

Increasing the Social Capital of People with Disabilities

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By Carli Friedman | CQL Director of Research

Social capital is a concept that recognizes that people's relationships and social networks are an important aspect of a person's health and quality of life. In fact, social capital has been shown to improve people's physical and mental health outcomes (Rodgers et al., 2019).

Social capital can improve access to resources, resilience, and mutual aid; it can also help people survive in natural disasters or as they navigate living in poverty (Hawkins & Maurer, 2010; Kyne & Aldrich, 2020; Mithen et al., 2015). Hence the name social capital – our social networks can literally serve as a form of capital or asset to improve our wellbeing, like money can.

There are a few different perspectives on social capital. While some people view social capital in the context of civic engagement and politics, we're focusing on social capital specific to people's social ties, as that's most relevant to human services. In this Capstone, we first look at what Personal Outcome Measures® (POM) data tells us about the social capital of people with disabilities. Then, Anne Buechner from CQL discusses ways organizations can facilitate the social capital of the people they support. Finally, we hear from Katie Hedlund, Jasmine Black, and Angie Collins from Lutheran Social Service of Minnesota about how they promote social capital at their organization.

Social Capital Among People with Disabilities

Since social capital is important and improves quality of life, CQL introduced the Social Capital Index in 2005. The Social Capital Index organizes eight POM indicators into two categories: bonding, and bridging. Bonding describes social capital with those people who are similar to us and who share common values, traditions, and backgrounds. Bridging describes social capital that is found in relationships with others who are less like us and who exist outside our typical social circle.

Almost 20 years since the Social Capital Index was introduced, we still commonly find many people with disabilities are lacking in social capital. In fact, as detailed in our Personal Outcome Measures® Benchmarks: 2021 report, people with disabilities only had 38.8% of Social Capital Index outcomes present on average. People with disabilities were less likely to have bonding social capital (35.2%) than they were to have bridging social capital (40.2%).



Social Capital Index: 2021 (n = 727)

Indicator	Bonding	Bridging
People have intimate relationships	35.6%	
People participate in the life of the community	25.2%	
People have friends	33.6%	
People are respected	46.2%	
People are connected to natural support networks	35.2%	
People live in integrated environments		50.3%
People interact with other members of the community		37.5%
People perform different social roles		32.7%
AVERAGE	35.2%	40.2%
OVERALL SOCIAL INDEX SCORE	38.8%	

While historically the Social Capital Index required calculating by hand, CQL's PORTAL Data System includes a templated report that not only automatically calculates the Social Capital Index for agencies, but also compares the data to national metrics.

As we can see from the data, most people with disabilities were lacking social capital in 2021. By targeting supports, organizations can help promote the social capital of those they serve.

Tips for Growing Social Capital

By Anne Buechner | CQL Quality Enhancement Specialist

All of us help strengthen our community in small and large ways (O'Brien, 2017). The Boys & Girls Club of America, and other organizations developed around the ideas that people need positive things in which to be involved and make a difference (Putnam, 2001). In a nutshell, people build social capital through active, reciprocal, and trusting relationships focused on a common purpose (O'Brien, 2017).

One way to achieve successful community building is through people's connections around shared social capital interests and strengths. In order to support people to join in, we only need start by taking simple steps. First, determine people's interests and where/how they want to leave their 'social footprint.' While doing so, it's important to use a customized approach to learning about people's education, experience, and exposure (the Three E's) about community (consider that this may apply to all of us). Then, once familiar with people's community building preferences, initiate logical connections – where do people experience joy and wish to contribute?

Let's be clear about community, too. It's difficult to develop community-related social capital while in a segregated bubble such as congregate living or programming which excludes the general public. Cultivating social capital happens in the general public spaces, where all people interact (Putnam, 2001). For some people who've had limited life experiences, consider ways to best begin to respectfully expose people to what their community offers. There's no replacement to in-person exposure (Putnam, 2001). Here are some examples to get started:

- "Take dance or music lesson(s) with a friend
- Participate in a political campaign
- Sign up for a class & meet your classmates for coffee
- Create a newsletter
- Audition for community theatre, backstage production, or usher
- Attend a lecture or concert
- Organize a neighborhood yard sale, BBQ or potluck dinner
- Run for public office
- Plan a 'Walking Tour' of a local historic area
- Gather a group to clean up a local park, cemetery or waterway
- Host a move night." (O'Brien, 2017, pp. 2-7)

Remember those simple steps to get started? One of those steps might include learning about the person's Three E's. Another step is to look into people's previous and current interests in hobbies, pastimes, connections, or passions. Next, comes individual exploration around personally defined preferences. Paring interests down to making effective connections requires that people actually experience and participate in those interests. Build upon existing, natural resources and contacts. Know someone who's an avid concert goer, activist, or sports enthusiast? Consider how to make those introductions for people. Organizationally, consider developing a social capital pool, a 'Who Knows Who or What' list.

To develop a social capital pool database, begin with stakeholders' input on what to include in collection data. Some examples include: formal or informal connections, clubs, groups, sports, hobbies, cultural groups, faith-based groups, civil groups, political groups, etc. Use this information to customize your starting list (be prepared to update it frequently). Collect this data and apply to all people: people supported and staff. Determine when and how to gather this information about people supported and staff. This might be upon entering into services, at an annual meeting, at staff on-boarding or at reviews. Update the pool list regularly. Once people's social capital development priorities have been solicited and are known, provide introductions to connect people to others from the pool with similar passions. It's also important to develop a process to "close the loop" to check on social capital developments and successes, and revise steps as necessary. Also, find ways to celebrate and share people's connections and social capital development.

DSPs and other supporters' roles are crucial to achieving successes! Sculpting impactful social capital may take time but will be so much fun while creating value, both personally and for the community.

Helping People with Disabilities and Staff Understand Social Capital

By Katie Hedlund, Quality Specialist, Lutheran Social Service of Minnesota

Jasmine Black, Director of Quality, Lutheran Social Service of Minnesota

Angie Collins, Statewide Director of Quality and Engagement, Lutheran Social Service of Minnesota

Lutheran Social Service of Minnesota (LSS of MN) is committed to our vision that all people have the opportunity to live and work in community with full and abundant lives and our mission speaks to services supporting all people with building community. We know we must address the topic of social capital and recognize the challenges brought on by COVID-19. We know that it is important that we ensure employees and people receiving services understand the concept of community, what social capital is, how to build social capital, and what social roles are. One of the biggest barriers with social capital is people not truly understanding what it means.

Historically, POM were standing topics for our team staff meetings. We recently increased our number of inter-rater reliable Certified Interviewers from 2 to 8 and Certified Trainers from 2 to 4; ensuring we have the capacity to increase the number of POM interviews completed, thereby increasing the awareness of social capital and social roles. Once a POM interview has been completed and determinations have been made, the interviewer meets with the person and their designated coordinator to review the results of the POM interview and discuss the priorities of the person. This provides the opportunity for one-to-one discussion about the interests of the person, what is positive and possible for their future, local and virtual options for social roles, sharing resources, and possible supports available internally and externally. It all helps the person be in the driver's seat to gain more education, experience and exposure (the Three E's) about their role in their communities.

Gathering this information is vital to not only understanding what a single person desires, but also provides the organization a road map to what gaps may be present in the communities in which the person lives. When these gaps are identified, additional guidance, support, and resources are provided to the person and others in the area.

Social Capital Among People with Disabilities

For example, one of LSS of MN's homes in Fosston, MN, Olive Branch, participates in a wide range of efforts to support people to live in their community and build social capital. In working to advance inclusion and integration, staff members have supported people to host community-wide activities like Halloween parties, participate in charity events such as 'Relay for Life,' and connect with others by hosting an exhibit table at their Intercommunity Health Fair.

They are especially fond of creating events that benefit the children of the community. A few years ago, they joined forces with a local daycare and painted "Fosston Rocks" for the Facebook site. Those rocks have traveled all over the world! Supporting people to be valued members of their religious communities and part of the coaching support for the local high school football team are just two examples of how natural supports and valued social roles have been developed. From supporting people in organizing advocacy group meetings, to taking part in the Minnesota Olmstead Academy, staff members work diligently to promote self-advocacy efforts.

As we continue to promote Olive Branch's efforts across the state, animations have been developed and shared with employees to help them better understand the concepts of community and social capital. Employees share the animations with people receiving services. The goal is to provide education and create opportunities for community connections and social capital and social roles. Previously, we took this same approach to ensure people receiving services can access their personal information in an online records platform. This

resulted in them requesting a log in for their accounts.

Additionally, we offer weekly hour-long virtual sessions to all employees and people receiving services about all aspects of CQL's Basic Assurances®, POM, and Person-Centered Excellence. One of the barriers we found is that people simply do not know what "social capital" and "social roles" are. When using that terminology, people receiving services and employees alike do not realize that they already have these roles in the community or that it is something attainable. We continue to find that people receiving services still live fairly secluded simply because they lack the Three E's. By offering generalized presentations of all that is positive and possible for people receiving services, people receiving services and the employees find themselves naturally brainstorming what they can do!

LSS of MN also encourages employees to commit to NADSP credentialing and mandates this process for all house managers once they have been in their positions for 6 months. This supports social capital by employees reflecting on and providing focus, then sharing the actions they took to support someone with building community.

Through offered education, experience, and exposure for self-advocates and employees, we hope to expand everyone's knowledge and opportunity to be viewed as valued members of their communities, as they determine.

Expanding Social Capital to Improve Quality of Life

By Carli Friedman | CQL Director of Research

As seen in the Social Capital Index data, we have a far way to go in promoting the social capital of people with disabilities. Doing so may be especially challenging during the COVID-19 pandemic. But by implementing the techniques and tips suggested in this Capstone, you can help facilitate the social capital of the people you support. Doing so will not only improve people with disabilities' social capital, but also their health and quality of life.

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