Join Us in Harnessing the Power of Inclusion

By Sarah Sandau
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Imagine finding a place where you’re instantly accepted and acknowledged -- where your accomplishments, contributions, and needs are recognized and appreciated.

Every person -- regardless of race, age, gender, sexuality, or ability -- deserves that kind of respect. Every person deserves a chance to take part in meaningful daily activities that add to their growth, development, fulfillment, and community contribution. Every person deserves to feel included.

At Lewis and Clark Public Health (LCPH), we want to be that kind of place. So last year we convened an Inclusiveness Work Group to help us move closer to our mission of improving and protecting the health of all residents of Lewis and Clark County, with an emphasis on “all.”

Our employees who serve on the work group have learned a lot in the past year. We started by reviewing current practices and policies at the health department to determine how well we serve people with disabilities and other underrepresented groups in our community.

People with disabilities represent close to 14 percent of the population in Lewis and Clark County. Studies have shown that this population is less likely to get recommended preventive health-care services and more likely to engage in unhealthy behaviors. Yet disability is a part of human existence. It can happen to anyone at any time. We owe it to the community to topple any barriers in our workplace that make people with disabilities feel excluded.

To guide us in our work, we reached out to members of the disability community (great folks from the Montana Independent Living Project and the Montana Disability and Health Program). They were instrumental in helping us see things from a different perspective.

We discovered several relatively simple and inexpensive ways to make our organization more inclusive. Many of them might be appropriate for other businesses and organizations that want to build a culture of inclusion. Among them are:

- Adopting a department-wide inclusiveness policy that promotes “people first” language and commits us to including underrepresented groups in all our work;
- Revising the evacuation plan for our office building at 1930 Ninth Avenue;
• Lowering the volume on several of our fire alarms;
• Installing a larger and more noticeable access button on our elevator’s emergency call box;
• Enlarging and lowering the height of the emergency call button in an outdoor stairwell “area of refuge,” so people who use wheelchairs can reach it;
• Adjusting the tension on restroom doors to make them easier to open;
• Extending the time that automatic main-entrance doors stay open to allow easier access to people with mobility issues;
• Revising our emergency plans to address people with disabilities;
• Formatting documents on our website so they’re accessible with screen readers; and
• Bringing our focus on inclusion to all community conversations and initiatives that we’re part of.

By creating our Inclusiveness Work Group, we’re deepening our culture of inclusion at LCPH. Collaborating with partners in the disability community has shed light on the work that needs to happen to be fully inclusive, because every resident in Lewis and Clark County deserves to use our services knowing that they’re respected, accepted, and appreciated.

Our work group will continue to meet and learn about existing barriers that we can address. We’re happy to share our experiences, resources, and information with other business and organizations interested in building a more robust culture of inclusion.

Sarah Sandau is supervisor of the Prevention Program at Lewis and Clark Public Health. You can reach her at ssandau@lccountymt.gov. The Inclusiveness Work Group was originally created as a result of funding from a National Association of Chronic Disease Directors project called “Reaching People With Disabilities Through Healthy Communities.”