**WHEN A SEAT AT THE TABLE IS NOT ENOUGH: A PARTICIPATORY ACTION RESEARCH STUDY ON COLLABORATIVE PARTNERSHIPS IN ONTARIO DEVELOPMENTAL SERVICES ORGANIZATIONS**

**Kaylagh Vanwyck1,2 & Dzidra Halar2**

**Wilfrid Laurier University1**, **Christian Horizons2**

**Objectives**: Historically, developmental services (DS) evolved largely guided by the knowledge and direction of non-disabled service providers and government. However, a human rights approach, as promoted in the UN CRPD, demonstrates the need to shift power toward service users labeled with developmental disabilities (lw/DD) such that they have greater voice, choice, and control over the design, implementation, and evaluation of DS. Unfortunately, little research exists on how service users are participating in Ontario’s DS organizations nor how they would prefer to have their voice heard at an organizational level. Existing theories and literature reveal the importance of *collaborative partnerships* where power is shared with service users through participatory decision-making, shared leadership, and opportunities to participate with influence. Addressing this gap, this study explored how service users envisioned collaborating in partnership with DS organizations and what model of collaborative service planning and participatory decision-making best met their goals for inclusion.

**Methods:** Four self-advocates lw/DD collaborated as co-researchers in all phases of a participatory action research study. The study explored methods of collaborative service planning and participatory decision-making, and facilitators of participation service users identified as inclusive and effective in DS organizations. Nine adult service users lw/DD and twelve leaders/managers of eight Ontario DS organizations participated in virtual semi-structured interviews. Thirteen service users participated in two focus groups. Consensus coding and thematic analysis were applied, and results are currently being written.

**Results:** Findings suggest a model that may meet service users’ inclusion goals is a s*trategy* of participation that integrates service user’s expertise at each level and stage of the service delivery cycle coupled with an approach to involvement that positions them as experts and partners with the power to effect change. This model consists of the following key elements. At an outer layer is a **supportive organizational culture** including leaders who value it, champion it, and offer multiple means to participate at multiple levels. Service users are viewed as partners and collaborators in designing and planning services and their input is actively sought through consistent means of participation. Within that supportive context, are **methods of participation that are** **inclusive and influential.** This involves formal methods of participation integrated into organizational planning and decision-making processes. These methods position service users as experts and full members of the group with equal decision-making authority and power to influence change on important topics affecting services. Participation is accessible and involves equipping and education. Methods include a representational body of service users (e.g., advisory council) with representatives on the organization’s board. At the centre are **committed and supported members** who are passionate about making the lives of people lw/DD better and the services they use stronger. These members are supported and encouraged to participate.

**Discussion:** Our findings draw from the experiences and expertise of service users lw/DD to offer key elements of effective collaborative partnerships between service users and DS organizations. This presentation will discuss our collaborative approach to research and the key elements of this model including its consistency with existing literature and unique contributions.

Kaylagh Vanwyck

Part time Master’s student, Wilfrid Laurier University

Manager of Strategic Initiatives, Christian Horizons

Waterloo, On

[star7980@mylaurier.ca](mailto:star7980@mylaurier.ca)

Dzidra Halar

Co-researcher, service user at Christian Horizons

Toronto, ON

[dzidrahalar@hotmail.com](mailto:dzidrahalar@hotmail.com)