Universal Design on a Parish Level

Essential Components

Just as organization and structure are essential to an effective diocesan ministry with people with disabilities, so too are they needed on a parish level. Many parishes throughout the country have successfully increased the meaningful participation of parishioners with disabilities through the efforts of parish advocates trained and supported by a diocesan director. Other parishes build inclusion through efforts of the parish council or a subcommittee of that official body, disability concerns committee, or other parish entity.

The structure, direction, and speed with which this ministry evolves within any parish will vary according to a number of factors, including the following:

- vision, mission, and ministerial focus of the pastor;
- level of commitment to the ministry on the part of the pastor, parish staff, committee chairs;
- size and demographics of the parish;
- availability of funds;
- number of staff persons or volunteers involved in this ministry;
- programs currently in existence; and
- needs that are particular to a local population (e.g., presence of an institution, group home, or a school for the deaf).

The following components are essential to an effective ministry with people with disabilities, regardless of how the ministry is conducted within the parish structure:

·Provides access to the pastor.

It is important that the person assigned to oversee disability ministry within the parish, whether on a paid or volunteer basis (hereafter referred to as the parish advocate) has an opportunity to meet with the pastor to determine his priorities, and thereby assure that the ministry fits within the mission and ministerial scope of the parish. Ongoing communication with and support from the leadership of the parish is critically important to the success and relevance of the ministry.

·Clearly identifies placement of ministry within the parish structure.

Ideally, the pastor or his associate identifies the mission and goals for the ministry and where it will fit within the parish structure. Regardless of the ministry structure, the parish advocate should have access to colleagues from various parish offices, committees, and organizations to ensure collaborative efforts for integration and inclusion.

·**Is committed to the ministry at all levels.**

In order to be successful, this ministry must be supported by the pastor, his associates, and other parish personnel and volunteers. Without such a commitment to the goals and ideals of the ministry, the efforts of the parish advocate would be minimized due to a lack of cooperation and support.

·**Respects the discrete levels at which the ministry is carried out.**

This ministry is truly successful if disability concerns are addressed by parish programs, committees, and organizations as part of their regular plans and programs. Therefore, the parish advocate acts as a consultant to parish personnel, infusing a knowledge of disability perspectives and concerns, but allowing the direct interaction with and welcoming of people with disabilities to be made by each entity within the parish. Thus the parish advocate, rather than running special programs which may tend to isolate parishioners with disabilities, enables the various levels within the system to provide welcome and essential services.

For example, rather than hosting a separate retreat for parishioners with disabilities, the parish advocate would offer advice on access issues to the committee planning the parish family retreat, in order to heighten awareness and facilitate participation. Likewise, a parish advocate would offer to the parish director of religious education support and resources to assist in preparing a student with mental retardation to receive first reconciliation and Eucharist within the parish family, rather than in a separate program offered outside the parish.

At the same time, at this level, the parish advocate may be called upon directly to address the issues brought by members of the parish and should be prepared not only to make referrals, but also to function as an advocate and bridge builder when appropriate. Thus, the parish advocate may be involved in direct service in a manner less effective at other levels of the ministry.

·**Provides sufficient personnel and financial resources.**

Adequate staffing, whether on a paid or volunteer basis, and funding enables a ministry to achieve its goals, thereby enriching the parish, and fulfilling its mission of building the Body of Christ.

·**Utilizes competent personnel.**

The pastor appoints a parish advocate qualified to implement the mission and goals throughout the parish, whether establishing the ministry for the first time or assuming leadership for a pre-existing ministry. This person should receive

appropriate on-going training. Section B of this chapter details necessary qualifications and responsibilities of the parish advocate.

·Delineates clear role descriptions and lines of authority, and provides adequate supervision.

This ministry more effectively carries out the parish mission when it is supported by competent staff or volunteers whose role is clearly defined and supervised.

·Creates opportunities for people with disabilities to meaningfully participate.

Parish offices and organizations, with the support of the parish advocate, create opportunities for meaningful participation for people with disabilities and their families in all aspects of the parish community, including the following:

· faith formation;
· sacramental life of the church;
· ministerial, educational, and social life of the church;
· parish activities;
· offering their gifts to the community, including as Eucharistic ministers, lectors, deacons, and in other leadership roles.

·Incorporates a disability perspective into all areas of the faith community and facilitates collaboration.

Rather than focusing on running separate programs, the parish advocate helps parish offices and organizations to assume their responsibility to welcome and include parishioners with disabilities. Such consultation includes the following:

· works with parish offices, committees and organizations, including, but not limited to, Buildings and Grounds, Liturgy, Family Life, Religious Education, Social Concerns, Sodality;
· shares resources and offers strategies to pastors, DREs, parish councils;
· identifies key resource people, such as those knowledgeable about specific access issues, or sign language interpreters;
· builds a resource library;
· utilizes parish bulletins and newsletters;
· offers support to catechists of students with special needs.

·Keeps abreast of current and emerging social policy issues, trends, and threats which impact on the life and options of people with disabilities and their families.

In order adequately to promote disability awareness, the parish advocate should be informed on the myriad issues affecting the lives of people with disabilities, including the following:

- social security, welfare, and economic policy;
- health care, managed care, health maintenance organizations;
- education, rehabilitation, and independent living;
- family support issues;
- emerging ethical issues such as euthanasia and assisted suicide, eradication of disability through abortion, genetic testing and pre-birth diagnosis.

Keeping abreast of such issues enables the parish advocate to address more adequately the concerns of people with disabilities and their families. Section B.3 of this chapter offers information on organizations and publications which can assist the parish advocate in keeping abreast of such issues.

Priorities, Goals, and Objectives

The parish advocate is appointed to coordinate parish services for people with disabilities in order to ensure their full and meaningful participation in the parish community. During initial planning, the parish advocate establishes goals and objectives for fulfilling the mission and priorities defined by the pastor. In some cases the pastor may delegate the responsibility of defining priorities to the parish advocate. In either case, the goals and objectives, and the time lines within which they are to be accomplished, should be based on a realistic assessment of staff and resource availability. Care should be taken not to set up the ministry for failure by being overly ambitious when defining and setting goals and objectives. Accomplishment of achievable goals sets a firm foundation for future growth.

When assuming responsibility for a pre-existing program or ministry, the parish advocate must familiarize himself or herself with the already defined goals and objectives, and must subsequently develop appropriate time lines and action plan.

For each identified priority, goals and objectives are defined which describe a desired end to be accomplished through a series of concrete tasks. As the diagram on the following page illustrates, each level of the plan supports the next higher level. The priorities, goals, objectives, and tasks together constitute a plan of action for the parish advocate and other volunteers. In order to accomplish the over-arching mission, components of the plan must work harmoniously and stay on target. Tasks must be clearly defined from the beginning to ensure that actions do not stray, but rather stay related to goals and objectives.

Some parishes develop and work from extended year plans. In such cases, the parish advocate should be involved in the planning process. The parish advocate can be guided by suggestions solicited from people with disabilities throughout the year, and/or through an annual forum.

Ideally, the role of the parish advocate is to plan and oversee the ministry, rather than become involved in running separate programs. As mentioned previously, this ministry is most successful when people with disabilities are welcomed and served directly by the entire parish community, or are assisted by the parish office which can best serve their immediate concern. For example, a couple contemplating marriage should be referred to the appropriate parish office responsible for marriage preparation programs. The parish advocate acts as a consultant, providing counsel and offering resources and support.

A sampling of parish priorities and goals, with related objectives and tasks for a new parish advocate, may include those listed on the following pages. This is by no means an exhaustive list, but rather is offered here to spark ideas, and as an example of possible goals and objectives which can be expanded upon or utilized based on the specific parish situation. These parish level objectives and tasks would be performed by the person designated by the pastor to oversee parish ministry with people with disabilities, whether a parish advocate, parish council member, disability concerns committee member.

PRIORITY 1: NETWORKING

Goal 1 Establish working relationships with other parish staff and volunteers.

Objectives and Tasks

- Work with pastor; director/coordinator of religious education; family, young adult, adult and youth ministers; parish staff; ministry chairs; parish council; religious education/school boards; school administration and staff to share a disability perspective.
    - Meet to discuss their goals and objectives, and ways in which you can work together to achieve your mutual goals.
- Work with various parish committees and working groups, including social concerns, transportation, CYO, to share a disability perspective.
    - Meet with these committee and group members to discuss their goals and objectives, and ways in which parishioners with disabilities can best participate in their programs and activities.
- Identify and utilize available diocesan resource personnel.
    - Meet with diocesan director of disability ministry and other diocesan personnel as appropriate.
    - Maintain a file of available diocesan resources.

·Identify local and parish disability resource people.

Goal 3 Educate parish staff and volunteers, on an ongoing basis, on the ways in which their programs affect the lives of people with disabilities and their families.

Objectives and Tasks

·Share newsletters and other appropriate resources with pastor and parish colleagues.
  ·Discern with whom to share various resources and information.
·Invite pastor and associates, and parish staff and volunteers to appropriate meetings, training sessions and celebrations.
  ·Discern whom to invite to various meetings and gatherings.
·Participate in meetings, sharing a disability perspective when appropriate.
  ·Prepare for meetings, anticipating the disability issues involved in various agenda items.
·Offer to conduct disability awareness sessions for parish and school.
  ·Read Chapter One, Section A of this volume for information on disability awareness programs.
  ·Order videotapes and other resources from NCPD, or borrow such from the diocesan disability office or resource library.

Goal 4 Establish working relationships with personnel in relevant secular offices to share resources and keep abreast of current information and trends.

Objectives and Tasks

·Identify and visit local agencies providing services to people with disabilities (e.g., independent living center, Deaf club, sheltered workshop).
  ·Meet with staff to learn about the services provided, and to offer information about the ministry.
·Solicit information from and request to be on mailing list of agencies.

PRIORITY 2: ASSESSING AND PLANNING

Goal 1 Identify currently existing programs and services.

Objectives and Tasks

·Attend trainings offered by the diocesan director.

- Obtain from diocesan director a list of contact names of organizations and services found to be most useful to people with disabilities and their families throughout the diocese.
- Following meetings with pastor and parish colleagues (see Priority 1, Goal 1), identify and assess their programs as they serve people with disabilities.
- Interview disabled parishioners and family members through personal visits or group meetings to learn of services, programs, and organizations which they utilize and recommend.
  - Identify people through parish census records, referrals from pastor and parish staff.
  - Advertise meetings through parish bulletin.
  - Visit Catholic residents of group homes, nursing homes, rehabilitation, and other residential facilities.
  - Conduct home visits or meetings at which you solicit information on current services, and ideas for improving opportunities for involvement.
- Maintain files on Catholic and secular agencies serving people with disabilities, as identified through the networking process (see Priority 1)

Goal 2 Determine unmet needs.

Objectives and Tasks

- Meet with pastors and parish staff to solicit information regarding parishioners known to have a disability and those who receive the Eucharist at home or in nursing homes.
- Conduct an access survey of parish facilities and programs.
  - Solicit access survey from diocesan director or develop a survey (see Chapter One, Section B.3).
  - Schedule visits.
  - Conduct survey.
  - Compile and analyze survey data.
- Encourage and offer input in the development of a census or other ways of assessing the needs of all parishioners, including those with disabilities.
  - Develop questions to be included in census (see Chapter One, Sect. B.3).
  - Work with pastor to ensure that such questions are included.
  - Review census data.

Goal 3 Prepare an action plan for parish disability ministry.

Objectives and Tasks

- Gather information to assist in establishing priorities, goals, and objectives.
  - Review data collected from networking with parish and secular colleagues.
  - Review data collected from assessment of current parish programs and buildings.

- Review data collected from meetings with parishioners with disabilities and their families.
- Define achievable priorities, to be accomplished by realistic goals, objectives, and tasks.
  - Familiarize self with parish mission, and priorities and goals determined by the pastor or parish council for disability ministry.
  - Define priorities and goals, in the absence of any developed by the pastor or parish council.
  - Determine objectives and tasks necessary to accomplish priorities and goals.
- Set realistic time lines by which priorities, goals, and tasks will be accomplished.
- Submit action plan to pastor and/or parish council for approval.

Goal 4 Set-up the location of the ministry.

Objectives and Tasks

- Establish access to parish facilities, resources, and equipment as deemed appropriate by the pastor.
  - Meet with the pastor to determine how you should conduct the ministry, and what parish resources will be available.
- Determine what budget, if any, is available for the ministry.
  - Meet with the pastor or parish council.

PRIORITY 3: ADVOCACY

Goal 1 Develop statistical data to assist parish leadership, personnel, volunteers, and others in understanding the pervasiveness of disability issues.

Objectives and Tasks

- Consult Volume II of *Opening Doors to People with Disabilities*, Chapter Four, Section B.
- Determine disability statistics for parish by applying national disability statistics to specific parish population profile.
- Consult with diocesan director for diocesan demographic information.

Goal 2 Increase awareness of people with disabilities as welcome and essential members of the church community.

Objectives and Tasks

- Utilize church bulletin, and parish and diocesan newsletter to share statistical and other information about Catholics with disabilities and about the parish program of expanding welcome and facilitating participation of parishioners with disabilities.
  - Maintain a mailing list of parish and diocesan contacts.
  - Develop bulletin inserts and press releases with information about events or news of interest to and about people with disabilities.

- Alert people to available access through the use of access symbols on flyers and listings of activities and parishes.
  - See Chapter One, Section B.6.e. of *Opening Doors,* Volume II for camera-ready symbols.
  - Utilize symbols to advertise events sponsored by the ministry.
  - Send to pastor and parish colleagues an information packet which includes a set of camera-ready access symbols.
- Sponsor events to highlight disability issues.
  - Identify parish events at which a disability perspective could also be presented and offer expertise to meeting planners.
  - Plan events which bring together the entire parish community to worship and celebrate the gifts of diversity.

Goal 3 Encourage action necessary to facilitate the full and meaningful participation of parishioners with disabilities.

Objectives and Tasks

- Identify barriers and recommend appropriate accommodations.
  - Analyze the data from the parish access survey.
  - Research and provide information on available resources and assistive technology.
- In the event of a parish renovation, meet with pastors, planners, and architects to discuss access issues.
  - Make appointment.
  - Prepare for meeting, and bring along copies of relevant materials to share.
- Maintain and offer current resources to pastor, parish colleagues, and committee members.
- Share stories of the ways in which people with disabilities are successfully serving their parishes.

Goal 4 Have a disability perspective represented in official documents, programs and plans of the parish.

Objectives and Tasks

·Offer knowledge and expertise to the pastor and parish staff in order to ensure that a disability perspective is included in documents, programs, and plans of the parish.

PRIORITY 4: PROMOTING

Goal 1 Increase awareness about people with disabilities, and the existence of the ministry with people with disabilities.

Objectives and Tasks

·Advertise the parish ministry with and outreach to parishioners with disabilities.
  ·Submit periodic articles or an ongoing column in parish bulletins and school newsletters.
  ·Post attractive and relevant posters regarding people with disabilities.
·Offer to conduct disability awareness sessions for parish and school.
  ·Read Chapter One, Section A of this volume for information on disability awareness programs.
  ·Order videotapes and other resources from NCPD, or borrow such from the diocesan disability office or resource library.

PRIORITY 5: RESOURCING

Goal 1 Keep abreast of current technology and issues of concern to the disability community.

Objectives and Tasks

·Read relevant magazines and journals, both religious and secular, relating to disability issues.
·Maintain contact with diocesan ministry with people with disabilities.
·Join or request information and newsletters from disability organizations.
·Participate in conferences and trainings on disability issues.

Goal 2 Maintain a current resource file relating to disability issues.

Objectives and Tasks

- Visit diocesan office to review resources and request information.
  - Make appointment with director of disability ministry.
- Review resources and recommend current books, audiotapes and videotapes for inclusion in the parish library.
  - Obtain information on available resources from Volume II of *Opening Doors*, and from newsletters.
- Maintain files on issues of concern to people with disabilities.
- Maintain a listing of local, state, and national organizations and resources.
  - Review and update periodically to ensure accuracy.
  - Utilize listing in making referrals, and maintain a log of such calls to assist in reporting on the activities and services of the ministry.
- Prepare and distribute a resource list advertising the availability of your resources for loan.
  - Distribute list to pastor and parish staff, council members, directors of religious education, youth ministry, family ministers, and committee members.

Goal 3 Provide information and referral services to inquirers.

Objectives and Tasks

- Respond to inquiries from and regarding people with disabilities.
  - Direct inquirers to appropriate services, organizations, and agencies utilizing current resource lists.
  - Whenever possible, interact on personal level through telephone calls or visits.
  - As possible, follow-up to ensure that inquirer received needed assistance.

PRIORITY 6: SUSTAINING ENERGY FOR MINISTRY

Goal 1 Keep Christ at the center of ministry.

Objectives and Tasks

- Take time for prayer and reflection each day.
- Participate in annual days of recollection or retreat.

Goal 2 Keep abreast of trends and new developments in ministry and disability issues.

Objectives and Tasks

·Participate in staff and volunteer development opportunities.
  ·Read announcements and sign up for available seminars and workshops.
·Regularly schedule time to read appropriate journals and newsletters.
  ·Build time into your schedule to read relevant materials.
·Regularly schedule opportunities to meet with colleagues to share ideas.

Goal 3 Avoid overwork which may lead to burnout and ineffectiveness.

Objectives and Tasks

·Organize schedule and workload in order to meet realistic and achievable deadlines.
·Maintain orderly files and work habits to increase productivity.
·Agree to do only what you know you can reasonably accomplish.
·Whenever possible, delegate.

While these myriad goals, objectives, and tasks may seem prohibitive for one person to accomplish, they should be seen as a process to be achieved over time and with the assistance of other volunteers and colleagues. Additional goals and objectives address issues identified through the above process, as well as those related to a number of other areas.

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