

**Top Down and Grassroots Up: Two Initiatives in Cultural Competence by
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Over the past five years, The Boggs Center on Developmental Disabilities has played a central role in two strategic initiatives to enhance the capacity of disability services to address the increasing cultural diversity of New Jersey. As framed in the title, one has been “Top Down,” working with statewide organization partners to develop a series of educational and training initiatives. The second has been “Grassroots Up,” helping to develop a New Jersey Statewide Network in Cultural Competence to bring together people and organizations to share ideas, expertise, and commitment to cultural competence.

Top Down

In 2001, following a Boggs Center Developmental Disabilities Lecture Series on cultural competence, The Center hired an African American seminarian to work on linkages with faith communities as part of a project with The Brain Injury Association of New Jersey. That led to a decision to hire several part time consultants to help our UCE determine some ways it could reach out several ethnic communities in New Jersey: Latino, Arab, Korean, and South Asian as well as African American. We hired people from those communities, whether they were familiar with disability or not.

When the findings and recommendations of the consultants were presented to The Boggs Center Consumer Advisory Council, they sparked a discussion and suggestion that all three of the ADD partners in New Jersey should work together on this, for we each had been doing things, but none of us very satisfied with the results. That led to a committee call the Cultural Competence Collaborative. After several months of brainstorming and discussion, that committee came up with the idea of a series of Cultural Awareness Days (based on the model of The Boggs Center DD Lecture Series), planned in collaboration with leaders from various ethnic communities, to ask them to teach the disability community about their cultural communities in New Jersey.

Around the same time, The Boggs Center made contact with Celia Abalos, Esq., Vice President for Multicultural Affairs, for our parent institution, the University of Medicine and Dentistry of New Jersey. (UMDNJ) She was very supportive of this initiative, quickly promised some funding, and even more importantly, invited a number of Latino leaders to an initial luncheon meeting to talk about our hopes and ideas. That approach led those leaders to say, “We need to learn about disability services in New Jersey, Can we do a two day conference instead of one, with one focused on disability service providers and the second on Latino families and organizations?”. The Latinos and Disabilities Planning Task Force was thus born, and worked about eighteen months to plan a first Latinos and Disabilities Conference in September, 2004, with primary coordination provided by The Boggs Center. Each of the ADD partners contributed funding along with UMDNJ. It was a smashing success, with a wonderful spirit, simultaneous language translation, a real desire for information, and excellent coverage in Latino print and television media.

Out of that conference, a Latinos and Disabilities listserv began. The same collaborative contacts were then utilized by the New Jersey Division of Disability Services, Department of Human Services, to plan and coordinate a conference on employment for Latinos with disabilities in the fall of 2005, and a conference on African Americans and Employment in November of 2006.

Meanwhile, in the last year, The Boggs Center and Celia Abalos, the university representative worked with the original Cultural Competence Collaborative to initiate a similar process with the South Asian communities in New Jersey. Planning is now underway for a first South Asians and Disabilities conference on June 15, 2007.

Thus, top down, statewide agencies worked together to reach out to leadership within ethnic communities to collaboratively plan training events and other activities.

Grass Roots Up.

In 2002, The Boggs Center also worked with the New Jersey Department of Health and Senior Services, to host a two day training and consultation event on cultural competence led by Tawara Goode and staff from the National Center on Cultural Competence at the Georgetown UCE. The focus was on early intervention and transition services, but part of the consultation was to determine future directions. A small committee came out of that event with a dream of establishing a statewide network on cultural competence, to find out who was doing what, to share ideas and expertise, and to work together in ways that would reduce reinventing the wheels. It took over a year to work through a mission statement, logo, and initial survey. For the past three years, the New Jersey Statewide Network on Cultural Competence (NJSNCC) has been holding quarterly forums with educational programs, growing a listserv that is housed at the New Jersey Department of Health and Senior Services but moderated by Bill Gaventa at The Boggs Center, and gradually adding to a website with information about the network and agencies in New Jersey: <http://www.state.nj.us/njsncc/>

In both of these initiatives and strategies, The Boggs Center has played a central leadership role, but one clearly shaped in collaboration with others. In specific activities such as the conferences focused on employment, other partners have taken the lead because of their mission and grant funding. We still have a long ways to go. To use a favorite term of Dr. Robert Like, a medical leader in cultural diversity at UMDNJ, we have all learned something about “cultural humility.” Some of the most important outcomes from the initiatives have been the creation of new connections with leadership in several cultural and ethnic communities, as well as enhanced collaboration with the ADD network and between disability organizations. There is more to learn, but the pathways are being slowly built, top down, and grassroots up.

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