

The Workforce Riddle in a Rural County

Gaye Wenger

This paper was presented at the DD Network training,
The Workforce Riddle, March 11 & 14, 2002.

These are interesting times for us to be here together figuring out riddles. Wouldn't it be great if they were the kind we loved in elementary school----Why did the girl throw the clock out the window? She wanted to see time fly!

Well, time has certainly flown! Hi! I'm Gaye Wenger from Marinette County. In 1975 I was a young mom of 3 young children----vacuuming the playroom and picking up toys. The phone rang relentlessly and as I picked it up my friend said, " Joe Heller is going to call you in a few minutes. You don't know who he is. I've told him you're an expert on early childhood development. He believes me and wants you to write a grant to start an early childhood program for Marinette County. " It turned out Joe Heller was the director of the Unified Board in Marinette County, a forerunner of the Human Services Department. To make a long story short, I wrote the grant, worked the program part time for 4 years and in 1979 became the DD Coordinator for Marinette County. My job has undergone many expansions and variations in duties, but the bottom line is, I've been in Marinette County for almost all of my natural life, in the DD area. We're on the border of Michigan--- the other borders are rural Wisconsin counties with low populations. We are 40,500 people strong and holding. We have a seasonal growth but our population stays right around 40,000.

Being rural brings with it its own challenges. We are the third largest county in the state (landwise) and we have lots of state and county recreational land. It is much faster for us to drive to Green Bay than it is to drive to the other side of our own county. Our median income is \$17,000. People live in our county because it's beautiful and offers a lot to people who appreciate the natural beauty and rural life it offers. One of my first lessons was peering at the county map and knowing that there would never be any one solution to the question of how to help people with disabilities live in and move about the county.

When I began trying to figure out this riddle the system looked like this: Contracts with local sheltered workshops and one 8 bed group home. The workshops provided their own transportation or there wasn't any. Most people with developmental disabilities lived at home with their families. The contracts had a certain amount of money and that money was guaranteed to the provider. Providers ran the show with a little help from the county. We had people living at Central Colony and Northern Colony, both state institutions where people from Marinette had sent their sons and daughters to be well taken care of and to "be with their own kind." They were heeding the advice of doctors and other professionals. The one 8 bed group home had taken the "best" of the ones living in institutions and they all lived together, just getting to know one another and doing everything together in the group the county and the provider had created.

Not until the 80's would we begin to figure out that things weren't going all that well and it looked like these people would be living here or in an institution for the rest of their days. That's when the Community Integration Program, CIP, was designed. The thought of an amount of money being attached to a person was revolutionary! This was a very nice beginning for people with disabilities to get their needs met by having us pay some attention to individual needs. COP and CIP were growing. However, I still struggled with those darn contracts that depended on a headcount, and didn't get up close and personal and look at each individual. Still we weren't quite where we needed to be!

Well, somehow we continued to move forward and I am very proud of the accomplishments and positive changes we have made. We began trying to offer supported employment as a choice. We have tried to stay aligned with families by making Person Centered Planning part of how we do business. It's the rule rather than the exception. We listen to consumers who use our system. We listen to parents and guardians. They challenge us all the time to do things better. Thank you to everyone for your challenge.

We changed some of the parts to make them work better. We changed our whole financial system to reflect money following the person. We got involved in the Self-Determination movement as a guerilla county. What that means is that we reworked how we do things with some help from the state and no new money. Although money was scarce and community aids increases

were puny or for many years non-existent, we could continue to fine tune our system to make it easier to work in. We could start to see what we were doing and how much we were spending on each person. We could invite the people we support to be a part of the whole process of selecting provider agencies, interviewing their own staff, changing their minds and now deciding to buy something different with this money that followed them.

In the 90's we were very excited that we could do more than talk about it. We could help people have real lives. Richard, who used to live at Northern Wisconsin Center, got a job at the local bakery, lived in his own rented house with his brother and got permission from his landlord to have a cat. He could take the cat to the vet and pay for the services with income from his job at the bakery. Harold, another Northern Center graduate, managed to get himself kicked out of many group living arrangements. Then we found a man who invited Harry to live with him and his family, an Adult Family Home. Harry doesn't know what it's called. He just knows it's the place where everybody loves him and he loves them---so much that he wants to be just like other male family members--- so he grew a beard for hunting season!

See, we were finally figuring out that support needed to be varied. The demand for good services was growing throughout our society. More people demanded more services. Counties had been pushed to get people out of DD Centers and nursing homes. That's when things really started getting tense. We had moved all these people back to their own community, were trying like heck to help them have lives, and the money did not keep up with the demand for support. Counties were getting really good at helping people with disabilities have involvement ----being a part of the community.

Unfortunately CIP reimbursement failed to keep up with the costs of paying workers to provide the support people needed. We have already made a commitment to support people in the community! We have nickel and dimed our way through each year since 1994, our last CIP 1B increase. That's a long time in someone's life folks. Think about where you were 8 years ago. Are you still making the same amount of money you were that year? NO! How can anyone afford to work for the same money year after year after year? You've got to pay the bills! After a while, you look for a different job. We lose good staff that way.

We are bleeding folks! Our system is coming apart at the seams. I know it is not politically correct to say so, but we cannot serve anyone new in our system. The people in the system now have unmet needs. Some advocates think we should give a little bit to everyone. My feelings about that are from my Yooper roots. I grew up in the Upper Peninsula of Michigan. Land of snow and ice in winter. The other day it was 10 below Zero in Marinette, and even colder in Yooper land. I was very happy to wear my hat, warm jacket and boots as I trudged through the 8 inches of new snowfall. 10 below... I was so happy my needs for warmth could be met. The hat alone wouldn't have done much to keep me warm and healthy. I'm glad that my support for warmth didn't have to be divided up among other people in Marinette so that we would each get a little bit of what we needed. Maybe I would get to keep my hat. Another person would get to have the coat. Yet another would get boots. We should be warm because we all have a little something---but none of us would be warm and probably after a little time in the 10 below temperatures we would have some serious problems and things would deteriorate very quickly. This is a simple way of looking at our system. If I go out and buy lots of pairs of gloves, a few coats, 3 or 4 hats and give a little bit to each person to spend time in the subzero weather, at least I am providing a little bit of what everybody needs. Do you think this is oversimplified when we look at and talk about providing services to people with disabilities in the same way? I think not!

We are stretched to the max----our resources are dwindling. We are holding on for dear life to support the people with disabilities that are in the system today. What are we thinking? How can we in good conscience bring new people into a system that is limping for lack of money. We need to increase resources to our system. In my organization there are differences about how people should be supported. We are struggling internally with decisions to spend less money so that people unfamiliar with your services won't make the decisions without input. We need to come together as partners! You all know what you need, or have people in your lives who can help you discover that. We must do it together!

CIP rates have not increased since 1994! If the state's share of the per diems of the Medicaid waivers had increased by only 3% per year, about the amount social security benefits have increased each year, we would have an additional \$35-36 million in the system by now! Legislators need to appropriate adequate funding to keep things going. We need cost of living increases in waivers!

We need to come together as partners. We need to do more than talk about it. We can help people with disabilities in Wisconsin have real lives! We must pay workers a living wage. We've been frugal, we've been creative, then we've gone back and done it again. We have a major workforce crisis on our hands. Have you heard anyone graduating from high school or college lately say they want to be direct support workers? We need to pay people a living wage for the important work they do. Until we fund what helps people have real lives we're just talking.

Let's get together because the way I see it, UNITED WE STAND, DIVIDED WE FALL!!!

Gaye M. Wenger, Supervisor
Developmental Disabilities and
Adult Protective Services

Marinette County Health and Human Services Department
2500 Hall Ave. Suite B
Marinette WI 54143
715-732-7797
gwenger@marinettecounty.com