

CONTRIBUTIONS AND LIMITATIONS OF HUMAN SERVICES

A Few Words About Expectations

People with disabilities and their families who rely on publicly-funded human service programs get their information about what to expect from the human service system in many ways and from many sources. Much of this information is inconsistent and unintentionally misleading. The following document was developed through discussion and conversation among a diverse group of parents, advocates, and service providers in Dane County, WI who are involved in supporting people with developmental disabilities

Human service programs do have important contributions to make.

The goal of services should be to reduce the conditions which, in the face of difficulty, make people with disabilities and their family and friends feel vulnerable and to increase the conditions that make them feel capable. Services can do this by helping to develop skills that aren't coming easily or naturally and to maintain abilities and life circumstances that are threatened by disability.

Human service programs can also play an important role in helping to develop and strengthen informal sources of support. Extended family, friends, people who are in similar situations, employers and co-workers, neighbors, members of churches, schools, and other community groups are and can become valuable and long-lasting sources of support.

Sometimes, needs of people with disabilities and their families require help by trained professionals or exceed the capacity of available informal sources of support. Sometimes, in spite of the best laid plans, everything just suddenly falls apart. In these situations, human service programs can and should provide specialized or crisis responses.

FROM JOHN O'BRIEN

Human service programs have important limitations.

You should keep in mind a few important limitations of human services:

1. *Services can not "fix" people or problems.*

Human problems rarely come with clear, easy solutions. Service programs can be helpful, but they usually don't make hard situations go away.

2. *Consistency and uniformity are not necessarily good qualities of human services.*

A person who has a disability and his/her family and friends make up a unique combination of characteristics which, depending on current circumstances, can cause them to be more vulnerable or more capable. There is no single, right solution that is best for every situation or person. Help must be individually designed and must be adapted as lives change.

3. *More human services are not necessarily better.*

Even the best human service programs, staffed by the best people, can't produce love, friendship, or a sense of caring or belonging. Some types of assistance are better received from family and friends than from human services.

In addition, human service programs may have these unintended consequences:

- Programs may separate and isolate a person with a disability and his/her family from potential informal sources of support.
- When specialized programs are available, friends and neighbors who can and want to help may feel like they don't have anything to offer.
- Programs may come with bureaucratic requirements, jargon, and negative labels.
- Programs may have strings attached that limit choice,

- Complex programs, funders, and bureaucracies may make people feel powerless and dependent on experts to explain or guide them

4. Long-term human services are not necessarily better.

In even the best human service programs:

- The response a person receives in a crisis probably cannot be maintained over the long run,
- There are few true entitlements, and funders are reluctant to guarantee services indefinitely,
- Resources and rules may change at important transition points in life,
- Important personal relationships may be lost when staff leave their jobs,
- Sometimes, long-term services create a level of dependency on the human service system that was not initially planned on or desired.

5. The most important ingredient in the success of a human service program is the quality of the relationship that the person with a disability and his/her family and friends have with the provider of the service.

The person receiving service won't necessarily like everyone s/he works with, but s/he should expect to work together with the human service staff person in a partnership. That means that each person:

- Spends enough time together to get to know one another,
- Respects the other's opinions,
- Is honest with each other, especially about the risks and dilemmas inherent in human services,
- Has high expectations of each other,

- Considers that, when a solution is not clear, the staff members most useful role may be in sticking by the person with a disability and his/her family and helping to deal with uncertainty and confusion,
- Recognizes that neither necessarily has the right answer all the time,
- Is willing to acknowledge disagreements openly and to find a way to work them out,
- Is willing to admit (and forgive) mistakes.