

Service, Support and Success
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*Edited by: Dave Hingsburger, Vita Community Living Services, vitacls.org and Angie Nethercott, North
Community Network of Specialized Care, Hands TheFamilyHelpNetwork.ca*

Talking Turf: The Job of Being A Good Neighbour

Dunja Monaghan, Emily Romita and Dave Hingsburger
Vita Community Living Services

The “Community Living” movement is well named. Our goal and our philosophy is easily stated, we believe that people with intellectual disabilities have a right to live in and be part of the community. We focus, often on the “rights” of community living – because these rights have been denied. But we also need to understand the “responsibilities” that come with being part of a community. Every social role we have comes with expectations and with responsibilities. Sometimes they are clearly stated, “As an employee you are expected to be on time.” Sometimes they are loudly spoken by a spouse, “YOU ARE EXPECTED TO BE ON TIME.” Those rules, for those roles, are fairly easy to follow because they are very clearly delineated. But for other social roles, like that of being a neighbour, they aren’t stated but simply expected, “please take your garbage out on time.”

Many direct support professionals work in some kind of shared living environment. Of all the roles they understand they need to fulfil, the one being a ‘good neighbour’ often isn’t on the radar. It might be a house or an apartment, but it’s not easy to remember that one is both an employee and a neighbour at the same time. Yet, being a good neighbour **is** one of the most important roles that both, people with disabilities AND those that support them, have. Community living means both living in the community and being responsible to that community. Community living means partaking in a social contract to ‘be’ in relationship to others and to ‘be’ responsible for active participation in making community.

Neighbourliness is a concept that runs deep in human consciousness – the idea of caring for our neighbours, watching out for our neighbourhood and participating in building a spirit of neighbourliness is not new. We have a kind of loving slang for ‘our part of town’ ... it’s our ‘hood,’ our ‘beat,’ our ‘turf.’ When we enter into someone’s home to provide service, we are also entering their neighbourhood. With that we realize that we are responsible not only for how we behave when we come in the door, but also how we behave as we approach the door. Direct Support Professionals become part of the neighbourhood and can either enhance the reputation of those who receive support or they can do, sometimes lasting, damage. Moreover, many people with disabilities have never had the experience of being neighbours or felt the responsibility that

comes with ‘neighbourliness’ – as such, the direct support professional has to ensure that people get an opportunity to learn and participate in the community by being good neighbours.

A quick look at the research and a leisurely browse through community blogs finds that the topic of ‘how to be a good neighbour’ is often discussed. There are lists, there are debates, there are even spirited disagreements. However, there are three areas that are presented constantly in these discussions, three areas that everyone seems to agree on. So here are tips for how to be a ‘good neighbour as a staff entering into someone’s ‘hood’ as well as tips for people with disabilities on the qualities of being a ‘good neighbour:’

Good Fences Make Good Neighbours: Boundaries

Noise: That’s it. That’s the number one concern on every list. It’s on the ‘good neighbour list’ as ‘quiet’ and it’s on the bad neighbour list as ‘noisy.’ People like their homes to be a refuge from the world. They don’t want their evenings to be disrupted by lots of noise and upset. Having someone go outside to ‘cool down’ might work as a strategy, but if they are outside working off steam by yelling and cursing, their ‘cool down’ will heat up neighbours’ anger and upset. No one likes hearing someone venting and screaming obscenities. People with disabilities have the right to be taught strategies that work and strategies that ‘fit’. Being part of a community means learning to follow some community rules. Staff, and behaviour therapists, need to consider the communities’ needs while they are assessing the individual’s needs. Let’s stay with noise a bit. Having staff outside, chatting, laughing and joking on their cell phone can be disruptive to a neighbour trying to get to sleep. You may be working nights, but they may be working days – and need to sleep. Talk indoors.

Parking: Cars. Cars. Cars. Parking matters. It’s important to remember to be courteous and thoughtful when it comes to a limited resource. So you may have to move staff cars around in a driveway a few times – that inconvenience is small in comparison to an angry neighbour banging on your door demanding that you move cars so they can park or they can have friends over. If you are looking to have a meeting where there will be a lot of extra cars, try to do it at a time when parking isn’t a premium or host the meeting elsewhere. For those who are, right now, thinking this is petty – remember the last time you drove through a packed parking lot looking for parking? We’re betting that you began to grumble, mumble and maybe even curse a little? It’s frustrating to look for a place to park, imagine how that feeling is multiplied when it’s said in a sentence like this, “Since that damn group home opened there is never any parking!” Suddenly this is now about more than you and your car, now it’s about how people feel about having people with disabilities living as neighbours.

Turf Wars: Garbage, Gardens and a Bit of Paint

Garbage: When a lot of people share a living space, there can be a lot of garbage. Make sure that staff are aware of garbage days. Make sure that staff know where to take garbage if there is

too much building up. Having a hot garage filled with garbage cans full of soiled diapers and rotting foodstuffs can create a toxic smell. Anger over the smell can be directed at the people who live there rather than at the people who aren't properly disposing these items. Be aware that garbage is both a practical issue (getting rid of it) and a boundary issue (smells leaking through doors). But it's also a confidentiality issue. By improperly dealing with diapers lets everyone know that people are wearing diapers. Many adults do, most don't want others knowing. So garbage in its place, garbage disposed of as necessary – if you don't want neighbours to trash the house, the people who live there and those who work there – take out the garbage.

Yard: Simply put. Mow the damn lawn. Pride in appearance is so important. Most people with disabilities are really proud of the fact that they are now living in the community; that pride needs to translate into action. Involve people with disabilities in keeping the place looking good. Pride of ownership. Pride of belonging. Pride of place. You don't need to get some landscaper to come in to mow a lawn, you can teach someone to take care of the grass, to trim the hedges and to plant some flowers. Yes. Flowers. Gardening is said to be one of the most calming and therapeutic of activities. Involving people with disabilities in the whole process, planning the garden, selecting the plants, watering and weeding allows people to make a claim of their space. More than that - it allows for natural conversations with neighbours. Chatting about plants and soil and the amount of water and sun a plant needs is a natural point of connection. And connections build communities.

A Bit of Paint: Notice when the deck or the windows need sprucing up. The wear and tear of a Canadian winter is nothing to the wear and tear of all those feet – members, staff, family – that come through the door and into the house. Be mindful of the fact that the house presents the 'face' of the agency to the larger community. Sometimes that face could use a lift, or a bit of paint. Make sure that, when you notice these things, that you point it out to those who have the power to approve the dollars for the upkeep.

Turn That Frown Upside Down: Attitudes, Approaches and the Occasional Hello

Friendliness: The major complaint made about having neighbours with disabilities, interestingly, wasn't about people with disabilities at all. It was that staff were rude and dismissive. Following that complaint was the fact that new people were constantly just showing up at the house, total strangers, and these 'intruders' into the neighbourhood made people feel uncomfortable. That these intruders were on-call staff, or people with supportive roles like BTs or OTs or PTs didn't matter, what mattered was that they were strangers and they appeared seemingly randomly. It's interesting that direct support professionals, and often the agencies they work for, make the same huge mistake. Direct support professionals believe that they work for and are supervised by an agency. Supervisors believe that they represent the agency in providing oversight to direct support professionals. Wow, what an insular way to think about

COMMUNITY SERVICES. Good heavens, as mentioned before, the word COMMUNITY is in the name, or mission, of almost every agency that supports people with disabilities. Neighbours have eyes AND telephones! Don't kid yourself, you are being supervised every moment of your job when you are out and about in neighbourhoods, in workplaces, in shopping centres. Angry neighbours have strong motivations to keep notes, license plate numbers, take photos on camera phones. Angry neighbours may never have heard of behavioural approaches but they can still take really good data. Even so, motivation for being friendly shouldn't be to avoid getting called on the carpet, it should be a recognition that you are a 'neighbour' and that 'neighbourliness' is called for and that your behaviour can enhance the reputation of both, the individuals you serve and the agency you work for. So some hints:

Smile ...

Say 'Hello' ...

If you're new say, "Hi, I'm new working here, my name is ..."

Compliment someone when compliments are deserved ...

BE NICE ...

It's odd to have to write these things down but sometimes it's important to see in print what we know in our hearts to be true. Remember you arrive at work the moment you enter the neighbourhood, not the moment you enter the door.

Teach "Howdy Neighbour" Skills: "A good neighbour smiles at you over the back fence, but doesn't climb over it." That bit of wisdom by Arthur Baer is often quoted in articles on how to be a good neighbour. The fact that Mr. Baer said this and the fact that articles exist on being a good neighbour means something important - neighbourliness is a SKILL. And the exciting thing is that skills can be taught. It's great that you are nice (especially now that you read the last part) but it's equally important that those who live in that community learn how to be sociable and friendly without crossing boundaries. Saying "Hello" is one thing, running up and hugging someone is something else entirely. Sometimes we forget that we've all had years and years (and in some cases even more years) experience of being in relationship with the community – clerks, neighbours, crossing guards, phone line repair people – and because of that we know the rules. These rules didn't come from some instinctual understanding of the rules of social interplay between yourself and the green grocer, it came from learning. Many people with disabilities simply haven't had the dignity of being taught social skills or having social expectations. Well, they do now, and it's important work.

Complaints: Proactive Not Reactive Ways to Solve Disputes

Listen, Acknowledge and Alert: When neighbours come forward with complaints, about noise, about garbage, about the behaviour of others on your team ... LISTEN. Really listen to what

they have to say. There will be a tendency to get defensive and even become slightly hostile. No one likes hearing complaints, no one likes to be put on the spot, no one likes to have to stay calm in the face of criticism – no one, that’s why you have to be paid to do it, it’s hard. At the first sign of distress or anger from neighbours, alert your supervisor, let them know that there is a problem brewing, or in the case of an actual complaint, of a problem stated. Make sure that the team knows. Take this seriously. Remember, you get to leave the neighbourhood and go home, those you serve have to live there, next to these neighbours, good neighbours make good lives. So don’t be afraid to take action. Besides which if you don’t - they will. It’s way more effective for you to bring the information forward than to have the information circle around and bite you in the ... (not sure if we’re allowed to say the next word) ... behind.

Conclusion

“I can tell just by pulling up to a group home and watching people come out the door what kind of quality care they are getting.” This statement by a WheelTrans (a transit company service people with disabilities in Toronto) driver is one that every direct support professional needs to think about. The driver is saying, clearly, that they are part of the vast network of “community supervision” that exists outside the walls of an agency. We longed to be part of the community, we fought to be part of the community, and now we are. This means that we have roles and responsibilities that come with membership. By taking the time to think through what the job really is, direct support professionals can work to enhance the experience of community living for those they serve, for those they work for and for the larger community of people with disabilities. It’s a big job but it’s a good job – making community is probably the coolest thing ever to be on a job description.

Service, Support and Success accepts articles for review and publication. To get a set of writer’s guidelines or to discuss ideas for articles contact the editors at:

dhingsburger@vitacls.org

anethercott@handstfhn.ca

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