A Circle Check-Up

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For the past four years, circles of support have been a key element in developing and guiding the supported living program operated by Jay Nolen Community Services (JNCS) in Los Angeles. Initially responsible for designing and implementing each individual's move from group home life into their own home, each person's circle now manages the person's support system and makes and implements long term plans. This shift of responsibility from agency to circles moves family members from being monitors of a group home to being directors of a personalized support system. It moves staff from being in charge of a group of clients to participating with circle members in designing and offering the supports and services a person requires to live successfully in their own home and participate in community life in satisfying ways.

   The people JNCS supports count on their circles for the safety and quality of their daily lives. Only a few people currently have communication systems adequate to allow them an unambiguous voice in stating their dreams or directing their supports. Circle members hold responsibility for developing a deep, accurate, and clear account of the person's interests, preferences, and dreams and assuring that this understanding guides day to day staff behavior. People will require a highly organized support system for the rest of their lives. Circle members hold responsibility for extending continuity through the person's lifetime by clarifying and supporting the commitments necessary to the person's security. Prejudice, widespread confusion about the nature of autism, and a history of segregated services leave people at great risk of isolation. Circle members hold responsibility for expanding the circle's membership and supporting and challenging the person to expand the network of those who know and care about him or her. Many barriers stand in the way of pursuing simple things, like living comfortably or having a job; and, keeping the supported living program focused on individual needs can call for the most assertive and creative negotiation with the service system that funds and regulates supported living. Circle members hold responsibility for persistent, creative problem solving, and vigorous representation of the person's interests. People are vulnerable to changes in their own condition, changes in the lives of the people who are critical to them, changes in their support system, and changes in the policies and programs that fund and provide the assistance they depend on. Circle members hold responsibility for sticking with the person through crises in order to protect the person's interests.

From time to time, a circle can use these key questions as a way to check up on their stewardship of these vital responsibilities.

- How have we strengthened our relationship with the person at the center of the circle?
  - What have we learned about accommodating the person so that we are better able to understand him or her; and so that he or she is better able to participate in the work of the circle?
  - What assumptions about the person's preferences, interests, or abilities have we revised? What have we been wrong in believing about the person? What differences have those of us who are closest to the person discovered between our own preferences, interests, and values and those of the person?
  - How have we shared the person's life outside the formal work of the circle?
- How has our shared knowledge about the person's identity and desirable future grown? What has becomes less certain about the future and what has become more clear to us?
  - What have we agreed to invest in for the person's long term future?
  - What have we discovered about what works to assist the person with life changes?
  - What have we done to deepen our understanding of the person?
  - What have we done to better organize our shared action?
- What actions have we taken that identify and deal with threats to the person's safety, comfort, and well being?
- What actions have we taken that stretch us outside our comfort zone?
- What has the circle put behind itself (for example, resentment at the responsibilities of circle membership, or fear of sharing dreams, or denial of unsatisfactory conditions)?
- What conflicts still get the circle stuck?
  - What do members see and believe that they are afraid to say? What circle business do people talk about outside the circle that doesn't get brought up with the whole circle?
  - What decisions does the circle try to avoid by passing them on to service agency authority?
  - What issues cause unproductive fights and cue disrespectful treatment of other circle members or supported living staff?
- How has the circle reached out to recruit new members and put them to work…
  …from the person's family and extended family?
  …from the larger community?
- What have we learned about achieving and maintaining an effective balance between the contributions of family and friends and the contributions of paid staff members?
- How have we become more effective as a group…
  …by increasing our ability to speak openly and honestly when we disagree?
  …by dealing more creatively with conflicts?

Éby learning how to better understand members with different points of view?

Éby finding ways to inquire more deeply into issues that keep coming up over and over again without resolution?

Éby noticing when we fail to treat other members respectfully and making amends?

Éby acknowledging our own ways of getting in the way of the cir cleÕs work and supporting one another to achieve self control?

¥ How have circle members increased their skills and knowledgeÉ

Éthr ough participation in training related to values issues and positive practices?

Éthr ough research on how to make the systems that affect available opportunities work for the person?

Éin discussion and exchange with members of other cir cles?

Éby learning ways to impr ove the effectiveness of the circle as a creative problem solving group?

   A circle may want to choose one of these questions and take time to discuss it at a regular circle meeting, or a circle could set aside a meeting for reflection on some of these questions with an outside facilitator, or circle members could pick some of the questions and ask an outsider to interview circle members individually and report the results for discussion. What matters most is building honest reflection into the work of the circle.