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OHIO VALLEY RESIDENTIAL SERVICES



### Community begins with Integration

By Kate Stark

"Integration is not a privilege, it's a right. The current policy statement says that every person with a developmental disability has the right to an opportunity for friends, family, a job, a regular life in the

community. That's as simple as it gets," according to Eric Metzger, of Hamilton County DDS. OVRs, along with three other local providers has joined the County board to come up with a plan to enact changes that will help put those words into practice. Metzger says people with disabilities have waited long enough to have these same fundamental rights as other citizens, and the time for change is now.

OVRs Program Director Jeff Krieger is quick to point out that although this shift has the potential to drastically improve individuals' quality of life in the long run, the organization is looking at each unique individual to determine the best changes for them specifically. Integration doesn't necessarily mean immediate, drastic changes day-to-day. "It's just a different way of looking at things. We already had some person-centered approaches to planning in place. Our staff is used to now, instead of placing group rules and house rules, really trying to cater individually to folks. This is just a natural next step from that," says Krieger. "Integration is basically how we're supporting our individuals. It's just one of the many ways we do that."

As Krieger mentions, more choices are being made available to individuals about their daily lives, as group home routines are deemphasized in favor of fitting each individual's needs. "We used to work really hard to keep everybody on that one schedule," Krieger says. "All that you're doing now is altering it in a way that there's less resistance. Now, they can set their own routine, when before there was very few choices about that. Now we can say, if he does sleep in, that's okay. Routine is good, but routine based on choices is a lot better than just routine."

Through his job with the county, Metzger meets all sorts of people who fit under the wide umbrella of 'developmentally disabled'. He likes to do an informal poll with them, a gut check of sorts. He asks if they're lonely. An astounding 90% of the time, the answer is yes.

He says often when you ask care providers if an individual is integrated within their community, you hear a laundry list of people they talk to: doctors, pharmacists, co-workers. "But do they have a friend?" Metzger asks. "A friend friend. Like, that they call on the weekends and don't just see at a place they go to, like my friend at school, or my friend at the workshop." The answer to Metzger's question under preexisting systems of care is overwhelmingly no. He hopes that by getting people out into their communities this will change.



**Eric Metzger from Hamilton County DDS & Jeff Krieger OVRs Program Director discuss Integration efforts with Kate Stark**

Metzger is passionate about the differences between true community and community-substitutes, like bussing individuals from a group home to a baseball game where they spend time only with each other. He'd love to get others involved as well. "If they didn't have those developmental disabilities, would they still be hanging out with these folks exclusively?" he wants to know. He looks skeptical. "A good way to look at integration is always asking yourself "is that real life, is that real community, or is that a community substitute?"

In the 1999 Supreme Court case, *Olmstead v. LC*, the Court affirmed the ADA's integration mandate, holding that "people with disabilities have the same rights as all citizens: to live with their families and friends in local neighborhoods and towns, to be employed in regular jobs at competitive wages, and to participate in community affairs." While this has been the de facto law for years, new regulations for Medicaid-funded HCBS (Home and Community-Based Services) programs went into effect in March 2014 that strengthen the existing legislation. It states: Individuals who receive Medicaid HCBS must have

opportunities to seek employment, to engage in community life, to control personal resources, and to receive services in the community to the same degree as individuals not receiving Medicaid HCBS. Furthermore, settings must ensure individuals' rights of privacy, dignity and respect, freedom from coercion and restraint, and must optimize individual autonomy and choice. The regulations also require, in provider-owned or operated settings, that individuals are supported to control their own schedules and activities, including access to food and visitors that they choose and at times of their choosing.

But how can care providers like OVRs accomplish this? "There is no template, or we'd all be doing it." Metzger is matter-of-fact about the challenges of implementation. "There's a lot of 'you shall' but there's not a 'how-to,' and there are tremendous complexities as far the range of folks with disabilities and the associated cost. In the past everything was associated by locations and sites. In the new day it's associated with the individual and engagement. That is so different! How do you take 150 individuals across 40+ sites and give them all individual programs going through various communities?"

***"Integration doesn't necessarily mean immediate, drastic changes day-to-day. It's just a different way of looking at things" - Jeff Krieger***

For OVRs, it means placing an emphasis on integration at their late-May staff retreat, as well as reallocating existing staff members and shifting responsibilities. "We are trying to make subtle changes," says Krieger about their restructuring in-house. It also means shifting resources and altering staff responsibilities so that staff members and care providers are connecting with the individuals they share the most in common with, or connect with the best. "We're getting to know our staff as well as we're getting to know our individuals. What are your likes? What are your hobbies? What do you know about going on in your neighborhood?"

By partnering with the county to establish a plan for integration, OVRs has firmly established their place at the forefront of policy and procedure making on a state level. "It's the first time I know of in the state of Ohio, where you have a start to finish process for doing this," says Metzger. "Lots of other providers and other folks are waiting for a model that's probably not going to come until somebody does exactly what OVRs and some other providers are doing."

According to the new model of service, outcomes are measured on a scale of 0 to 5. The criteria help gauge how well a provider is meeting the individual's needs and engaging them, while allowing the organization to systemically collect meaningful data across the 150 people who use their services. Metzger breaks it down, explaining, "A zero is you stay in your house, you go nowhere, you engage with no one except maybe staff. One is Discovery- we have no idea what George wants to do, he doesn't communicate in a way that we understand well, but we are going to try some stuff. Two is the next level up: I went out to a place or an event and I made a single attempt to engage somebody. It goes all the way up to a Five, which is 'Get away from me, I've got my own life.' It's almost like your teenager that you dropped off at the mall."

Not everyone is going to report an outcome of 5, and while there's no penalty for a low score, that information is tracked on a case-by-case basis to ensure progress is being made. While meaningful, such progress is rarely easy. "It's largely uncomfortable for people," Metzger admits. "In any civil rights movement, you're gonna have some things happen that are undesirable, that are difficult. But if you look at any kind of long-term care facility, bad things happen there too. So if our excuse is, we can't [integrate] because something bad will happen, well, we're really hypocrites then." Metzger also points out a "bad" experience doesn't necessarily mean a harrowing tale; it could be something as small as a misunderstanding or a soiled shirt- the same kinds of experiences that individuals who don't have disabilities have the opportunity to learn from.



**One way to embrace integration is to purposefully and actively help people meet and make friendships with people in their community**

"As soon as they experienced any discomfort, any pain, anything unusual, we protected them. We steered them off from life," Metzger understands the struggle facing staff. "In fairness... we have put this huge fear on people that they can't make a mistake-not one. If anything happens out there, you're accountable, and that's intimidating." But now, care providers are encouraged to be a little more hands-off.

Krieger says outings can be worrisome for staff members as they learn to navigate the new landscape too, but something as small as semantics can make a big difference. "A lot of times it's how [the staff is] asking questions. You're not looking at it as a serve model, you're looking at it as a side-by-side model. You're working side-by-side with that individual and helping them versus saying 'you should do that,' and 'here let's do this.' It's not, 'Do you want a vegetable with dinner?' It's more, 'Do you want carrots or broccoli?'"

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Allowing staff to meet individuals where they are starts them on a pathway to meaningful change and connection as a member of their community. OVRs has made a commitment to Hamilton County to have engaged everyone they serve by August 30. "I believe that's already happened," Krieger states. "Now is every single person going out and meeting new people? No. There are different levels of engagement. But we've already started that process and we've had some successes already." Those successes include everything from asking someone at the next table over to borrow ketchup, to attending a swim class in the community and being driven there by a friend from class.

These stories prove that integration is working to help people with developmental disabilities to live more authentic lives according to Metzger, "A lot of the folks who have been completely sheltered, people with significant behavioral issues, when we invite them to be a contributor to their community all of a sudden they get a little bit of self-esteem, a little bit of worth. They're so happy, and the people they work with are so happy and it's just magic. But it's because they've had no connection and now they do."

## **OVR's First Annual Staff Retreat!**

On May 27th, OVR held its first staff retreat at the Grove Conference Center. This was a working retreat where staff listened, discussed and came up with ideas how OVR can meet the new requirements of the CMS Rule.

[Click here to see pictures from the Retreat](#)



Karen Kelly and Liz Davis discuss Integration efforts within the OVR Shared Living Program.

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