsin's University Center for Excellence in Developmental Disabilities, implemented a series of community conversations to build dialogue and create a coalition around employment for youth with intellectual and developmental disabilities (IDD). Through this initiative, a range of community members came together in structured forums to discuss ways to improve integrated employment outcomes for youth.

## Implementation

Key members from the agencies mentioned above began by compiling a comprehensive list of attendees, including young adults, family members, school personnel, service providers, and employers. One of the key factors found for a successful Community Conversation was having a large enough group of diverse participants. It was an important goal to have people outside the service system in attendance.

Implementation was most successful when participants were personally invited; flyers to advertise the event were not sufficient. As part of the invitation, participants were told that any member of a community can attend and share their ideas. Invitees were then asked to invite members from their personal networks as well. This further contributed to successfully gathering large and diverse groups.

An average Community Conversation included a group of about 15–20 participants, though a few meetings brought together nearly 100 participants. Participants sat in groups of about 5–6 people per table, each with a table facilitator. The conversations began when a question was posed, and small group discussion ensued.

Generally, only two or three questions were discussed during each Community Conversation. This way it was possible to thoroughly explore each question and discuss many ideas. It was important that questions were well-crafted and solution-focused, so that time was not spent talking only about barriers that hinder youth employment outcomes or other problems.

Typical questions posed during a Community Conversation might include:

- “What can we as a community do to improve employment outcomes for youth with disabilities?”
- “What can I personally do to help the community reach our goal?”

In addition to structured questions, Wisconsin's Community Conversations effort benefitted from a savvy planning committee that understood the community's needs and knew when participants would be willing and able to attend. For example, for some communities, breakfast meetings had advantages over lunch or evening meetings, and for other communities, lunch or evening meetings were preferred.

After about 20 minutes, when the first round table had discussed and documented their answers, participants switched tables and continued to discuss the question, now with a different collection of participants. After another 20 minutes, small group discussion came to a close, a new question was posed, and the process was repeated.

Towards the end of each meeting, participants came back together as a large group to discuss the ideas they had generated. Most Community Conversations lasted one-and-a-half to two hours.

## Impact

In Wisconsin, Community Conversations created a foundation for establishing a local coalition around youth employment. These events not only built civic pride, but instilled a sense of ownership--a feeling that integrated employment for youth with IDD is the community's issue, rather than an individual or family issue. Community members felt more committed, and reported feeling a shared responsibility for reaching the group's goals.

Furthermore, participants agreed that Community Conversations opened up dialogue and built connections with employers, most notably between schools and employers. Unexpectedly, some employers who participated in Community Conversations stated at the event that they would be willing to hire an employee with IDD at their business and several youth did obtain paid employment through this connection.

Because of the value found in eliciting responses, building relationships, and generating many ideas very quickly, Community Conversations have now been included as a component in several other statewide grants and projects.

## Highlights

- The intentional creation of attendee lists to ensure a large group of diverse participants, which purposely extended beyond service providers.
- Planners ensured that questions were solution-focused, so that time was not spent talking about barriers that currently hinder youth employment.
- Community Conversations established a local coalition around youth employment whereby the full range of participants committed to a shared responsibility for achieving their goals.
- Community Connections opened up dialogue and built relationships between a diverse group of stakeholders, and specifically between schools and employers.

**For more information, contact:****Jennifer Neugart**

Wisconsin Board for People with Developmental Disabilities

[jennifer.neugart@wisconsin.gov](mailto:jennifer.neugart@wisconsin.gov)

(608) 261-7528

For more information, see the Community Conversations curriculum at:

<http://www.waisman.wisc.edu/cedd/pdfs/products/community/LaunchingInclusiveEfforts.pdf>

Community Conversations were implemented as part of the Let's Get to Work project, an implementation site for the Partnerships in Employment Systems Change initiative funded by the Administration on Intellectual and Developmental Disabilities, U.S. Department of Health and Human Services. [partnershipsinemployment.com](http://partnershipsinemployment.com)

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