

The Community LifeSM Conference

On November 9-10, 2006, in Charleston, South Carolina, The Council on Quality and Leadership (CQL) offered a new and unprecedented conference experience to introduce its Community LifeSM initiatives. CQL brought together a unique blend of national leaders and experiential exercises to explore quality of life within a community context.

What made this conference unparalleled in its approach is that participants were part of a new and unique community learning experience. An exploration of community took conference participants outside the ballroom of the Charleston Renaissance Hotel Historic District into downtown Charleston to learn about quality of life, community data, Community LifeSM, and how to make collective decisions from different perspectives. Under the guidance of expert facilitators and community representatives, participant teams discovered how to extend the information gathering process to their own lives and the lives of people in their organizations.

Conference participants included an array of human service providers for people with disabilities and people with mental illness. Participants included Executive Directors from private providers and associations, Directors from the state level, people that work for large provider networks, and people from small private providers. Participants came from all across the United States and also Canada and Ireland.

Community LifeSM is one segment of CQL's Quality Measures 2005[®], representing a major break-through in how organizations can evaluate their own effectiveness at providing quality supports for people with disabilities and people with mental illness. Quality Measures 2005[®] combine many of CQL's existing innovative quality management practices into one core document that provides a blueprint for moving an organization forward. They call for service providers to integrate the assets of the social environment where they are based...an approach CQL calls Community LifeSM.

"The community is the place where quality can happen," explained James Gardner, Ph.D, President and CEO of CQL.

"Every organization needs to become an integrated part of the world around it in order to provide the optimum setting for facilitating personal quality of life."

CQL

100 West Road, Suite 406

Towson, MD 21204

410.583.0060

www.c-q-l.org



The Council on Quality and Leadership
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Gardens

Charleston Harbor

“It starts with asking basic questions, such as ‘what does our community have to offer?’ as it relates to education, employment, transportation and personal safety, and ‘where is it lacking?’” Dr. Gardner said. “When a service provider goes through this process and begins to identify ‘what ought to be,’ they can then become advocates for positive change at the community level by joining forces with like-minded organizations, family members and self-advocates.”

Nationally recognized leaders addressed an enthusiastic audience with stories of success in their own communities, as well as provided practical tactics for developing community collaborations. Speakers included:

- Gale Bohling, President, Federated Human Service Cooperative
- Fred Butler, Executive Director, Austin/Travis County Community Action Network
- Karen Flippo, CEO, National Association of Councils on Developmental Disabilities
- Jason Hoch, Town Manager, Plaistow, New Hampshire
- Sheri Keith, Quality Enhancement Specialist, CQL
- Tim Quinn, Executive Director, The Arc Northern Chesapeake Region
- Michael Smull, Chair, The Learning Community for Essential Lifestyle Planning
- Sue Swenson, Executive Director, The Arc of the United States

The Community LifeSM Exercise

Conference participants were divided into teams of eight and were assigned one of the following topics to investigate:

- Housing
- Education
- Health Care
- Transportation
- Employment
- Recreation and Leisure

Based on their assigned topics, and the information they were able to gather on those assigned topics, groups were presented with the objective of assessing the quality of life in Charleston and deciding if they would want to move to Charleston. The biggest challenge is that each group only had two hours to

investigate its community topic. Several resources were available, and we recommended that teams divide their tasks as follows:

- 2 people visit with the community representatives assembled at the conference hotel
- 2 people walk through the community of Charleston
- 2 people use public transportation to explore the city
- 2 people search for Charleston community data on the Internet



A Charleston trolley or a carriage ride - just two of the many ways to get around Charleston.



Charleston Area Regional Transit Authority (CARTA) donated bus passes so that each group could send team members to explore Charleston's public transportation.

Groups were provided with **Factors to Consider** questions to guide them through their community evaluations. The Factors to Consider were categorized into two areas: **Geographic Community** questions which are based on hard data and physical locations; and **Sense of Belonging** questions which are more subjective in nature. These Factors to Consider were simply provided as a resource tool. Conference participants were encouraged to come up with additional questions that were more personally relevant to their decisions to move or not move to Charleston. Although we did not specifically give the exercise a focus on disability issues, due to their disability backgrounds, many participants did often include disability factors in their research.

Once the community data had been gathered, each group reassembled for a discussion based on the following questions:

- How did you gather information and why did you choose these methods? Did they get you what you needed to know?
- What else would you want to know? Who else would you want to talk to?
- What do we need to know about a community (in terms of housing, health care, etc.) to know if an individual will have a sense of belonging there?
- Have you found ways to understand how a person would develop a sense of belonging?
- What data were most helpful? Hard facts (quantitative) or qualitative data?
- How do we use what we did during the exercise to enhance our services at home? How can we apply this experience to our work on behalf of the people we support?
- How could my organization learn more about our community?

Groups were then mixed, so that each new group was comprised of people from each of the areas of investigation (housing, health care, education, employment, transportation and recreation). The new groups repeated the discussion questions to include multiple perspectives.

Finally, all groups were brought back together for one large group discussion where the question was posed, “Based on the information you gathered today, would you want to move to Charleston? Why or why not?” The discussion also included the information gathering process - what was easy, difficult, etc.

The information gathering process

Conference participants used a variety of methods to obtain their community information, including:

- Taking the bus and talking to the bus drivers and other riders
- Talking with the community representatives
- Riding a bike or walking through the community of Charleston and speaking to people on the street, local businesses, people with disabilities, real estate agents, pan handlers, firemen, college students, police officers, store employees, city workers, other tourists
- Reading brochures, newspapers, maps, state reports, publications, phone books, employments ads
- Downloading Charleston data from the Internet
- Visiting the hospital, visitors' center, the unemployment office, a local health care group
- Calling local agencies and speaking to subject matter experts



With the beautiful weather, riding a bike through downtown Charleston proved to be a great choice to explore the city

Philip Owens, Vice President of Business Development for the Charleston Metro Chamber of Commerce, brought together five representatives from a variety of Charleston community organizations to serve as on-hand expert resources to the conference participants. Along with Mr. Owens were the following community representatives:

- Annick Steffels, Charleston Visitors Center
- Janet Shumacher, City of Charleston, ADA/Mayor's Office on Aging
- Caroline Byrd, Trident United Way 211
- Heather Woolwine, Medical University of South Carolina (MUSC)
- Jamie Thomas, Charleston County Public Library

Also volunteering his time and expertise was Joseph Coker from the Renaissance Hotel.

"I felt like I talked the whole time, so there was an abundance of interest in health care services, access, and care issues," commented Heather Woolwine from MUSC. "From their questions, I learned that access to services is a HUGE deal for people with disabilities, especially getting to and from various appointments once on campus. We knew getting to the medical center was a big deal, but I think it reinforced our recent excursion into an on-campus accessible shuttle service." Ms. Woolwine added she believes this Community LifeSM Exercise would be valuable to repeat with other groups visiting Charleston.



Heather Woolwine from the Medical University of South Carolina volunteered her time to serve as a community resource for conference participants



Gathering community data from the Internet and from walking the town



Did the conference participants want to move to Charleston?

Most responses to our question about whether or not people wanted to move to Charleston were favorable. Many people cited physical aspects: fair temperatures and climate and the beauty of Charleston. Across all groups was agreement that the people of Charleston are generous, friendly, charitable and exhibited good camaraderie. People appreciated the accessibility of the city with its bus system, trains, bikes, walking and wireless communication system. Many people enjoyed exploring the cultural and recreational activities, noting their abundance. Some groups reported Charleston has a high livability rating due to the health care, small business population, employment opportunities and integrated employment resources, good climate, environment and natural resources. And of course, everyone likes the Charleston cuisine.

How to bring CQL's Community LifeSM Exercise and experience to YOUR organization and community

We can bring the Community LifeSM Exercise to your organization and work with you, teaching you the skills to:

- Involve staff, people with disabilities, family members and community leaders in a shared exploration process
- Define various perspectives on the meanings of “community”
- Identify the Community LifeSM and Social Capital data most important to your organization
- Strategize how to use the data to impact your organizational planning efforts

- Apply national resources at the local level
- Tap into the range of data resources and indicators available about your community
- Use different learning styles and experiences to gather and analyze personal quality of life and Community LifeSM
- Identify your organizational and community strengths, as well as barriers
- Investigate potential partnerships for your organization within your community
- Reframe your thinking to look at the community surrounding your own organization

To contact CQL, call 410.583.0060, or send an email to info@thecouncil.org.

