

**Agency Underfunded!**  
**Staff Overworked and Underpaid!**

**Waiting List Grows and Grows!**  
**But there's a solution...**

# **REINVENTING DD AGENCIES**

Revolutionary Common Sense by Kathie Snow, [www.disabilityisnatural.com](http://www.disabilityisnatural.com)

Any or all of the exclamations above may be the mantras of many developmental disability agencies. DD agencies—regional centers, community service boards, or whatever name they go by in your neck of the woods—are struggling. Budget cuts, too many people to serve, not enough staff, rules and regs out the wazoo, and a myriad of other problems have some DD agency employees wondering if they're aboard the Titanic.

Yet other developmental disability agencies are flourishing. They face similar issues, so why aren't they suffering? Because they're reinventing themselves!

Reinvention can come in many forms. In general, however, it requires an agency to think outside the box—about itself *and* the people it serves—and to look for assistance *outside* the traditional government funding streams. Such assistance, however, is not in the form of dollars! It represents, instead, collaboration with typical (e.g., non-disability) organizations and entities in the community. If “inclusion in the community” is part of a DD agency's mission statement, doesn't it make sense to look to the community for assistance?

At one agency, and through a collaborative effort with the local YMCA, very young children (birth to three) received Early Intervention services (therapy) by participating in baby swim classes at the Y. The swim teacher and the physical therapist

worked side-by-side during the classes—they were both “instructors”—making it a seamless, inclusive activity: moms and their babies with disabilities were indistinguishable from the moms whose babies did not have disabilities. This is community at its best, and the babies and their moms receive beneficial help through typical activities in a natural environment.

A community-centered board for a three-county area in Colorado is representative of the new breed of DD agencies. Under the leadership of executive director Steve Hall, the staff broke new ground.

“We do everything possible to ensure people with disabilities are doing things in the community, with people who don't have disabilities,” Steve said. “Our job is to build a bridge to the community.”

The staff members determined what's important to adults with developmental disabilities by creating an “interest inventory.” Armed with this information, staff members investigated what community activities meshed with an individual's interests. Staffers looked at churches and their activities; hobby clubs and special interest clubs of all kinds; service clubs and volunteer organizations; community activities, such as park and rec; and other opportunities. Staffers then provided assistance (as needed) to connect the person with the appropriate organizations. These efforts led to

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adults with disabilities joining organizations and clubs, which, in turn led to new friendships with people outside the service industry, which led to new connections, which led to individuals with disabilities getting real jobs, and then moving into their own homes or apartments, with whatever supports they needed!

The staffers purposely stayed away from typical human service and disability-related organizations, to ensure people with disabilities moved beyond the “client” role. Steve adds, “We mine the gifts that exist in the community.”

The “miners” routinely hit the mother lode. The community connections made by staffers led to “repeat business:” many employers began calling the agency when they had job openings! As a result, the overall cost of job development was lowered. In addition, Vocational-Rehabilitation statistics indicated that two-thirds of the adults with developmental disabilities in Colorado who attained real jobs were served by this agency. Obviously, it’s doing something right since its catchment area covers just three counties of the great state of Colorado!

Several years ago, employment guru Cary Griffin shared the following with me, “One of the ways to help get people jobs is to use local connections and not be wholly dependent on VR or any other system. So I was teaching a group of employment specialists some of the strategies people with disabilities can use to become more connected to their communities. As the workshop went on, I realized the employment specialists, themselves, were not very connected to their communities. So how could they be expected to teach people with disabilities how to become better connected?”

Cary, Steve, and other leaders have learned to focus on helping staff people create their *own* set of

community connections. To that end, agencies that are reinventing themselves provide their employees with time to make those connections. That may mean an employment specialist spends time driving around town to see what’s really out there, followed by personal visits to businesses, social organizations, and other entities. This is a vitally important step, for if a staff person is dependent on traditional sources for job placements for the individuals with disabilities he serves, he may not know what “real” places and opportunities exist in his own backyard!

When a DD agency works toward eliminating the dependence of people with disabilities on itself, grand results are in the making. If staff members become “bridge-builders,” people with disabilities are able to become interdependent in the community, through real jobs, social opportunities, friendships, and more. And when, for example, one person with a developmental disability achieves this goal, and needs less professional assistance, the agency is then better able to serve others who need more assistance. Multiply this scenario many times, and you can see that waiting lists can disappear, the budget is enough, and life is A-OK for staff and people with disabilities, alike.

Many of us are aware the system, as it currently operates, isn’t working like it should. Going back to the headlines of this article, people with disabilities are waiting and waiting and waiting, and their lives are passing before their eyes, while staff members of DD agencies are overworked. As long as staff and people with disabilities remain in the “closed” environment of the service system, the status quo will remain. But if agencies reinvent themselves by creating connections in the community—for staffers and people with disabilities—great outcomes are possible for all!