



Outreach Brief

Effective Community Outreach Strategies for Service Providers to Increase Delivery of Services to Asian Americans and Pacific Islanders with Disabilities

National Technical Assistance Center

www.ntac.hawaii.edu

Tel: (808)956-3648

Fax: (808)956-5713

Tty: (808)956-2890

Mission:

To increase employment opportunities for Asian Americans and Pacific Islanders with disabilities nationwide.

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The purpose of this brief is to assist service providers to develop effective community outreach strategies that increase their capacity to deliver services to Asian Americans and Pacific Islanders (AAPI) with disabilities and their families. It is adapted from: Balcazar, F.E., (2001). Strategies for Reaching Out to Minority Individuals with Disabilities. University of Illinois at Chicago.¹

In a report to the President and Congress on the challenge of meeting the needs of minorities with disabilities, the National Council on Disability included the following key findings: (1) The problems faced by many minority persons with disabilities are complex and require the coordinated attention of many programs and professionals from multiple disciplines. (2) There is limited research on issues related to “minority” persons with disabilities, and consequently, there are insufficient data on these populations to offer substantial guidance for policy or service development. (3) Service delivery staff members are not sufficiently trained to work with multicultural populations. (4) There have been insufficient outreach efforts to ensure participation of minority persons with disabilities in many programs. (5) Education should become more available and focus on the abilities of the individuals rather than their limitations. (6) Specific efforts should be made to assist minority individuals with disabilities in the process of advocating and learning to assert their rights through legislation like the ADA or IDEA. (7) There is a need to develop grassroots networks and funded resources to help minority individuals with disabilities become active participants and leaders in their respective communities.

One conclusion that could be derived from a brief review of these findings is that reaching out to minority individuals with disabilities is a critical aspect of assisting them with the many broad and complex challenges that minority individuals with disabilities face. The following is a list of wide-ranging principles and strategies intended as a general guideline to improve outreach activities to AAPI minorities with disabilities.

1. Before you try to reach out to minority populations, make sure you can provide the services they need.

This point should be obvious to service providers, although some agencies with limited resources and staff often find that they are unable to deal with the multiple needs of minorities with disabilities. Service providers should be capable of effectively addressing the

needs of the individuals they are trying to service to avoid reinforcing their alienation. Agencies should make efforts to identify the needs of the target population in order to tailor their services in a most effective way such as recognizing the importance of including family members in Vocational Rehabilitation (VR) planning for Asian Americans and Pacific Islanders (AAPI) with disabilities.

2. Utilize a culturally diverse staff to deliver services to the target population.

The issue of mistrust of traditional service delivery agencies, including state VR agencies, particularly among AAPIs, is increased if individuals have to deal with providers who do not seem to share their characteristics or cultural values. That is why it is so important to recruit and support minority staff who can make consumers feel welcomed and hopeful that their needs will be met. A frequent limitation in serving the AAPI community is the lack of bilingual staff, or having staff that is, not familiar with the culture of the target population. Staff that is culturally sensitive and aware of the culture's social norms can communicate more effectively with minority individuals.

3. Build personal relationships with members of the target community.

Encourage service provider team members to get to know community members and establish personal relationships with them to develop a better understanding of their culture and values. It is very important to develop personal relationships with the gatekeepers or leaders of the community to seek their input. They can have a great deal of influence and their opinions are highly respected by other members of the community. They can be of great help by introducing you to other community members, facilitating entry or outreach, creating employment opportunities for your target group, describing the value of your work to others, and supporting you when you need assistance.

4. Become a part of the local network.

This is a common practice for service providers, who often organize in local associations, to coordinate services and referrals more effectively. Strive to become a part of the local network of agencies serving your target group by maintaining regular contacts with representatives from different agencies and developing a reputation that facilitates access and mutual support through collaboration and relationship building. Strive to be seen as a resource to other agencies' missions.

5. Build consumers' strengths.

An important consequence of focusing on the strengths of individuals with disabilities is that they start to break the dependency that the service delivery system often reinforces. Letting consumers realize that they have to take an active role to address their own problems—as opposed to waiting for the professional to do it—is a critical step in any effective rehabilitation process (Balcazar & Keys, 1994). However, professionals often have difficulties recognizing the capacity of individuals to help themselves. It helps to consider that the person who experiences the problem knows what the problem is, is familiar with the conditions that maintain it, and has some ideas about ways to solve it. On the other hand, one could ask if that is the case, then why are 'people still experiencing problems? One reason may be that people who are marginalized have little confidence in their own capabilities and people with disabilities in particular are left to focus on their limitations and not on their strengths. Traditional service delivery systems reinforce this perception.

6. Be persistent and do not let consumers go when they fail to comply.

As a group, minority individuals with disabilities face multiple challenges that make compliance with

traditional service plans difficult. Not surprisingly, they are often terminated from services. It is understandable that service organizations need to have clear policies to determine service eligibility. However, a degree of understanding and flexibility is often necessary to accommodate individuals who have a history of rejection, like some minorities with disabilities do. Let them know early on that you really care about what is happening to them and that you are there to help them and that you are willing to give them many opportunities to succeed in the process of attaining their transition goals.

7. Be willing to listen.

If you want to reach out, you should be able and willing to listen. This is not a trivial point. In effect it is critical, because demonstrating a genuine and sincere concern toward the individual you are trying to reach is key for his/her acceptance and willingness to trust and collaborate. Personal relationships are built on trust. This requires good communication. As a professional you may be used to telling people around you what to do or not to do. This is one-way communication. To build the kind of relationships required for successful outreach and dissemination efforts, you have to be willing to listen and learn from people in the community. If you show you are willing to listen to them, then they will in turn be willing to listen to you. It is a reciprocal process of communication that benefits all.

8. Utilize members of the target community in outreach efforts.

Some agencies employ members of the target community as paraprofessionals, responsible for outreach and follow up support. This is a well-known community organizing strategy. The leaders and other gatekeepers from the community are a great source of access. They can become excellent collaborators and develop recognition and increased visibility for you in the community.

9. Meet people where they are instead of waiting for them to come to you.

For example, send case managers to meet with transitioning high school youth with disabilities and their families in their own homes. This is especially critical in AAPI cultures because they are family centered. During such visits, case managers can provide as much information as possible about the issues facing the particular student. By demonstrating respect for the importance of their family structure, case managers eventually develop good relationships with the parents who then become more willing to participate in planned activities. Many parents eventually start calling the case managers to ask for help or advice. Parents play a critical role in supporting or sabotaging the transition process of their son or daughter, so seek their active involvement in the process.

10. Utilize multiple channels of communication to disseminate information to the target community.

Do not rely on a single channel of communication, hoping that people will get your message. Utilize multiple channels, word of mouth, phone calls, mailings, pamphlets, posted announcements, and even newspapers and radio announcements in AAPI languages to reach the desired target audience. The process is more difficult when the target community is not easily identifiable or located in a specific, target area. Another outreach strategy is to rely on multiple organizational mailing lists from multiple service providers to distribute information. This is another reason to maintain an active network of collaboration with local social service agencies.

11. Volunteer to help.

You build good will by increasing your visibility in the target community. One of the best ways to do this is by volunteering to help. There are multiple avenues to do this such as volunteering to help

whenever possible in the local high schools. Teachers and administrators really appreciate that and it strengthens the collaboration. It is another way to show you care. Do the same regularly with other community organizations as well. People come to expect reciprocity as a demonstration of your commitment to the community and its well-being.

Conclusion

Reaching out to minority individuals with disabilities, including AAPIs, should be part of a comprehensive service program that ultimately attempts to improve their quality of life. This effort should be conducted as a partnership, with jointly determined goals and objectives, roles and responsibilities. Minorities with disabilities are tired of being “studied.” They want allies who can support their struggle for a better quality of life and social justice. To community members, this could mean access to resources, information and opportunities that they otherwise lack. To service providers this is an opportunity to develop, implement and evaluate innovative programs and interventions designed to have an impact in people’s lives. There are many challenges that minority individuals with disabilities need to overcome. You can be part of the problem or part of the solution. The choice is yours.

Resources

Additional information regarding such topics as collaborating with Vocational Rehabilitation counselors, student and parental involvement in transition planning, and strategies for insuring interagency involvement, can be found in the following web sites:

- Department of Education, Office of Special Education and Rehabilitative Services, Western Regional Resource Center <http://interact.uoregon.edu/wrrc/trnfiles/bibliography.htm>
- Florida Department of Education Career Planning Resources <http://www.fsu.edu/~spec-ed/carplan.htm.html>

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1. “Strategies for Reaching Out to Minority Individuals with Disabilities” by . F.E. Balcazar, 2001, Research Exchange 6 (2). Copyright 2001 by National Center for the Dissemination of Disability Research. Adapted with permission.

