

“The contribution of Service Workers In Getting The Relationship “Right” Between People With Disabilities And Their Communities”, *Crucial Times*, Edition 21, July 2001

## **The Contribution Of Service Workers In Getting The Relationship “Right” Between People With Disabilities And Their Communities**

It is not always obvious that our personal efforts make all that much difference on any given day. Nevertheless when you step back and look over a longer period of time there are often signs that give encouragement. This is the case with what may seem the rather “ordinary” efforts of everyday service workers in helping people with disabilities to more fully be part of and enjoy their communities. The very simplicity of these contributions often mask their potential profundity and importance. That is why it is important to give them the recognition they deserve. What follows here are some examples of how such contributions are made.

### **Help People Meet People**

Loneliness and isolation can be a terrible burden and it is always a welcome change to meet and spend time with people when one has had too much of one’s own company. However, meeting new people is not always easy, and even a small amount of thoughtful assistance can go a long way towards making the process an easier one. It is also true that the more one gets experience with doing this the more relaxed and natural it can become. Many a service worker has found a way to be helpful in bringing people together.

### **Keep Community Encounters Comfortable**

Underneath the surface of our lives within community there are many fears, doubts, anxieties and apprehensions that can greatly inhibit the kinds of ways people are with each other. Many people with disabilities encounter a certain discomfort in people who are not sure how to act, or who are uneasy being in the presence of people whose appearance or disability is a difficulty for them. It is interesting that despite the fact that things may start this way people can quite quickly shed such fears and inhibitions as they come to realize that people are just people. Anyone who helps build such comfort between people is making a useful and needed contribution. Often as not, this may be a contribution staff can make.

### **Help People See The Potential Of People With Disabilities**

It is an all too common problem that people underestimate the capacities of people with disabilities to play a larger role in community life. This is not easily overcome but it will yield eventually to the efforts of people with disabilities and their staff and other supporters to open people’s minds and to change their ways. Since this often comes in small increments it may not always seem like a “breakthrough”, but looking back one can see that it indeed was one. Often it is just a matter of persevering until one gets a chance

to show people what is really possible when people are given the chance and support. So, many staff would do well to be recognized as potential “mind changers” and “opportunity makers”.

### Help Non-Disabled People To See Their Own Potential In Relation To People With Disabilities

It may not be clear to many non-disabled people that they have a contribution to make that would be welcomed and appreciated. Many people are unsure of themselves, and may benefit from a bit of expanded vision and steady encouragement to explore the kinds of roles and contributions they can make to benefit people with disabilities. They may be bound up with their own misleading stereotypes about themselves, and thus not act in ways that would be helpful. This could spill into any conceivable role in life that they could either personally play, or support being played by others in relation to people with disabilities. This could include friend, neighbour, employer, club member, colleague, spouse, business partner, mentor, ally or whatever. There is no “automatic” role, people must discover what comes naturally and is most welcome and needed. In this regard, they might well be aided by a supportive and encouraging service worker.

### Help People To Develop and Live Important Values

We are all familiar with values that would benefit people with disabilities. Often we discover that we need to relearn and reapply these. It is an ongoing struggle to develop and live our values with a measure of integrity. Yet, these values are well worth the effort in terms of the way they can make life-changing differences. That is why it is important to not lose sight of values such as respect, open mindedness, fairness, honesty, and many others. It cannot be assumed that people always get the connections between values and how people are eventually perceived and treated. Nevertheless, this awareness can be stimulated and nurtured as can the realization in people that their values and resultant attitudes matter. Many service workers often provide good role models and mentors in regards to these, particularly when they have struggle hard themselves to behave honourably.

### Help People To Stay Involved With And Connected To People With Disabilities

Being part of a community is not just a matter of meeting people in a community, it is much more a matter of continuing to be part of a community and staying connected to its life and people. This embedding of people in community life is a process that builds one day upon another and maintaining attention, focus and effort will pay dividends. This may be made a lot easier if service workers understand and commit themselves to the continuity of relationships and community presence. When they do so, the natural facilitative process is helped along thereby ensuring that people with disabilities are more deeply an ongoing part of the life of their community.

## Recognize And Appreciate The Contributions People Make

A day hardly goes by where an “ordinary” person does not behave in a way that is helpful and welcome. Often, such actions would continue, strengthen and become more “natural” if they were noticed, appreciated and reinforced. Such recognition can help to move conduct that is tentative and impulsive into something more deeper and enduring if it is applauded and affirmed, however discreetly. Sometimes just letting people know that they are on the right track can help keep them there, particularly if it becomes clear to them that this is welcome and needed. Service workers often play a critically supportive role in “noticing” small gestures and encouraging them to continue and flourish.

## Help People Struggle For A Sense Of What A Better Community Would Be

If we cannot imagine better, we often fail to achieve what is possible and practical, because of our much too limited sense of what is possible. Even when we can see the potential of individuals we might still miss the role of what an enabling or “better” community would need to look like. Thus it is very important for all of us to play some part in both imagining a “better” community and creating small examples of it. Though it may surprise some people this often begins not with grand schemes of community change but rather in the small examples of “better” that can be created in opportune pockets in our communities. Consequently, these imaginative efforts at community improvement often involve everyday service workers with a sense of mission and the resolve to make progress.

It is always the few that precede the many, the small that beget the large and the obscure that humble the famous. It is important that service workers not become persuaded that their efforts do not matter, as we would all be the poorer for their absence. It is better that we see these contributions for the importance they hold, and encourage service workers in their efforts to get the relationship between communities and people with disabilities to be “right”.