It Takes a Village: Choosing and Managing Your Team

There is a saying that “It takes a village to raise a child.” Most would agree that the support of our village is invaluable. Using a person-Centered planning process has been compared to relying on your village.

Likely you had a whole village you maintained to help you when your child was small—relatives, neighbors, school staff, coaches, church leaders, medical providers, friends, and so on.

Families often feel that it gets harder as youth reach the fourteenth year of age—the time when transition planning with the school IEP team starts. Now you need to think about life after high school as you plan school courses and write goals for post high school employment, postsecondary education, and independent living.

The village you relied on before may be forgotten as you feel the urgency to find and arrange new services and supports. There are many new players to work with and agencies with very formal processes that you must navigate. You may feel overwhelmed or that you don’t have the time to become an expert on all the options for services and supports.

The informal supports from your young person’s village may not be used effectively, or you may not even consider using them. If your family member is an adult, the village may feel even more sparse.

A person-centered planning process is a way to bring people together and to rebuild your village to support the individual by including representatives of formal (agencies) and informal (family, friends, etc.) systems of support. By working toward a common goal, families and professionals, and community members can achieve more positive outcomes while putting long-term community supports in place.

• “Some parents do not believe that their child is limited or boxed in by a diagnosis. They dream as big for the child with a diagnosis as they do for any other child. The parents set up a circle of friends to help the child by finding ways to remove barriers to full participation and to find ways to include the child in whatever is going on. Sometimes these circles continue into adulthood and continue to provide a range of benefits to all
people involved in them.” –Tanya D. Whitehead (See the UPC resource list to access more information from Tanya Whitehead)

By the time a student is transition age the village needs to become broader, and families need to make sure that the invaluable informal supports a young adult can benefit from are developed. Depending on the student’s needs, it could include among others:

- Family friends and neighbors
- People from community programs and organizations
- IEP team members
- The high school counselor
- The Vocational Rehabilitation transition counselor
- A DSPD caseworker
- Independent Living Center personnel,
- The pediatrician,
- Mental health providers

As the individual becomes an adult, more new team members may be needed. This may include:

- Case managers
- Social workers
- Service providers
- Housing providers
- VR counselors
- Employers
- Health care providers
- Appointed guardians
- Financial planners
- Legal administrators or family attorneys
- Anyone who provides services

Growing an individual’s village also includes developing natural supports for inclusive living in a community. Natural supports usually do not involve payment but are based on relationships. Natural supports can be very important throughout a person’s lifespan and can be a key to inclusion in the community. Often small towns and more stable neighborhoods are very supportive in this way. Sometimes people are just glad to know how to help.

Some examples:

- A neighbor who helps a young person find movie theaters on nearby bus routes
- A relative who talks with colleagues about job opportunities for a young adult
• Friends or relatives who help the adult find clubs to join
• A fellow volunteer or supervisor in a community organization or committee where the youth provides volunteer service
• People from an individual’s church congregation who provide support
• People at a neighborhood gathering place
• People at local businesses the individual may use.
• A retired community member who volunteers to support the individual

It helps to keep in mind that no person, including parents, can be fully knowledgeable in all of life’s domains. Parents need to have the mindset that it is not only OK but it is necessary to call on the experts to give support in this journey. It really does take a team to build the best life for your son or daughter and to sustain it over the years.

Tips for choosing and managing team members:

• One way to make your list of potential team members is to use a circle of support diagram to help you visualize people who are already associated with the individual. This diagram is available on the Utah Parent Center website. The blue center of the circle is the place to write the youth or adult’s name. The red circle is for good friends, relatives and neighbors. Next the green circle is for people in your network and organizations you work with such as teams, scouts, church groups, or school personnel. The outside purple circle is for service providers such as case workers, therapists, service coordinators, medical care providers care attendants, VR counselors and so on. (See link in resources below)

• Support your youth or adult with disabilities in deciding whom to invite to be on the team.

• A manageable sized team is at least three and up to nine or so members.

• An important quality for good team members is a commitment to be of service and to understand and be guided by the individual at the center of the plan. Good team members should be willing to work to meet difficult goals and be creative and open to trying whatever will serve and bring out the good in the person. The team members might be people who:

  o Have an interest in the individual
  o Have the ability to make the process happen
  o Have connections in the community
  o Have connections with the different services

• Most team members are not paid. Members should be able to meet on a regular basis.
• Good communication is very important so that people know what is expected, and we know what we can expect from people. We need to know if the person really is available and willing.

• Some of these people will function as a safety net and connection to the community over the years. A commitment to the individual is important.

• Membership may ebb and flow with services but a core committed group is essential.

• As your team gets into the swing of things, you may want to set up a rotation system where members serve for a couple of years and then have a break. After a break team members may come back refreshed and ready to work.

• Having terms of service can be helpful in keeping the energy going. Having people transition on and off at different intervals can assure you always have some old and new team members.

• Keep old and prospective team members as friends and consider having a way to keep them informed. A private Facebook group, web page or blog might work.

• Be sure to talk about celebrate successes, even small ones. Celebrating will help create the energy and motivation to continue for the long haul.

Resources:

Circle of Support chart for helping to brainstorm and choose the team: https://utahparentcenter.org/wp-content/uploads/2016/07/Circle-of-Support.pdf More information about using the chart and a link to instructions: http://www.utahparentcenter.org/family-resources-draft/


Article about how to develop natural supports: https://www.dds.ca.gov/Publications/docs/Natural_Supports.pdf