Overcoming Stigma Through Education and Capacity Building in Communities

A person’s community includes neighbors, schools, first responders, physicians, businesses, prospective employers, and any other location in the community that is important to that person (Parenti, 2017). We need to help support people with disabilities to be fully integrated community members by ensuring they receive the appropriate access to education, healthcare, goods and services, and have the opportunity to have access to competitive employment, which can involve specific skills training. Disability advocates continually point out the ways in which marginalization continues to occur; we need to include those voices in all elements of planning and service provision.

In addition to continuing to educate others on the abilities of people with disabilities, it is crucial to be careful with our words given that the language we use can significantly impact stigma reduction. Our words and conversations need to be supportive and positive in order to impact stereotypes that may still exist within the community. Remaining positive and highlighting the contributions of a person with a disability helps support them and assists other community or family members to value the person’s contributions. Ensuring that we see and name the “person” instead of referring to them as clients or patients helps others see the person too.

Case Study

The following Case Study illustrates an example of how one person was supported in ways that overcame stigma in their community. William is a 38-year-old male diagnosed with an intellectual disability who resides in a home in the community. William receives 24-hour support from direct support professionals (DSPs) who work in his home as well as the program he attends during the day. William also receives behavior services to help support him in learning how to communicate his needs instead of engaging in behaviors that may be considered dangerous or disruptive, such as aggressive behaviors towards others, destruction of property, or yelling at others.

William has great communication skills and is able to engage in conversations with others. He loves to help and will jump right in when he sees someone start to take the trash out or wipe down a table. He has strong gross motor skills activities. William expressed a desire to be competitively employed, and the aforementioned skills helped his support team to work with him identifying possible jobs of interest. Competitive employment involves working in the community while earning a competitive wage (i.e., earning what someone else working the same job without a disability makes, at minimum wage or higher), with the ultimate goal being to have natural community supports.

Natural supports in an employment setting include coworkers, managers, and any other person who will be naturally in the environment, as opposed to a paid caregiver. In order to help make William’s community involvement a success, preparation occurred for him, the community, and the DSPs, providing support. To prepare William for success, his preferences were evaluated and community job/locations meeting those preferences were identified. William has full autonomy when he accesses the community and what activities are completed.

To prepare the natural supports at the job location, the DSP demonstrates for coworkers and community members that all interactions should be with William, and not with the DSP. They also demonstrate and teach how to build a relationship and how to respond if William starts to become agitated. They also demonstrate the best way to teach William any new skills. Initially, William attended work once a week for 30 minutes and would complete a highly preferred job duty (taking out the trash). The length of time William attended, and the number of days were slowly increased, with his preferences and choices closely monitored.

This gradual increase allows the coworkers to get to know William and build relationships. Once those relationships were built, the DSP was able to step back, and natural supports took over. William’s DSP plays close attention to his verbal and physical cues, and if William becomes agitated or overwhelmed, he is reminded of his ability to take a break, or even to leave work early. Because the relationship has developed over time with careful attention to relationship building, the place of employment understands the need for flexibility and William is permitted to leave early, come in late, switch days, and so forth, based on his needs. William has also developed relationships with community members who frequent the convenience store and will notice if he’s been out for a few days. They too help to provide the natural supports needed to secure successful community involvement.

By educating the natural supports in William’s community about his needs and how best to support him, stigma around any perceived differences has been minimized and replaced with genuine care and concern for him as a person.

Though much progress has been made both legally and culturally related to discriminatory practices, there is still work to be done to create inclusive environments in all sectors of life. Modeling how to be inclusive in our everyday lives is crucial.

We must also continue to listen to the disability community about their needs and the best way to support a person with a disability in achieving the goals they set for themselves. While there are general guidelines for providing this support, specific are determined by the person receiving supports, and this will look different for each person. What’s most important is ensuring that the person receiving supports is actively involved in all aspects of planning to the greatest degree possible. Additionally, we must listen and heed the words of advocates who are also disabled, learn from their feedback, and involve them in our work.