

**Final Report
Phase 1**

**Project Connect: Improving Alcohol and Drug Services in
San Diego County for People with Developmental
Disabilities**

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Executive Summary

In 2006 The California Endowment funded an unprecedented effort, Project Connect, in San Diego County (population 2.9 million) to improve linkages between alcohol/drug treatment and recovery services for people with developmental disabilities (mental retardation, cerebral palsy, autism and epilepsy) and the agencies that serve this population. While no reliable measures exist to determine the level of need, Project Connect estimates that of the approximately 60,000 San Diegans with a developmental disability, there may be 6-7,000 who are in need of substance use disorder treatment. However, in 2006/07 San Diego County Alcohol and Drug Services reported that only 40 of 13,088 admissions were identified as having a developmental disability.

Project Connect is the nation's first effort to strategically assess services for people with developmental disabilities in need of treatment and recovery, and to plan for targeted capacity expansion (Phase 1). The initiative is a partnership between the treatment and disability sectors with the lead agency, Toward Maximum Independence (TMI), convening stakeholders and generating resources to drive the effort. TMI, a non-profit organization that has been serving people with disabilities since 1981, works to include people with disabilities into all facets of community life. Several years earlier the organization pioneered a forensic advocacy project designed to address the unique needs of persons with developmental disabilities involved in the criminal justice system. Evolving their focus to include addiction and recovery was a "no brainer" as unaddressed substance abuse always undermines independent living outcomes.

Founded in 1996 the mission of the National Association on Alcohol, Drugs and Disability (NAADD) is to improve addiction prevention, treatment and recovery services for people with disabilities. The organization has been funded by the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation, the California Department of Alcohol and Drug Services, and regional centers for developmental disabilities.

The strategic planning work of Phase 1 has included key informant interviews, focus groups and provider surveys all overseen by a community advisory council comprised of professionals, consumers, policy makers and advocates.

Below are Project Connect's major findings and recommendations.

Alcohol and Drug Services Findings

ADSF-1 Working linkages between alcohol and drug services and the developmental disability sector have improved, especially during the past 12-18 months, but substance use disorder treatment within the publicly-funded service system for this population is largely inadequate, and recent efforts to improve and strengthen the cross-system linkages are fragile and will require continuing support.

ADSF-2 Alcohol and drug treatment providers are inadequately prepared and under-resourced to provide accessible, quality treatment to the target population. This has resulted in widespread reluctance to participate in remedial efforts.

ADSF-3 Despite the above finding, many professionals and policy makers within the alcohol and drug sector report that they are willing to work collaboratively to remedy the situation and in a few instances innovative and accessible services are currently being provided.

Developmental Services Findings

DSF-1 Alcohol and drug prevention services for this population, which should be occurring in the developmental services system, are non-existent. Evidence continues to mount that young people and adults with developmental disabilities are at increasing risk for developing substance use problems, but have virtually no exposure to the basic alcohol and drug prevention and education services available to their nondisabled peers.

DSF-2 Developmental service providers are inadequately prepared and under-resourced to provide assessment, intervention and referral services to their clients in need of substance use disorder treatment and recovery support services. Few incentives, other than client need, exist to support service providers who address substance use problems.

DSF-3 The Lanterman Developmental Disabilities Services Act of 1969 which authorizes services and supports for people with developmental disabilities and their families contains no provisions for the delivery of addiction treatment and recovery support services.

Recommendations

These recommendations will form the basis for Phase 2 of Project Connect. All members of the Project Connect collaborating partners (Toward Maximum Independence, San Diego Regional Center, SDRC Recovery Task Force, San Diego County Alcohol and Drug Services, and the National Association on Alcohol, Drugs and Disability) are expected to be involved in implementing these recommendations.

Alcohol and Drug Services Recommendations

ADSR-1 Project Connect partners should explore the feasibility of developing several Drug Medi-Cal outpatient groups building on the SDRC Alcohol and Drug Support groups that have been in existence now for more than 6 years.

ADSR-2 San Diego Alcohol and Drug Services should hasten to prioritize people with developmental disabilities as a special population for future prevention and treatment funding. Publicly-funded alcohol and drug services are mandated by federal law (Americans with Disabilities Act of 1990, Rehabilitation Act of 1973 as amended) to serve all persons regardless of disability.

ADSR-3 San Diego Alcohol and Drug Services should explore mechanisms to establish access to sober living facilities for people with developmental disabilities. A “buddies” program could be developed to assist individuals seeking 12-step support.¹

ADSR-4 The 12-step community should be encouraged to work proactively to include people with developmental disabilities in 12-step groups and activities.

Some issues that have been identified during the course of this project extend beyond San Diego County borders and require attention from state agencies. State mandated data collection is an area of particular concern.

ADSR- 5 The California Department of Alcohol and Drug Programs (ADP) should develop systems and procedures to track the number of clients with developmental disabilities that are served in their service system and create a robust appeal/complaint process to reduce denials-of-service and improve provider compliance with the ADA.

ADSR- 6 ADP should initiate the creation of an interagency (ADP and Department of Developmental Services) task force charged with improving cooperation and linkages between ADP and DDS.

Developmental Services Recommendations

DSR-1 The San Diego Regional Center should continue with and finalize its efforts to vendorize alcohol and drug case management services for clients with alcohol and drug problems. Such vendorization has existed for more than 10 years at the Redwood Coast Regional Center and has been successful for helping dozens of regional center clients achieve and maintain recovery.

¹ According to *About AA: A Newsletter for Professionals*, “Alcoholics Anonymous is dedicated to making its message of recovery from alcoholism available to as many as possible, including those with special needs.”

DSR-2 The San Diego Regional Center should work with residential vendors to create one or more group homes set aside exclusively for clients in need of a clean and sober environment.

DSR-3 The San Diego Regional Center should develop systems to systematically assess all clients for substance use problems, provide appropriate alcohol and drug prevention services and monitor those clients who are in need of treatment and recovery services.

Conclusion

In 2004 the President's Committee for People with Intellectual Disabilities issued *A Charge We Have to Keep: A Road Map to Personal and Economic Freedom for Persons with Intellectual Disabilities*. The report encouraged "focused research designed to achieve parity in health care for persons with intellectual disabilities. Such research should examine provider attitudes, behaviors, practice patterns, specific reimbursement barriers and new financing proposals."

Project Connect is a major step towards "a charge we have to keep" with respect to addiction treatment and recovery.