

You can't control what happens. It is a process of learning to exchange.

Stella Burry
Community Services
St. John's, NL

Stormy Seas, a book of stories written by people living in poverty is a powerful way to help people understand poverty.

Urban Core Support Network,
Saint John

agencies. First Voice refers to individuals who are personally familiar with issues such as poverty, disability, homelessness, and unemployment. The Network is “committed to full participation in the decision making process of Social Assistance reform”. When the group agrees an issue is important, it forms a committee of First Voice participants and agencies to develop a plan of action.

Involving program participants

Five years ago, Stella Burry Community Services in St. John's, NL began to hire individuals who were former program participants. Each individual has the benefit of a mentor to help them in their move to employees. Other program participants recognized the advantages of staff that understood their challenges and could present them to others.

Stella Burry recently organized a forum where members of the Board of Directors, staff and participants came together to talk about current activities and possibilities for the future.

Having fun

Poverty, social assistance reform, and poor health are heavy challenges. A group or committee needs to make sure they have some fun times. It may seem simple, but laughter, doing something to celebrate your work and sharing food can lighten the load and create positive experiences together.

Preparing people

Everyone needs to be prepared for new roles and responsibilities. Literacy Nova Scotia helps adult learners have a strong voice by providing

We learned that involving people who are homeless can be done and that their stories are powerful and reinforce our work.

St. John's
Community Advisory Committee on Homelessness,
NL

workshops on public speaking and writing. The Urban Core Support Network ensures that individuals living in poverty are part of planning and making presentations to politicians, government staff and others.

In Prince Edward Island, the “Ministerial Advisory Committee on Disability Issues” accepted the nomination of an individual from People First along with the recommendation of a “supporter”.

The supporter helps the individual prepare for the meeting and is present during the meetings to assist in their understanding and participation.

Everyone can make a difference

As individuals, as couples or as groups, we can all reach out and include individuals who feel uncomfortable because of their differences. This can occur at a meeting of parents, at church, at school, or in other settings.

Recognizing the value in working together

When community agencies, government departments and individuals work together, our policies and programs will be more responsive. They will have better results. We will move towards equal economic, educational and health opportunities. We will move towards vibrant cultural voices, safety and respect for each other. We will move towards inclusive communities.

Prepared by Cathy Wright.

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VOICES HEARD

Building Inclusive Communities

We need to ensure that individuals who know the issues first hand are a meaningful part of the decision making process.

This guide offers principles to encourage the VOICES of individuals to be HEARD.



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Community has many meanings: a group of people in a geographical area; and a group of people sharing a common interest.

“Inclusion means that I am included in the group through my words and actions and that my ideas are valued”.
Halifax, NS



Belonging

Feeling that we belong to a family, a neighborhood, and a community is most important in our life. It makes us feel good. It makes us healthy. It makes us want to reach out to others.

Communities where people feel they belong are healthy, too¹. These are inclusive communities.

We have many differences - our age; sex; nationality; race; physical, emotional and intellectual abilities; education; income; sexual orientation; religious beliefs; and language. In an inclusive community our differences are respected. We have equal opportunities to participate socially and economically.

Opportunities are developed and solutions are found when the VOICES of individuals facing challenges such as poverty, unemployment and poor health are HEARD, valued and acted on. Inclusive communities don't just happen. They are created over time through respectful working together – government, community organizations, businesses and individuals.

A Guide

The Urban Core Support Network (UCSN)² presents VOICES HEARD, a guide to encourage us to listen to the VOICES of individuals. VOICES HEARD is drawn from the experiences of many individuals and organizations across Atlantic Canada and beyond. We hope you use this guide, improve it and share it with others.

¹ Fay, Michael, excerpts from Count Me In!, Ontario Prevention Clearinghouse, 2005

² UCSN is a coalition in Saint John, NB of individuals living in poverty, community agencies, faith communities and government. It promotes a better understanding of poverty and more responsive policies.

A traditional Board may not be a good fit for youth. Meetings and items like financial matters are boring.
Choices for Youth,
St. John's, NL

Members of the focus groups were paid for their time, received support for childcare and transportation.



Principles

Many of us want to contribute to a better future for ourselves and for others. We need to ensure that individuals who know the issues first hand are a meaningful part of the decision making process.

This may be challenging, but in the end it will be rewarding and empowering for all.

This guide offers principles to encourage the VOICES of individuals to be HEARD. Feeling comfortable, participating without financial or physical barriers, considering the time of day, time of month and the language being used are all important to including the VOICES of individuals.

Not the traditional way

Choices for Youth in St. John's, NL found that involving youth on a traditional Board of Directors is not a good fit. So instead, they have youth focus groups on different topics. When they were developing their new site and services, focus groups were organized to seek the input of youth. Youth are also involved in the hiring of staff.

Valuing the contribution

The Department of Community Services in Nova Scotia conducted a Social Inclusion Initiative. It included focus groups with individuals on income assistance to obtain their input on a document related to using services for Employment Support and Income Assistance programs.

Members of the focus groups were paid for their time, received support for childcare and transportation and provided guidance on materials that would be helpful to them. Not everyone expects to be paid for their time nor is there always money. But covering expenses like childcare and transportation is very necessary.

I am involved because the issues are important. Working with others living in poverty and with agencies is a learning experience and the comradeship is important.
Community Advocates Network,
Halifax, NS

Something as simple as using names only on name tags or during introductions is more inclusive.



Respect

The Urban Core Support Network knows that for people with different experiences to work together, they have to respect each other. It is difficult when an individual living in poverty has had a negative experience with an income assistance worker. They need to realize that not every income assistance worker is the same. And people in positions of power need to recognize their impact on others in meetings.

Individuals who share common experiences don't necessarily have to agree on what will make things better. For example a long time poverty activist may have different ideas from a young person, even though both are living on income assistance.

At meetings people often introduce themselves by name and then occupation, or position or title. This leaves individuals who have no title or position feeling left out. It is more comfortable for everyone to focus on names. Each person brings something to a meeting or event and this can come out as people work together.

Trust is important

Individuals dealing with real challenges may not trust agencies and government. Building trust takes time. Often community groups such as disability groups, anti-Poverty organizations and educational and employment programs can be important places to find the “VOICES” of individuals because a relationship of trust already exists.

Making decisions together

The Community Advocates Network in Halifax is a group of First Voice participants and community