

Our Community

Sacramento Community Assessment: Focus on Special Needs

Turning Outward

We turned outward to listen. We viewed through a new lens, all of the hopes and aspirations seen by our community. Listening to voices beyond our own walls, we heard the concerns that matter to people. We held conversations unfettered by expert knowledge or inward ways of thinking, to bring focus toward change for a better community. Without having any answers or taking ownership of solutions, we embarked on holding traveling conversations. Common themes were identified early on as we engaged with adults and youth in the special needs community. They candidly shared their thoughts through unforgettable conversations.

The Community Conversations

We held six community conversations and several one-to-one interviews with adults and youth in the Sacramento area. We sat down with families with special needs and a wonderful group of adults, Jazzy Talkers, who use speech devices to socialize and talk at monthly meetings. Each group spoke candidly and passionately about their community. We wanted to make sure we spoke to families of those with special needs and the people close to them. We made an effort to reach out to people who don't necessarily visit the library. We sat down with people in Sacramento who wanted to share their hopes for a better community. To guide our kitchen-table-style talks, we asked these questions:

- *What kind of community do you want?*
- *What are the two to three most important issues or concerns when it comes to the community?*
- *What concerns do you have about the issue?*
- *How do the issues we're talking about affect you personally?*
- *When you think about these things, how do you feel about what's going on?*
- *What do you think is keeping us from making the progress we want?*
- *When you think about what we've talked about, what are the kinds of things that could be done that would make a difference?*
- *Thinking back over the conversation, what groups or individuals would you trust to take action on these things?*

As we documented the thoughts shared by people attending our conversations we were amazed how quickly themes began to emerge. After the conversations were all held, ideas were identified, sorted and placed into three major areas. One or more themes listed below were voiced in every conversation we held. We'd like to share what the Sacramento community said:

- ***We want to be accepted and included in our community.***

- ***We need a central, trusted hub of information and resources.***
- ***We need more opportunities to become involved in community activities and programs.***

These are the themes voiced from the community conversations. What if we could work together to address these aspirations and concerns to make a positive change? Each of the themes below are further detailed to provide insights into the hopes, aspirations and concerns voiced by the special needs community.

ACCEPTANCE AND INCLUSION IN THE COMMUNITY

People don't see me as a person with ideas to share.

(Person with a disability)

We heard time and again that people want to be included and active in their community. It's important to be connected with the interests and activities taking place all around them. They want to be accepted by, and enjoy the community in which they live. They want a place for parents and kids with disabilities to play, connect, decompress, and to share experiences. By learning how others navigate some of the challenges that special needs families face, families are able to find support systems through others, which leads to inclusion. Parents and individuals with special needs want the opportunity to ignite change in their community.

I feel alone and isolated.

(Parent of a child with special needs)

Parents often feel isolated due to their child's disability, and report that their children have few friends. The separation of special needs families from typical families may lead to isolation from fun learning activities. Finding ways to network with other parents of children with special needs are few. Parents of children with special needs shared that they have difficulty getting out of the house due to specialized care needed to leave their child at home while they run essential errands. There are few local, low cost or free programs for children with disabilities. The distances that need to be traveled to activities along with the cost of programs often keep families further isolated. Families also reported that the lack of a centralized hub of information and resources prevents them from fully connecting with the community which was identified in the second theme, Resource Sharing.

RESOURCE SHARING: A CENTRAL TRUSTED HUB OF INFORMATION

Educating the community and teaching kids is key to creating an inclusive community.

(Conversation participant)

Individuals and families shared that information is scattered and scarce. They often rely on small

networks of parents posting comments on social media to learn more about activities and more about disability resources. They search multiple sites to find information on school, health care or government resources, which often takes more time than they have available. They often need to scour many online resources to pinpoint a single specific need. We heard many times that if there were a central online hub of information to access, it would be everyone's go-to site. Having the right information--trusted information, is desperately needed. Families reported that without the help and support of other parents who have navigated the system, they would be lost.

We need to create an environment where it is OK to be different.

(Assistant for person with special needs)

Those who are not as English fluent or research-oriented have a tougher time connecting with information and consequently, their community. We heard that social media provides informal ways to connect with other families that share the same challenges. The information found in social media posts provides support and resources through personal connections. Parents shared that they found support within the special needs community through social media sites. At a time when they feared no children would show up to their child's birthday party, parents reached out on social media and received support from families of children with special needs who wanted to make the child's birthday a well-attended party. This is the kind of personal support families are receiving as a result of sharing a need and getting support from social media groups.

Finding a trusted hub of information contained in one or even several online locations is a challenge due to the many unique needs for families with special needs. Sparser still are the quality and quantity of appropriate, accessible and affordable activities or programs for people of all ages with special needs.

ACTIVITIES AND PROGRAMS FOR ALL AGES

I fear being judged.

(Parent of a child with Autism)

The community described the lack of affordable and accessible programs and activities available for children with special needs. They described that if a suitable program was identified it was often too far from home to travel or admission fees were prohibitive. Parents and caregivers of children with special needs were especially appreciative of organizations that held open hours for children with special needs to visit for a unique session.

One of the most poignant Harwood conversations was held at the Children's Museum with families of children with special needs, while the children freely explored the wonders of the Museum. It was a particularly moving conversation as parents and caregivers described the alienation they often

experience due to the lack of activities or programs that welcome children with special needs. Parents said they would like to see more learning opportunities for their children. Knowing that inclusion, acceptance; a central hub of reliable information and more programs are all things the community wants, let's look together at meeting these community needs.

Where do we go from here?

The conversations provided the community with a way to connect and people felt like they belonged. It has allowed people to share their concerns and discover common aspirations for something better than what they are currently experiencing. These conversations have allowed us to imagine an alternative future and to open a window to invite others to join us.

Three simple needs. How can they best be met? Who will be part of bringing change to Sacramento's special needs community?

The special needs community wants to be accepted and included in the larger Sacramento community. They need a central, trusted hub of information and resources. They want more opportunities to become involved in community activities and programs. We invite your feedback for transforming this conversation into action.

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