

## **San Diego's Project Connect: Services for People with Developmental Disabilities**

By John de Miranda

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.

This publication, writing at the start of the effort, commented *Because substance abuse and DD services are traditionally funded out of separate streams, there is little communication between the two systems and little opportunity to integrate services.* (ADAW, October 2, 2006, Page 5). Only a handful of programs exist in the United States that target this population. TMI Board President, Jim Timlin, underscores the urgency and importance of Project Connect. *When the people we serve develop health problems, TMI's job is to advocates for their fair treatment. Alcohol and drug recovery services generally do not welcome these citizens. We are proud to have originated Project Connect which shines a light on this situation and lays the groundwork for creating accessible disability-friendly services.*

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. I have been serving as project lead.

A number of findings have resulted from Project Connect's investigations including:

- Several existing funding streams are available to create new treatment and recovery services such as Drug Medi-Cal (alcohol and drug sector) and the independent living vendor category within the developmental services funding mechanism.
- Alcohol and drug providers report that their knowledge of developmental disabilities is somewhat limited but almost 75% of survey respondents indicate that they are interested in improving or enhancing services for people with developmental disabilities.
- Alcohol and Drug providers also report that they would like to access specialized materials and case consultation from disability specialists.
- Survey results from disability service providers indicate that clients use prescribed psychoactive medications and that illicit drug and alcohol use are seen as problems.
- The need for cross-training and professional education about the issue of alcohol and drug problems among individuals with developmental disabilities has been identified throughout the project.

The final report lists a series of recommendations including: the need to expand the focus of Project Connect to establish new treatment services, enhance the county's capacity for cross-training, and creation of disability-friendly recovery support services. In addition the report urges policy makers and funders to:

- Continue and expand the multidisciplinary community advisory council that has overseen the project.
- Create a specialized web site to link service systems and provide self-paced instruction and case management support to professionals.
- Mobilize the local recovery community to assist with engaging people with developmental disabilities in Alcoholics Anonymous and non-12 step mutual support groups like SMART Recovery.

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.

For further information about Project Connect contact me.

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