

How to Create a Parish-Based Program for Persons with Developmental Differences in 10 Easy Steps

According to US Census data, nearly 20% of Americans have some type of disability. For these 1 in 5 Americans, their disability may be physical, intellectual, or developmental. The disability may manifest itself in a way that is apparent, or it may not. It may be severe and complex, or mild. Whatever the specifics, living with a disability has a profound impact on the individual and her/his family.

Often, people with disabilities feel, and are made to feel, unwelcome in places and activities that are routine parts of everyday life for their “typical” neighbors. People living with disabilities are faced with physical and attitudinal barriers that make it difficult or impossible for them to participate fully in all aspects of community life.

Once identified, these barriers can usually be dismantled or overcome. We have seen this done successfully in a number of parishes throughout the Archdiocese of Washington. This template is offered to parishes that wish to include persons with disabilities and their families fully into the lives of their communities and to provide programs that will promote that goal by offering new opportunities for people with and without disabilities to come together to worship, learn, and enjoy themselves.

These ten easy steps are based on the approach taken by a small group of families at Our Lady of Mercy Parish in Potomac, Maryland, who joined together in 1994 to explore how their parish could do more to include and serve the needs of persons with developmental differences. That conversation resulted in the creation of Potomac Community Resources, Inc., a nonprofit organization that today provides 35 therapeutic recreational, social and respite care programs and serves some 400 members who have developmental differences. For information about PCR and its work, visit www.pcr-inc.org.

10 EASY STEPS TO CREATING A PARISH-BASED ORGANIZATION

- 1. Pay Attention** – “We don’t have anybody like that in our parish” is often the first response to the suggestion to start a program for persons with developmental differences. Given the statistical prevalence of disabilities in the U.S. population, it is obvious that this default response cannot be accurate. Often, because they have been made to feel unwelcome, persons with disabilities do not participate in parish life. Their absence often leads to their families withdrawing also. Take simple steps like putting the issue of becoming a welcoming, inclusive community on the parish action agenda – talk up the issue and schedule and publicize a series of meetings to discuss it. Reach out in a special way to individuals and families who have a direct interest.
- 2. Identify a core group of people** who will assume initial ownership of the conversation – this group will obviously include people/families living with the challenges of disabilities and should also include parish leaders (the two groups may coincide) who are knowledgeable about how the parish is organized. Initially, a very small group is all that is necessary – it will grow as word gets out.
- 3. Identify Needs** – Interview key stakeholders to determine needs and expectations. Gather parishioners in small groups to hear their needs and hopes. Expect to hear many complaints and suggestions and requests-- be patient and remember that you have tapped into pent-up frustration. Select one or two priorities for immediate action.

4. **Start Small** – Begin with short-term goals that can be accomplished with specific, simple steps. Build on each success. Consider offering a special Mass that celebrates the gifts of persons with disabilities/special needs that can become part of the regular calendar each year. The Mass (similar to the annual Archdiocese of Washington White Mass) could include persons who have disabilities as lectors, altar servers, gift bearers, etc. There is typically little or no cost to begin and sustain such an effort.
5. **Collaborate** – Invite other parishes to join in a common effort around shared goals. Doing so broadens your reach to include more people with disabilities and families, avoids unnecessary duplication, and achieves economies of scale. Create a “cluster of parishes” effort around disabilities-related issues that serves people living in a wide geographical area encompassing several parishes. Reach out to neighboring faith-based communities to share space, volunteers, and fully include the community.
6. **Access Resources** to support the work –
 - a. **Time and Talent resources**, from the core group of parishioners, from external experts, such as the Archdiocese of Washington Department of Special Needs Ministries (contact: Mary O’Meara, omearam@adw.org, 301-459-7464) and Catholic Charities of the Archdiocese of Washington (contact: Deacon James R. Shanahan, Jim.Shanahan@catholiccharitiesdc.org, (202) 772-4310) and Potomac Community Resources, Inc. (contact: Stephen Riley, sriley@pcr-inc.org, 301-365-0561); and from area nonprofit organizations working in the field.
 - b. **Financial resources**, from each collaborating parish; from the Catholic Charities Parish & School Outreach Program; from area businesses, schools, civic organizations, etc.
7. **Hire Staff** – as the initiative gets going, hire a part-time staff person who will be responsible for arranging meetings, for publicity, coordinating arrangements for events, and also for generating support. Initially, engaging that staff person per a simple letter agreement can be handled through a parish. As the effort matures and grows, and the scope of work increases, the staff role can be expanded to meet the needs.
8. **Formalize the Organization** – by setting up a nonprofit corporation under the laws of the State of Maryland or the District of Columbia (depending on your location) and by seeking tax-exempt, 501c3 status from the U.S. Internal Revenue Service. Doing so enhances your ability to secure financial support through grants from local government agencies and from corporations, foundations, and individuals in your communities.
9. **Be and Stay Flexible** – you and your fellow parishioners know your community and its members and needs best. Don’t be afraid to try a program or event, and don’t be discouraged if response is slow at first. Needs and interests of course change over time; listen to your members and be responsive to their preferences.
10. **Celebrate Your Successes** – you will raise awareness throughout your community, attract participants in your programs, and generate support.