

Inclusiveness through community development

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Have you ever asked yourself what would need to happen to build an inclusive community? Have you ever thought about how to enable people of varying abilities to participate in the community activities you enjoy, or whether new programs need to be developed to replace unhealthy activities? Have you ever considered how to make the best use of the strengths and resources of your community?

Occupational therapists often ask these types of questions. These questions ask about how to build strong, vibrant and healthy communities. The process of building communities is often called community development. Occupational therapists believe that community development is an important way to promote community participation by people of diverse abilities, cultures and interests.

Before beginning the community development process, it is important to define community. Defining community is important because it influences the identification of characteristics, issues, values and resources that play a central role in the community development process. There is no consensus in the literature about how to define community and which definition should be used when discussing community development. In general, a community can be defined as a group of people who share either common interests or circumstances, or share a geographic location such as a neighbourhood¹. This means that individuals may belong to several different communities. The meaning and significance of each of the communities may vary enormously for any individual.

Once a community is identified, the next step is to

define what is meant by community development. The literature on community development is also strewn with many definitions, because there are different social and intellectual traditions that have contributed to community development work. As a result, communities emphasize one aspect of development over another, and respond to the different social, cultural, political and environmental contexts in which community development has been applied internationally. There appears to be some consensus forming around what community development means in the Canadian context. Labonte² proposed that community development is "...the process of organizing and/or supporting community groups in their identification of important concerns and issues, and in their ability to plan and implement strategies to mitigate their concerns and resolve their issues."

Several generally agreed-upon principles are used to guide community development. Community development is committed to equality by breaking down hierarchies and power relationships³. It values the knowledge, capacities, skills and experiences of community members, addresses the priorities identified by and common to those communities, and empowers members to participate more fully in community decisions⁴. It allows communities to take ownership to improve their health through enhancement of their leadership capacities, and promotes the development of client-centred health and social services⁵. Inherent in the process of community development is change: change in social, economic, cultural, political, and physical environmental situations for the betterment of the community⁶. People with disabilities are able to participate more fully in communities through equalization of opportunities and the concept of social inclusion for all⁷.

Occupational therapy and community development

Occupational therapy has much to contribute to community development. It is concerned with the occupations of everyday life which can include everything from paid employment



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to the things that people do to look after themselves and to enjoy their leisure time. Engagement in meaningful occupations contributes to the economic and social capital of communities⁸; however not all people are afforded the same opportunities to participate in meaningful occupations, resulting in occupational injustices. “Justice is an implicit social vision in occupational therapy... a justice of inclusion in ordinary, daily life...”⁹

The focus of occupational therapy is on the interaction between people, their occupations and the environments in which they live, work and play. This interaction results in what occupational therapists call occupational performance¹⁰. Occupational therapists recognize that health and disability influence occupational performance and that occupational performance influences health. Successful occupational performance is a primary focus of occupational therapy.

Occupational therapists have developed a strong tradition of using client-centred approaches in their work. In contrast to the traditional professionally dominated models of health care delivery, in occupational therapy client-centred practice means that therapists engage in partnerships¹¹ and view clients as leaders in the process¹². Occupational therapy processes encourage clients to identify their strengths and resources and identify the issues that they would like to address¹³. This approach is congruent with community development: community members assume leadership in identifying and implementing actions that promote the building of their communities. Professionals act as resources for communities to achieve each community’s goals and aspirations.

As a resource for communities, occupational therapists bring their client-centred approaches, knowledge of health and disability, ability to identify strengths and resources, and a focus on occupations, to participate in a variety of roles in community development. All of these roles assume that the community takes the leadership role in guiding the process. Occupational therapists support community development by using their knowledge and skills to promote occupational performance within communities. Roles focus on the three cornerstones of occupational therapy practice: *people, occupations* and *environments*.

People — Creating opportunities to develop personal knowledge and skills

Occupational therapists provide mentorship, coaching, facilita-

tion and support to enable the development of knowledge and skills in community members. Members may develop basic life skills or they may choose to acquire the skills to obtain and maintain leadership roles within their communities.

Role Example

Occupational therapists work with non-governmental organizations such as family resource centres to meet the needs of geographic neighbourhoods. Using community development approaches, occupational therapists work with women in a neighbourhood to identify the daily living skills they require. The women advocate for needed resources to assist them to develop skills. Through the process of identifying needs and advocating for needed resources, the women participating in the community development process develop leadership knowledge and skills.

Occupations — Developing new occupations

Occupational therapists partner with communities to discover and develop new occupations that better meet the goals, aspirations and needs of the community. New occupations promote economic opportunities and healthier lifestyles and assist in the prevention of sickness and disability.

Role Example

An occupational therapist works with a community coalition to engage youth who are facing many social and emotional barriers to traditional healthy youth occupations such as organized sports and recreation programs. The occupational therapist partners with youth, community leaders and interested residents to support the identification of new occupations in which the youth may want to participate. A youth art studio is developed in a space donated by a local business. Youth become involved in creating art work which they display and sell. Through this process, the youth become engaged with positive occupations to replace unhealthy and high risk behaviours.

Environments — Building more accessible environments

The physical inaccessibility of community environments can be a major barrier to the participation of people with disabilities in community life. Occupational therapists apply universal design principles to create physical environments that

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allow people with varying abilities to participate in community programs.

Role Example

Occupational therapy fieldwork placements, in which student occupational therapists receive coaching from a community contact and a qualified occupational therapist, provide a resource to promote inclusiveness through application of universal design principles in municipal recreation facilities. Students work with people with disabilities and the facility staff to assess individual participation in specific recreation programs. They then recommend structural and program modifications that will allow greater participation.

Occupational therapists use their understanding of social, economic and political barriers to join with people who are marginalized in society to advocate for greater access to supports and resources. They share their knowledge and skills to advocate for the removal of social policy barriers that prevent full participation in community life.

Role Example

An occupational therapist works with a community disability group to develop skills and capacity to do participatory action research. The group develops research-related knowledge and skills, and forms partnerships with professional researchers. The group members use their experiences as persons with disabilities to inform the development, implementation and interpretation of the research. The goal of the group is to affect social policy changes that will improve the lives of persons with disabilities.

Community development is a viable and effective strategy for the prevention and management of disability; for the provision of accessible services for persons with disabilities and their families; for improving the health and quality of life of Canadians with varying abilities, in all social and economic circumstances. Occupational therapists, with their focus on occupational performance through the interaction of people, occupations and environments, provide a unique perspective in the community development process. In partnership with individuals, groups and communities, occupational therapists promote full participation in those communities.

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