

The Community's Calendar
A strategy for planning meaningful life activities

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The Community's Calendar:

A Framework for Planning Individualized Life Activities

Typically, the manner in which people recreate and spend their non-work time is a reflection of the most distinct characteristics of their personalities. All individuals have attractions, preferences, dreams, hopes, beliefs, and attitudes that are acted on in their daily lives. A person who values happiness, satisfaction, and balanced growth will seek life activities that meet their needs. When life's non-work activities fit together, a person has a greater opportunity to have a quality life. The coordination of these activities takes place under several main headings which are not always mutually exclusive:

- 1) recreation/fitness,
- 2) entertainment,
- 3) hobbies,
- 4) community participation/responsibility,
- 5) religion/spiritual/meditation,
- 6) relationships, and
- 7) logistics for living.

Much of what is considered in "Getting a life" is contained in these areas. In our hectic society, many people who are overworked and stressed feel that they have to give up areas # 1 - 5 almost completely in favor of survival in area # 5. When we are able to get our lives under control, its often due to intentional planning and targeting of those activities which we feel compliment the interests, dreams and beliefs which comprise who we are. But even when our lives feel out of control, we all strive for richness and meaning. In the best of times, we are able to balance our work responsibilities with satisfying and varied life activities.

There is almost a universal understanding in the human service field that experiences in these are seldom enjoyed by persons with significant disabilities. Instead, they often lead non-work lives comprised almost entirely of simulation, preparation, and group participation. This strategy is designed to offer a framework by which individuals, families, friends and supporters can map out a personalized activity plan which is based on the possibilities offered in one's local community. It borrows extensively from the tenets of planned recreation and from the work on the importance of associations by John McKnight.

The Role and Connection of Recreation

The very nature of recreation requires that it be planned and implemented in an individual

way. One's satisfaction can only be evaluated in an individual manner. We know that each person attains satisfaction, happiness, and a sense of balance individually, with distinct indicators that largely describe who we are. When a person achieves a workable balance between the life areas listed above with other activities that they value in their life such as work and family time, they experience a more enriched life. When these issues are out of balance, we are usually unhappy and dissatisfied.

According to Meyer and Brightbill in their book Community Recreation: A Guide to its Organization, the characteristics of recreation involve a number of dimensions. Recreation:

- 0 typically involves activity, but may not,
- 0 has no single form,
- 0 is determined by personal motivation,
- 0 occurs in unobligated time related to work and other required tasks,
- 0 is entirely voluntary (with complete freedom of choice) ,
- 0 is universally practiced,
- 0 is serious and purposeful, though fun and flexible, and
- 0 has by-products (which can be social, physical, intellectual, health or improved citizenship).

Even though persons with significant disabilities are participating more often in person-centered life planning, most continue to lack richness in leisure experiences. It has become increasingly clear that strategies are not being used to target specific activities in a systematic process which can help assure that community experiences are driven from the individual. We feel that in order for recreation to be meaningful, especially for persons with significant disabilities, it is necessary to be systematic and planned. This is due to the fact that community events, associations and activities are fluid and often change on a daily, weekly or monthly basis.

The Importance of Associations

John McKnight has written extensively about the importance of associations in the lives of all persons, and particularly in the lives of people with severe disabilities. McKnight feels that associations comprise the very foundations of a community. Furthermore, it is through association with others that we get acceptance, consideration, and the opportunity to form our deepest relationships. Even though the associations available through work are important in

most of our lives, the majority of associations for most people are formed outside of our jobs. We start by identifying our interest areas and seek to find activities, individuals or organization which promote and engage in those interests.

Membership in most non-work associations is available without considerable credentials, status or cost. In other words, if we are willing to commit the time, associations are willing to accept us. There are several types of associations found in communities ranging from formal organizations to a regular group of friends meeting for coffee and conversation.

Since persons with severe disabilities have led lives largely separate from their communities, they have not had opportunities to participate in the associations available in their local communities. This is a critical deficit in the lives of people who need virtually all of the benefits which accrue to those who have a life rich in associations.

Planning for an Inclusive Life

Since choices involving recreation and other life activities are, by definition, individualized, and since many people seem to let an active and meaningful life pass them by, it is recommended that an individualized process be facilitated to provide the systematic planning necessary to assure a person-centered life plan. However, plans are too often disconnected from the complexity in personal lives of individuals and from the actual opportunities offered in the community. The problems becomes even more complex when the issues surrounding severe disability interacts with the traditional lack of connection to community experiences by human service staff .

The area of supported employment offers a possible resolution to this problem. The authors have written extensively in the area of employment concerning the need to have two accurate “pictures” before proceeding with employment plans and job support plans. In employment, these pictures include the person of concern, on one hand, and the specific work culture on the other. The processes of the Vocational Profile and the Job Analysis provide the necessary hues and shapes to fully describe each entity.

We suggest that similar pictures are necessary before implementing a plan to target life activities. Since a defining characteristic of significant disability is significant complexity, a personal and detailed picture of the individual of concern is necessary **before** planning begins. Similarly, since all communities, even the smallest, are comprised of a complex array of associations, events, happenings, and relationships, a detailed picture of the community is necessary **before** planning begins. By investing time in the development of these pictures, we

can help assure an individualized and natural plan for life activities.

The Community's Calendar as a Framework

Following the lead of McKnight, this approach to planning recognizes that communities are largely defined by the sum total of activities, associations and services which are participated in by citizens. Communities organize these varied features through the use of a calendar. Events, organizations and other community activities are naturally planned for by planning and targeting dates. The Community's Calendar approach suggests that effective way to assist persons with disabilities to interact in a community is to use the community's system for planning as a metaphor for human service planning. By participating in community activities, people can have access to the relationships, associations, connections necessary to develop friendships and to benefit from the natural supports offered all citizens.

Implementing the Community's Calendar

This strategy starts as all effective person-centered processes should -- with a personal profile which describes the person's life (this process is described fully, below). The actual plan is initiated in a kick-off meeting which describes the person's preferences, conditions and expected outcomes for the community activities in which they will participate. This plan sets the general direction of activities for up to a year. The yearly planning meeting results in a listing and number of the general types of activities to be pursued, any yearly events which may become traditions, any regular activities which may be performed throughout the year and the general supports which will be needed to get started. The annual planning meeting should also result in suggestions for persons who currently have few activities in their lives.

Interim activity planning meetings are needed at least every two months to target specific activities, sites and personal connections. Activity planning meetings must also identify the specific supports which are needed/available for participation, the amount/availability of money necessary and the fit with work and home aspects of the person's life. Activity planning utilizes all the sources of information in a local community. Examples are newspapers, chamber of commerce brochures, tourism calendars, club listings, etc.

Categories for Life Activities Include:

- 3 Formal Organizations: clubs, civic groups, churches, service groups
- 3 Regular Organized Events: ball games, flea markets, concert series
- 3 Episodic Organized Events: concerts, festivals, fairs, town celebrations
- 3 Seasonal Events: Christmas parades, July 4th barbeques, Mardi Gras
- 3 Work-Related Recreation: Employee picnics, parties, employee sports leagues
- 3 Community Recreation: YMCA, parks, museums, game leagues, library
- 3 Commercial Recreation: cinemas, bowling alleys, amusement parks
- 3 Church/Religious Events: regular services, religious holidays
- 3 Personal Interests: hobbies, fishing, boating
- 3 Family & Friend Activities: holidays, reunions, birthdays, cook-outs
- 3 Interpersonal Activities: dating, hanging out, visiting friends

Values Implicit in the Community's Calendar

As with any respectful human service strategy, the Community's Calendar rests on a foundation of clearly stated values. In addition to those generic values associated with the best of recreational theory, this strategy is represented by the following guidelines:

- All activities selected are a blend of the person's interests and the community's offerings.
- Any instructional or behavioral supports should be offered as naturally as possible and be designed to facilitate participation in the activity.
- Instructional/behavioral needs must not be considered as pre-requisites to participation.
- Support personnel must balance the effort to embrace diverse activities with cultural sensitivities and individual preferences.
- Participation in activities can result in:
 - 3 The personal enjoyment of each unique activity.
 - 3 The fellowship and citizenship which accrues to those active in their communities.
 - 3 The development of friendships which may lead to a richer life and the availability of supports.

- 3 The identification of discrete skill discrepancies which can provide the rationale and direction for human service training and supports.
- 3 The satisfaction of directing one's own life plan.
- 3 The respect and value associated with persons who are active in their communities

Discovery and the Role of the Profile

Since the lives of people with severe disabilities are often extremely complex. In a way, their disability makes getting to know them more difficult than for persons who do not experience disability. Therefore, a starting point for planning should involve the development of a comprehensive picture of each individual developed through the process of *discovery*. Discovery and the development of a narrative document that describes the best and most meaningful aspects of the individual provide a foundation for planning and a touchstone for identifying all life activities. This picture can be developed in a number of ways -- graphically on large sheets of paper, expressed by the individual as an autobiography, realized personally by those closest to the person, related verbally as an oral history or in numerous other creative ways. Various support people will eventually gravitate towards a format that suits both their skills and style. Ideally, the needs of the individual should also drive the selection of a process to capture that individual picture. The facilitator's personal style is also likely to determine the approach used. And this is probably fine as long as the approach used is respectful and generates a useful portrait for planning.

As a starting point, however, we recommend that a narrative profile, similar to the Vocational Profile Strategy (Callahan & Garner, in press), be used as the framework for painting the individual's picture. The Vocational Profile can easily be adapted to a Personal Profile in order to meet life planning needs. It has the advantages being bureaucratically friendly as well as being accessible to families, friends and non-professional supporters. The use of a profile approach provides an alternative to the traditional strategy of testing and comparison as a means of describing the individual. Callahan and Nisbet (1987) distinguished the profile approach from traditional procedures. The following distinctions are adapted here to focus on life activities as rather than employment:

- (1) The personal profile consists of **already-existing information** rather than information developed solely for the purposes of evaluation. The decisions involving the selection of meaningful life activities are based on **information obtained from the person's entire life** and not from an instance of performance.
- (2) The profile is used only as **an information source and guide for matching** for appropriate life activities and is not intended to systematically exclude a person from participating in certain activities.
- (3) The profile seeks to have **ecological validity rather than predictive validity**. It is more important that a match makes sense in relation to a person's life than to attempt to predict success. Predicting measures almost invariably predict failure for persons with severe disabilities.
- (4) The use of the profile **frees the applicant from** the necessity of **taking standardized or norm-referenced tests** to prove their readiness. Readiness to begin a meaningful life is assumed for all people.
- (5) The use of a profile indicates a belief that **a person's skills, experiences, available supports, preferences, needs and living situation cannot be best captured on a standardized checklist**. A format composed of open-ended categories allows for each person to be described in a unique manner.
- (6) The profile strategy seeks to **empower and involve applicants, their families and friends** rather than to exclude them. Common sense approaches to life activities are given priority over strategies which rely solely on professional judgment and service.

The profile reflects an accurate description of how the person leads their life while avoiding the opinions of the individual completing the profile. We recommended that the person responsible for planning and supporting life activities complete the profile or, at least becomes intimately involved in its development. Only by participating in the development, can the information necessary to hold a planning meeting of all stakeholders be obtained.

Characteristics of a Personal Profile

While each individual will leave his or her unique mark on their personal profiles, there are characteristics common to all useful portraits. A good profile is:

- 3 **Narrative**, rather than numerical as in test results,
- 3 **Comprehensive**, rather than narrowly targeted,
- 3 **Competency-focused**, rather than deficit-focused,
- 3 **Optimistic**, rather than cautious or skeptical,
- 3 **Respectful**, rather than coldly professional and intrusive,
- 3 **Accepting**, rather than competitive, and most importantly,
- 3 **Descriptive**, rather than evaluative.

Strategies for Developing a Personal Profile

As we have previously indicated, the strategies and characteristics associated with the Personal Profile are similar to those used in the Vocational Profile strategy used in employment. The following list provides time-tested approaches for developing clear picture.

1. Arrange to meet with the person of concern and his/her parents or representatives at the person's home for an initial meeting and for several follow-up meetings. These meetings should serve as the basis for compiling information necessary to complete the profile. The meeting should last approximately 1 - ½ hours. Permission should be obtained to perform the following activities.
2. Before or after the initial meeting, drive or walk throughout the immediate neighborhood for a radius of about 1/4 to ½ mile. Look for services, transportation, sidewalks, safety issues, recreational opportunities, parks, etc..
3. Compile an inventory of organizations, settings, and other features which may potentially be used in life activities which are in reasonable proximity to the applicant's home and means of transportation. This listing can be done while driving in a car or while riding a bus which serves the applicant's neighborhood.
4. Meet with selected direct service staff who have provided the person of concern with services in the community.
5. Contact advocates, neighbors and close friends of the person to gain information concerning the persons's social life, preferences and connections.

6. Spend unstructured time with the person, getting to know the dreams, interests and concerns that he/she expresses about their life.
7. Observe the person (with his/her permission) during the activities which comprise the majority of his/her day.
8. Accompany the person on a planned community-based activity. Note the amount of assistance required, the person's attention to natural cues, his/her reaction to the activity and any important behavior changes from those described in Items # 6 & 7.
9. Review files and records of current and past services provided to the individual, including IEP's.
10. Compile all information using the Personal Profile form, using complete sentences and descriptive narrative as much as possible.
11. Distribute the completed Profile to all persons involved in non-work supports for the of the individual: family, living support staff, advocates, designated friends.

Considerations in Compiling a Personal Profile

1. Fill out the profile form using positive language. Since the purpose of the profile is to provide an ecologically valid "picture" of the applicant, all information should relate to facilitating successful life activities for the person being profiled.
2. Any significant physical or intellectual disabilities or "inappropriate" behaviors should be referenced to the specific instances that they are problematic. The person of concern should not be described in sweeping generalizations such as "self-injurious" or "aggressive". Cite specific contexts and examples.
3. Ask the person, or his/her parent or representative if more appropriate, to review the profile when completed. Ask if items should be added or deleted from the profile.
4. Continue to update the profile as new information is developed.
5. Involve the individual and his/her parents in every aspect of "getting a life". Ask for ideas and support from the family.
6. Frame the entire process from the individual's perspective rather than from the agency's perspective.

7. The entire profile activity takes time to complete -- approximately 10 - 20 hours of time and is usually accomplished in two to three weeks. Resist the temptation to take short cuts.

Using the Community's Calendar as a Basis for Planning

After an acceptable Personal Profile has been developed and approved by the person and the family (as appropriate), an accurate picture of the individual now exists to begin planning. As in the Vocational Profile Meeting, the Activity Planning Meeting must empower the individual and their family to negotiate the matching of community activities to the individual and to utilize any family connections to actualize the plan. The meeting should clarify the individual's conditions, preferences, and contributions for community activities. The clarification of these individual characteristics create the components to be sought or matched in community activities for the individual.

Persons with disabilities have had a variety of life experiences. For persons who have always lived in the community, it is assumed they will have more life experiences to build on when creating an activity plan as compared to persons who have lived most of their lives in a large facility. For this reason, the Activity Plan may need to include experiences for the person to explore through out the year. The purpose of exploration is to help the person identify additional outcomes. The discovery of additional characteristics increases the opportunity for the individual to experience a richer life through meaningful life activities.

Life activities are considered in the categories listed above and should match the characteristics discovered in exploration. Specific places are targeted to yield opportunities for community activities for the person. Community people that participate in these activities are identified and may be recruited to create a more natural involvement in these community events. Activities are identified for daily, weekly, monthly, and annual participation. Since the individual will likely seek multiple experiences, this plan requires the individual and supporters to complete a monthly (or bi-monthly) detailed calendar that incorporates daily, weekly, and seasonal monthly or annual events.

This activity calendar should coincide with the on-going calendar of events that is published by your area's various media . This use of this concept, called the Community Calendar, facilitates the individualization of community events, coordinate staff time, and assists individuals in to have meaningful opportunities in the community.

The Community Calendar becomes the working blueprint for the Activity Meeting by describing the breath of possible experiences available in the local community. This blueprint, along with the non-published activities and informal associations identified during the Personal Profile assures that the individual experiences activities that are truly directed from his/her personal characteristic list of ideal activities.

The process of developing a profile and implementing an individualized plan on a monthly or bi-monthly basis gives the individual and their supporters a strategy to systematically implement an individualized plan for leisure time that is directed by the person.

Holding an Activity Planning Meeting

Once the Profile form has been completed and distributed to all those involved, it is time to hold a Profile Meeting. At this meeting the information developed during the profile activity is used to target types of activities desired by the individual. Specific activities and interests available in the community can be found in the calendar information, developed prior to the meeting.

This meeting should be attended by the individual, his/her parents or care givers (if appropriate), neighbors, advocates, community support personnel and anyone else, approved by the individual who might be able to offer assistance in matching and targeting activities. The following should be considered when conducting an Activity Planning Meeting:

1. Try to make sure that there is a balance between "professionals" and non-professionals. The individual should be encouraged to invite his/her parents (again, as appropriate), friends and advocates. A meeting should not be held unless there are at least as many participants **not** paid to be there as there are those paid to attend.
2. If the person indicates a desire to have the Activity Planning Meeting conducted in a much more personal, informal manner, adjust the membership accordingly. It is possible to hold a meeting with just the community supports facilitator and the applicant in attendance.
3. The form for Activity Planning Meeting must not be filled out before the meeting -- literally or conceptually. While it is helpful for persons attending the meeting to have ideas concerning possible activities, the nature of the meeting is to be flexible and formative -- not to act as an approval for agency generated goals.

4. Occasionally the preferences of applicants and/or parents might seem unrealistic. When this is the case, the facilitator must strive to identify potential activities as close as possible to the applicant's wishes.
5. The person who developed the Personal Profile is typically the best person to lead the Planning Meeting. However, if the individual or the parents request to lead the meeting, they should be assisted by the facilitator.
6. In describing the list of ideal activities, the individual and/or the parents should be asked to relate their "vision" of ideal life activities. The group can then work from that basis to formulate a plan.
7. We recommend breaking the ideal activities into the "Conditions", "Preferences" and "Outcomes" which comprise the applicant's perspective of how planned activities fit in his/her specific life.
8. All suggestions for specific activities to be supported must be consistent with the information contained in the Profile and/or the Community's Calendar, as appropriate. The facilitator should monitor suggestions for consistency and guard against negativism by any member.
9. The Profile Meeting can be improved by using a flip chart to capture the information which is developed. The pages can then be placed on the walls for visual feedback.
10. It will be necessary to hold monthly or bi-monthly planning after the initial Activity Planning Meeting in order to keep up with the changing nature of life activities. In some instances, it is possible to hold a meeting via the telephone but it is usually preferable to schedule another regular meeting.
11. When compiling the list of Specific Activities, it is best to prioritize the list so that those activities most desired by the individual can definitely be implemented.
12. The initial Activity Planning Meeting takes approximately 2 - 3 hours to conduct. Make sure sufficient time is available.