

Excerpts from *A Guide to Developing Community Connections*

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Third Places And Community Connectors

**A community life exists when one can go daily
to a given location at a given time
and see many of the people one knows.**

Philip Slater

From the book by Ray Oldenburg *The Great Good Place: Cafes, Coffee Shops, Community Centers, Beauty Parlors, General Stores, Bars, Hangouts, and How They Can Get You Through the Day*

In his book *The Great Good Place*, Oldenburg writes about what he refers to as “Third Places,” those places in every community where locals gather to visit, share news and be among others. Such places are a great spot to meet the neighborhood “connectors” (those people who know everyone else) and to assist someone to become a “regular” in a neighborhood place. Oldenburg describes the characteristics of Third Places in this way:

- They must be on neutral ground - places where individuals come and go as they please, none are required to act as the host, and in which all feel comfortable and at home.
- They act as a leveler - a place that is inclusive, accessible to the public and does not set criteria for membership and exclusion.
- Conversation is the main activity - a place where the “talk is good”, lively, colorful and engaging. You can see it in the smiles of others, handshaking, back-slapping, and pleasurable, entertaining conversation.
- There are regulars - a place where the customers are a source of attraction, giving the place its character and the assurance that on any given visit someone will see someone they know.
- They have a low profile - the place is typically plain, sometimes looks unimpressive, and do not attract a high volume of strangers and transient customers. This discourages pretense and people “come as they are.”
- The mood is playful - there is laughter, which is the magical element that warms the insider. The urge to return is there, to recreate the good time and to recapture the experience.

Helping individuals with disabilities get better connected to their communities would be much easier if the staff who worked with them were themselves connected to their communities.*

Unfortunately, it is not always possible to hire staff who already have strong community ties. It is possible, however, to train staff about the importance of community connections and relationships, and to encourage them to use their existing connections as well as to develop personal connections in the community.

- *Have staff create their own relationships maps.* This can help staff see opportunities within their own networks of relationships for connecting people with disabilities. If staff people within an agency begin thinking about their own connections and brainstorming ideas for connecting various individuals served by the agency, they might find that a wide variety of opportunities are already available.
- *Identify staff people who are natural “connectors.”* Some staff people are more comfortable in roles as “community connectors” than others. These people are generally the outgoing, sociable types. Some are already active in their neighborhoods and community organizations, and know lots of people through their activities. Some may be new to the community, or unfamiliar with particular activities or opportunities, but have no hesitation calling up, asking questions, finding out information, and meeting new people. These staff people can act as resources to other staff, can take the lead and help other staff learn about community building, can inspire others to try. When one staff person discovers that “It never hurts to ask,” and help someone make a connection, others see that it can be done.
- *Encourage staff to get involved in community themselves, and recognize this involvement.* One way to encourage involvement is to make information about various community organizations available to staff using a bulletin board, newsletter, or information presented at staff meetings. Acknowledging staff who participate in community organizations is one way to let them know that their participation is valued and to encourage others to get involved. Often, when one staff person joins or becomes involved, others follow.
- *Encourage people learning to be more self-generative, curious, outgoing, and to take more risks.* With continuing encouragement, staff will become more willing to ask more people to become involved and to investigate more possibilities. Staff become more of a part of their own communities just by helping others do so.

*Adapted from Friends: ***A Manual for Connecting Persons with Disabilities and Community Members***, by Amado, Conklin and Wells. <https://ici.umn.edu/products/579>