

# Service, Support and Success

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### Living Locally: Understanding Community Supervision

By: David Hingsburger

When is washing the dishes, not just washing the dishes?

When is taking out the garbage, not just taking out the garbage?

When is a friendly greeting, not just a friendly greeting?

These routine tasks, important as they are, can become overlooked in terms of their role in your support of someone with an intellectual disability. We work in the community living movement; this is a civil liberties movement which has a set of ideas. One of those ideals is that people with disabilities have a right to a valued place in the communities in which they live. This stands in stark contrast to the prevailing belief only a few years ago that people with disabilities needed to live separate lives separated from home, family and community. It's a big deal. The movement towards community living is not always readily received and there is still opposition to the idea of people with intellectual disabilities as neighbours, coworkers and citizens.

Direct support professionals can be so distracted by the everydayness of the responsibilities they have, they can forget that what they are doing is always seen in the larger context. There is always a larger context. Neighbours who don't really want people with disabilities in their midst will be looking for any infraction, of any standard, to make complaint. Advocates, on the other hand, will be looking for any evidence of lack of care, or lack of appropriate support, and are ready to raise alarm when they believe that someone with a disability isn't getting the care they deserve.

Riding to work one day, on the accessible transit system in my city, I was chatting with the driver. She said to me, when talking about the work that I do, that she could tell, from the moment she pulled up to a group home or program for people with intellectual disabilities, the kind of care that people are getting. "I can tell," she said, "even more about that care when I see the individual comes out of the building with their staff." I asked her if she ever saw things that made her really concerned, she said, "Yes, and I reported it every time." As we chatted, she said that she thought it was odd that the staff never seemed to think that she could see and hear what they were doing, and what they were saying to the people they supported. "I guess, in my role, I'm invisible to them" she said.



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But she's not invisible and she's not silent either.

She is one in a vast network of people who see what we do. She sees and wants the best for the people we serve. Others see and want reason to protest the existence of your service in their community. What we do always has a larger context. And because of that context, our work is up for scrutiny even when we least expect it. I once saw a woman receive terrible support while attending a movie; the staff was shocked when I approached, spoke to them, told them what I saw, and why it disturbed me so much. I saw the name of the agency on the side of the van they were driving when they left the parking lot. My next move was to call the agency. The staff thought they were at a movie, they were wrong; their work was on public display.

So, should direct support professionals then live in a state of constant paranoia? No, of course not, but they should work with an awareness that their relationship to the community and to the people they serve is a complex one and, it needs to be stated again, is seen in a larger context with different lenses.

Let's take a look at some of the local relationships that you need to be aware of when providing service to people with disabilities. A lot of these relationships might seem invisible to you, they might not even seem like relationships, but they are. They need to be remembered, because, as it turns out, we are all supervised, and more powerfully so, by many people other than those on the organization chart of the service agency for whom we work.

#### 1) The Locals: Servers, Clerks and Security

Even people who live in cities organize their lives such that they really just live in a small town. For the most part, they go to the same movie theatres, the same bookstores, the same coffee stops and they shop at the same grocery stores, malls and supermarkets. You become one of the locals and, because of that, you become very visible. You aren't just a nameless person in a crowd. They might not know you by name, but you have a name: 'that tall woman who supports the redheaded wheelchair guy.'

I didn't realize this until Joe, my husband, and I were at our local for a cup of tea. We go there all the time. Don't know the name of a single staff person, but we recognize and greet them when we order. Joe and I were in a bit of a dispute when we were having tea and, as can happen in those situations, we forgot where we were and got a little loud. I'm good at being loud quietly – Joe, not so much. At one point, Joe got up to go to the washroom. During his brief absence, one of the clerks came over and whispered to me. She wanted to know if I felt safe with my 'helper,' and offered to 'call someone' if I did not. Even though I do wish that, when we were out together, it wasn't always assumed that Joe is my staff, it was wonderful for her to be concerned and take action. When I told her that it was OK, Joe wasn't my staff but my husband, and we were arguing, she made a joke about arguing being a defining quality of marriage.

She saw.

She took action.

I didn't realize that we were being watched and watched from a different context, the context of service provider/service recipient. That context made what was happening between us viewed differently. There was an expectation that Joe, as my support

provider, would not raise his voice, would not emphasize his point with the occasional cuss word. (Don't everyone now get a hate-on for Joe here; I was just as prone to swearing as he was at that point in the 'discussion.')

Being out in the community means being OUT in the community. The mere fact that you are a regular, and that you are with someone who is 'different' or deemed 'vulnerable' makes you more visible, and your actions more likely to be weighed and judged.

The solution, of course, is to remember that, no matter where you are, you are at work. And because you are at work, you mind your manner and your manners in supporting the people you serve. It's your job to be respectful and, if you do that, no matter where you do that, there's no concern.

## 2) The Locals: Taxis, Buses and Other Drivers

I mentioned earlier that the bus driver I spoke to said that she could tell the quality of service that people got in just the brief time that she was there to pick someone up or drop them off. Let's look at what she said. First, she said that she could tell from just pulling up to a place the kind of care people were getting. Well, how is that possible? Without seeing the interactions between a person and their staff, how would she know if quality care was being given? Well, think about it. If you drove up to pick someone up from a support home or a support program, what would be the first thing you'd notice? Yep, does the place look cared for? Is there pride in the appearance of the house? Does it look like someone has made an effort to either make a nice home for themselves, or alternately and probably more commonly thought, has someone made an effort to make a nice home for others? This is a two second assessment and, I believe, sets the driver up for the expectations of what they will see in the interactions between the individual and their staff. If they see poor care of the environment, they will be set up for seeing poor care of individual.

The second thing she said was that she knew even more when she saw the interactions between staff and individuals from the house or program to the bus. This brief bit of observation isn't during the 'best moments of the day' between a person with a disability and their staff. It's a transition time between house or program and bus; it's a time limited event. The individual has to be on the bus at a particular time; these are always stressful periods. Any parent knows this – getting kids out the door in time for a movie or to catch a cab has been likened to 'herding cats.' It's tough. Now, here's the thing – the people you support aren't children, they are adults. Even so, it can be high stress, and we can tend to do what our parents did ... mistake! But then, remember you are a Direct Support PROFESSIONAL, and this is what you are trained to do. That training should shine through now. The manner in which you assist the person to the bus or taxi or to the family friend picking them up for the weekend matters.

The solutions here are twofold. First, ensure that care of the house or program is part of every staff meeting, and that people are assisted, to the best of their abilities and interests, to participate in the aspects of care and beautification of the area. It's simply part of doing business and part of showing the pride of place that people have in their communities. The second, of course, is to remember, at all times, particularly during stressful times, to rely on your training. Take a breath, bring back your best self and respond respectfully as you provide support. Please remember to acknowledge the

driver, who often feels invisible – say ‘hello,’ greet them and thank them for their service. It’s a simple thing to do that can really influence how you and your agency are seen and spoken about.

### 3) The Locals: Police, Paramedics and Ambulances

Speaking of high stress situations ... people are people and, as such, at some point will require emergency services. If you support people who have significant issues with behaviour or who are medically fragile, the probability is that you will have need, from time to time, of these services. Unlike bus or taxi drivers, these people will actually come into your home. And while transportation providers will have experience and have the ability to ‘see’ service, emergency services people come in with trained eyes. They are used to looking for indicators of quality service or for indicators of lack of care. They do this no matter what environment they go into – family home or group living environment, but they are much more on alert when people are living within a ‘care system.’

They will, however, like the drivers, see two things. The environment in which service is offered and the interactions of the staff and the people they serve. This should never be an issue, of course, because our homes, our programs should always be ready to receive guests or visitors. That doesn’t mean they have to be spotless and pass a ‘white glove’ test, but they should always look and feel like home. They should look and feel like care has been taken so that everyone feels welcome. “The most important thing I want to feel in my child’s home,” said one parent, “is that it’s a welcoming place.” It doesn’t take much to make a place look welcoming does it? Just a little thought, a little time and a good ‘hoovering’ every now and then.

What really will be on display though, is your professionalism. And that, really, is the solution isn’t it? The likelihood is that you or one of your team has called emergency services, therefore, you shouldn’t act all surprised and confused when they show up. Know the kinds of information that they will need, be ready to offer it. Be ready for their questions, be clear with your answers, demonstrate through all that you care for the individual. Be sure, as well, to ensure that the emergency response team feels your support, your respect and your thanks for the help they are giving. If you’ve taken care of the environment, it will be up to muster for the critical gaze of anyone entering your home during an emergency. Remember they are there to serve the community, that big COMMUNITY, and they do that through ensuring that people with disabilities are being served well. They take their jobs seriously. And so, of course, should we.

So when is washing the dishes not just washing the dishes? When is taking out the garbage not just taking out the garbage? Well, the answer is simple – when you do them at home, they’re chores, when you do them at work, they are a statement about your commitment to quality care, welcoming environments and respect for the people you serve. These behaviours are seen through a different lens and in a different context when viewed as part of your work and your professionalism; they are evidence of quality care.

Further, when is a friendly greeting, not just a friendly greeting? When supporting someone to fully participate, your attitude, demeanor and tone will be very much watched, weighed and judged. It might seem daunting but, instead, it should be viewed as intensely exciting. How cool is it that you get the opportunity to show the best of who you are, to everyone watching, every moment of every day? It’s very cool, so cool that it could change you ... forever.

**About the author:**

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