When considering how to include people with disabilities in service, many people don’t think of advocacy. Why did you launch a project that trained individuals with developmental disabilities as housing advocates?

I started having conversations with staff at our Regional Center, who were developing a corporation to build affordable housing for people with developmental disabilities. Our city government didn’t even believe that we had people with developmental disabilities living here. How invisible is that? And when they did think of it, they thought people with disabilities didn’t need homes because they would be in institutions or group homes. This is in 2008! I was outraged. Also housing is a big issue here in Los Angeles. A study recently said that you need to make $28 dollars an hour to afford housing here. A lot of people don’t make that, especially people on fixed incomes.

The ELA foundation says they are “changing the face of advocacy.” I like that. Right now the faces of affordable housing advocates are not people with developmental disabilities; they are social workers, staff at the Regional Centers and developers. I figured there must be self-advocates with disabilities interested in housing.

I didn’t think it would necessarily be easy. I didn’t know what skill level it would require. I thought we could develop a way of training people on some very difficult concepts. There is a whole other language in the housing world, so we’d have to surmount that and keep advocates from getting lost in all the acronyms.

You had some challenges during the recruiting phase. What recruiting strategies worked best for you?

I started by approaching social workers and other professionals that work with people with disabilities. I asked them if they could recommend advocates with disabilities who might be interested in housing. The response was silence. Obviously, there was a disconnect.

Recruiting picked up when I spoke directly to individuals with developmental disabilities. Then those individuals talked to other individuals and it spread by word of mouth.

In order to train advocates, you used one of my favorite techniques of combining learning and practical experience. Tell us about it.

During the planning phase, one of our team members suggested we pair a lab with the lectures we had planned. Everyone loved the idea. We developed what we thought were the key concepts to be mastered. Some had to do with advocacy and some had to do with housing. We wanted a very practical, straightforward lecture, followed up a couple days later with a practical experience.

For instance, each advocate was asked to develop a personal mission statement. Why did they care about affordable housing? We did the lecture and then each advocate was asked to answer three important questions, which formed their mission statement.

This inclusive service project was supported by CaliforniaVolunteers, California’s State Commission on Service. The Local Inclusion Network Collaboratives for Service (LINCS) at UCLA Tarjan Center Service Inclusion Project is part of a national initiative in California, Hawaii and Florida funded by the Corporation for National and Community Service. LINCS uses community collaborations to increase the number of people with disabilities taking their places as volunteers in community service. For more information on the California LINCS project or to share your own success story, call 310-825-0067 or send an email to kleventhal@mednet.ucla.edu.
Each statement came from their hearts and each was unique.

We also did a lot of role plays. For instance, we learned how city revenue is connected to housing. Most cities get more revenue from developing business sites than they do from developing housing, so their incentive to build housing is lower. Then we did a role play. I was a city council member and advocates tried to convince me that the city should build affordable housing rather than a shopping center… We tried to coach the advocates that they needed to present the issue positively and emphasize how the city would benefit from affordable housing, not just talk about all the people who wouldn’t be able to pay rent and be homeless.

At TCSIP, we always talk about the importance of nurturing community partners. You partnered with Key Community Housing to make this project happen—can you say more about your collaboration and how it developed?

Key Community Housing was started by the Eastern Los Angeles Regional Center and community members to develop affordable housing options for people with developmental disabilities. We used to work in the same office. The Director of Key Housing envisioned a group of housing advocates that would go to city hall meetings and talk to developers. That’s how these conversations started. At one point, the Director was going to have a meeting with the city about affordable housing units and I said “you could take someone with a disability with you.” That’s how the relationship started. Key Community Housing was part of the planning committee for the project and they helped us train advocates.

Housing policy can be technical and complex. How did you make this knowledge accessible to people with developmental disabilities?

This was our first group of advocates, so they are helping us to develop the official curriculum. One advocate doesn’t read and has limited writing. In order to get around that, we read out loud. We didn’t read everything but they had all the information people would typically have. We went through and highlighted important points. We made sure trainings were interactive.

We talked about how they could help officials learn about the issues facing people with developmental disabilities. We also provided bus passes so that advocates could attend meetings and events. And staff gave rides as well. Transportation is a big issue and it would have been a barrier if we hadn’t provided assistance.

The culmination of this project was the launch of the cross-disability council, which the advocates helped organize. Can you say more?

We wanted to invite other groups that were interested in housing advocacy, groups advocating for people with different types of disabilities, groups that had expertise working in the Spanish and Tagalong speaking communities, or those that were focused on housing for seniors. We had our first meeting May 1st. The advocates put together that meeting and I tried to give them the skills to do it. We talked about what would be on the agenda. They were assigned roles, like note-taker. In fact, our note-taker ended up being our advocate who has limited reading and writing skills. She had her staff help her. Advocates planned what food to order and ordered it. When we met, the group talked about why we were getting together and what things we could do as a team. They made a commitment to meet quarterly, twice more often than we had anticipated.
Even with the challenges you faced, you found committed advocates, some of whom are taking on big leadership roles. Tell us about the success the advocates are finding.

Christina, one of the advocates, has joined the board of Key Community Housing. She’s already testified at the City of Alhambra fair housing hearings. When she testified everybody just sat up and listened. She talked about where she is living and why it’s a great place and how people need more places like that.

She has difficulties because of her disability but she’s able to contribute positively through this project and her own perseverance. It gives her a sense of contribution to the community. The other day she said to me, “I’ve been thinking, we need to do outreach on radio and television to let people know what we are doing.” They had recently trained the Key Housing board on public relations and she applied it to what we were doing. She’s really active with a great personality.

You have some plans to reach out further into the community. How so?

Key Community Housing wants to do more outreach and we are hoping to collaborate with them on that. We are considering organizing a neighborhood community service project. We’ve already talked about some possibilities, like connecting with Habitat for Humanity or doing a neighborhood clean-up. At our community event, we would promote the work of the Cross Disability Council.

For more information about the housing advocacy initiative contact Yvette Baptiste at 626-300-9171 or ybaptiste@elafrc.org.

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