

# Cultural Competence

## Pennsylvania Developmental Disabilities Council

### Discussion Paper

#### Introduction

The Pennsylvania Developmental Disabilities Council values diversity in all aspects of life. We believe that diversity brings variety that enriches all of us, inclusive of age, gender, race, ethnicity, language, culture, sexual orientation, or disability. Just as important is learning how to include and apply that diversity across philosophy, policy, and operations to the benefit of all. To welcome diversity, we must understand cultural competence.

The process of gaining cultural competence means that a person learns to: (1) recognize and reject his or her inappropriate beliefs about a group of people, (2) recognize the influence of his/her own culture on creating those beliefs about others, (3) focus on understanding new information, (4) forgo the temptation to classify or label individuals, and (5) know how to reconcile in instances of cultural insensitivity.<sup>1</sup> This process makes manageable the task of gaining progress toward achieving cultural competence and avoids spreading or perpetuating fixed, generalized cultural misinformation. We need to engage in open discussion and take advantage of training to ensure that we internalize or adopt the beliefs or values, not just use the right or the politically correct words.

No longer can cultural competence be defined by race and ethnicity but must include a broad spectrum of additional primary and secondary identities such as age, gender, mental, sensory and physical abilities, and location.<sup>2</sup> We believe that there is an intimate relationship between competence with regard to cultural differences, and competence with regard to people with disabilities. We do not believe that either cultural differences or disabilities are problems to be “fixed”, or inconveniences to be tolerated. In both cases, we believe, that accommodation, while critical, does not mean the denial of difference. The goal is not only integration, but also making disability and cultural diversity integral to the human experience.

We believe that all difference is part of the tapestry of life and that different cultures bring gifts and challenges to pre-existing notions and ways of thought. The worlds of disability and the worlds of different racial and ethnic cultures overlap and must learn from each other’s struggles. It will always benefit people with disabilities to learn from the approaches and models used in other civil rights and cultural struggles and vice versa.

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<sup>1</sup> Adapted from National Council on Disability, Common Myths about Diversity, Cultural and Linguistic Competency, Cultural Diversity Advisory Committee March 2007, NCD 2007

<sup>2</sup> Adapted from NCD 2007 and “*Diversity Mosaic Participant Workbook: Developing Cultural Competence*,” Pfeiffer Essential Resources for Training and HR Professionals, Tina Rasmussen, November 28, 2006

We seek a path beyond “cure” or “accommodation,” beyond “fix” or “toleration.” Valuing diversity through cultural competence, in all areas of our work, will require reckoning with a continuum of competence from cultural destructiveness to cultural proficiency. In our conception it will no longer be acceptable for people with disabilities to always be the ones doing the accommodating, or for people from different cultures always having to be at least bicultural in order to get through the door. The forces of inertia and homogenization need to change.

We question the assumptions in our own authorizing legislation that people with disabilities should achieve “self-determination,” “independence,” and “productivity” -- values derived from the dominant culture. Different cultures value group decision-making and interdependence, rather than independence. Some cultures reject materialistic assumptions about the value of production. We must not simply adapt services and supports to ensure that people from different cultures achieve outcomes that reflect false universalist norms. Instead, we must question whether these outcomes, and their implicit value set, are valid, in themselves, as goals for all cultures in all times.

We must fight prejudice, discrimination and cultural incompetence<sup>3</sup> in service delivery by delivering services which not only incorporate the concepts of equality and non-discrimination, but go further to include the concept of services matched to the individual.<sup>4</sup> As we systematically identify and address the disparities in services that arise from cultural incompetence, we should remember to celebrate difference in service design and resist the temptation of “one size fits all” models. Finally, access to human services cannot be limited to electronic media to which not all people have access, any more than it can be through a door which is physically inaccessible. Access to services should be in places and through means that are culturally comfortable, accessible and meaningful to the person.

Above all, it must be recognized that cultural competence is not a one-time, finite achievement. It would be dangerous for a person or an organization to conclude that all existing information that one can learn about diversity and culture has been mastered. This is a life long process reapplied in every interaction--practiced throughout one's career and re-examined periodically by organizations and workplaces.<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> The reference to cultural incompetence includes linguistic and other forms of communication discrimination.

<sup>4</sup> Adapted from DPW Office of Medical Assistance Programs, Medical Assistance Bulletin 01-93-03. OMAP

<sup>5</sup> Adapted from NCD 2007 and “*As United States immigration patterns and increases occur among racially, ethnically, culturally and linguistically diverse residents, governments need systemic change to meet diverse population needs,*” *National Center for Cultural Competence. Accessed online March 27, 2007*

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