

Youth Leadership Initiative: The Arizona SILC's Strategic Approach

Systems Change in a Complicated Environment

Systems procedures, policies, and programs should benefit the population they serve. However, at the local, state, and national level, systems tasked to provide services and supports to youth in transition and their families are not adequately designed to fully address the needs of this population and often have unintended negative results. Within this system of services there are often competing priorities (i.e. employment, housing, transportation, post-secondary, etc.).

For youth with disabilities, the obstacles are formidable. After completing their secondary education, young adults generally do not have a clearly defined path to the basic components of adulthood. Youth and young adults with disabilities and their families in Arizona, as well as those across the US, are facing these systemic dysfunctions. To effectively address these complex issues is an overwhelming task. It is unlikely that any one entity could attempt comprehensive system reform.

However, systems are inanimate entities that are designed by, acted upon, and used by people. It is people who bring change into their environments and communities. It is their will to change that begins the processes of mobilizing constituencies for change. These changes can range from the miniscule to prominent and far-reaching, (Kendrick, Jones, Bezanson, & Petty, 2006).

The mission of the Arizona State Independent Living Council (AZSIL) is to promote equality, inclusion, and choice for people who have disabilities through collaboration and public policy change. The AZSILC seeks to promote inclusive, accessible communities that value differences. The five CILs in Arizona are located throughout the state. Geographically, the majority of the state is sparsely populated with only modest resources available. The disability community's needs are high and prior to 2014, CILs had been providing limited supports and services to youth and young adults with disabilities, and their priorities were not heavily focused on developing/expanding such services. Recognizing the need, and having someone on staff who has significant experience in developing youth transition projects, the AZSILC felt they could achieve success in implementing change with youth with disabilities.

The AZSILC has systematically planned and executed a series of broad initiatives that engage youth into multiple aspects of the independent living movement, the disability community, and the broader community and state. In order to accomplish this, the AZSILC has utilized an effective mechanism as a roadmap for change - the State Plan for Independent Living (SPIL). In order to better understand the strategic activities that were involved in this endeavor and guide other efforts, Melissa Ann Santora, Director of Innovation, suggests that the following questions and steps be considered before identifying a strategic direction and beginning the planning process.

Critical Questions

- Three important questions to guide the SILC's work are:

- What must we do?
- What can we do?
- What can't we do?

Federal/state laws, your bylaws/charter, organizational status, and policies and procedures all dictate which activities you must and must not do. If there are rules that say we can't do something that you feel strongly about, use systems advocacy to change the rules. The activities that you can do are affected by your organizational resources and expertise, your collaborative partnerships, commissioned constituency, and your attitude.

Strategic SILCs

SILCs are already taking strategic actions in a number of areas including the development and implementation of the SPIL, but with some thoughtful planning, could be even more successful. Some questions to think about include:

- In what ways is the SILC strategic?
- What are the benefits when the SILC is strategic?
- In what ways could the SILC be more strategic?
- What are the challenges for the SILC to be strategic?

As SILCs become more strategic, determining priorities is a critical step. Identify areas where services need to be developed, expanded, replicated, and sustained. Decide what the SILC can accomplish in reasonable increments within the timeframe. Develop goals based on the top priorities. Make sure that the priorities are consistent with your mission and vision.

As the plan is developed, it is useful to consider the SILC's history, including which strategies have and have not worked, and the reasons why. Check the archives, ask people, and obtain as much information as possible. The SILC will not want to implement something that has already been tried without clear results, or at least not without major revisions.

Build on your successes and the strengths the SILC already has, but also try to predict potential obstacles and barriers with possible strategies to overcome them. A Strengths, Weaknesses, Opportunities and Threats (SWOT) analysis may be useful in this process. It is helpful to design projects or activities with the end result in mind - where you want to be. Create timelines and actions for each major step.

Be intentional about fulfilling the SILC's mission, vision, and goals. To do this, you need to thoughtfully and deliberately reflect on the overall trajectory, build or expand services where needed, and sometimes rebuild or restructure existing processes. Staying on top of the details, continually paying attention, and consistently focusing on your mission, vision, and goals will help all of the other pieces fall into place.

Over the past seven (7) years, the AZ SILC has strategically addressed the need to develop and support youth in becoming advocates and leaders. Some detailed examples of this process to implement youth initiatives are described.

Youth as Leader Advocates

The AZ SILC was committed to addressing a significant need that had major system implications. If the disability movement was to remain the vibrant and viable voice for system change that it has been for the past 60 years, the SILC recognized that new leaders must emerge who can improve societal perceptions of disability and advocate for responsive, person-centered systems. However, based on needs assessment activities, many youth and young adults do not understand the critical importance of individual and system advocacy, nor do they have the knowledge and skills to engage in a change process. Further, systems are not in place to provide the training and opportunities for young adults to become leader advocates.

The Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) has created unprecedented opportunities for youth to fully develop as positive, contributing members of our society. However, many need opportunities to learn and grow as leader advocates in their own lives, and in their communities.

The Arizona SILC chose to address this challenge in a purposeful and strategic manner while acknowledging that this process required additional human and fiscal resources and a longer view than a 3-year project cycle.

In the following sections, the development and execution of the SPIL is described and how the SPIL supported and strengthened these critical youth initiatives.

Key SILC Initiatives

Setting the Stage

Approximately six years ago, the AZSILC recognized that there was little concerted effort around youth transition within the Arizona IL Network, and to fill the gap, AZILC set a goal to start a Youth Leadership Forum in Arizona within two years. The AZSILC's current initiatives and resources were considered as well as the results of a 2013 multi-pronged needs assessment conducted in preparation for the 2014-2016 State Plan for Independent Living (SPIL). In addition, AZSILC met with a variety of prospective community collaborators, to gauge the interest and level of support for the concept. Based on this analysis, the Council submitted an amendment to the current SPIL that included support for a Youth Leadership Forum (<http://www.azylf.org/>). In conceptualizing this request, the Council relied on technical assistance and support from the Montana Youth Leadership Forum (MYLF). RSA approved the amendment and the AZSILC Youth Initiatives began.

The Arizona Youth Leadership Initiatives (AZYLI) are composed of five major ongoing endeavors: (1) AZ Youth Leadership Forum; (2) AZ Youth Engagement Academy; (3) AZ Youth Leadership Initiatives Alumni Association; (4) Emerging Me: Middle School Matters, and (5) Diverse Ability Incorporated. These are all described in more detail below. All of these initiatives grew out of objectives in the AZ SPIL, and all will be continued in the next SPIL (2020-2023), pending approval.

AZ Youth Leadership Forum (AZYLF)

Following the approval of the SPIL amendment, the first AZYLF conference was conducted in June 2014. AZYLF upholds the philosophies and tenets of the California Model: Youth Leadership Forum for Students with Disabilities established in 1992. Staff

of the Montana Youth Leadership Forum MYLF) provided mentoring, and the National Association of Youth Leadership Forums provided technical assistance. Starting with an established model and getting support from more experienced YLFs facilitated the initial process.

The Arizona Youth Leadership Forum (AZYLF) is a 5-day regional conference that fosters personal growth for students and young adults with disabilities as they prepare for and progress through transition to adulthood. AZYLF believes leadership is a personal journey and to support this concept, provides experiential learning opportunities to assist each individual as they identify and embrace their strengths and gifts, and begin planning for their future.

AZYLF brings together up to 25 youth (delegates) from across Arizona, for an experience that focuses on self-discovery, leadership development, career exploration, effective advocacy, and empowerment through the lens of disability history and culture. Through person centered planning, delegates develop a Personal Leadership Plan which includes specific action items. Delegates also become a voice for their peers as they serve to inform the development of the AZ SPIL. Every delegate receives peer-based mentoring for on-going support for one year after AZYLF. Delegates are also offered continued connection through the thriving AZYLI Alumni Association (see details below), following graduation.

Although purposeful and relevant, the true value of AZYLF is not found in a workbook or in the words of an accomplished presenter, it is found in the climate of trust, mutual respect, and absolute acceptance, which allow youth to be themselves, to be heard, and to be changed. AZYLF invests in our most precious resource, the youth who will transform our tomorrows. Each AZYLF season, the youth elect a 3-person Leadership Team to share their perspectives and represent their AZYLF Class, as they moved forward with planning and implementing future AZYLF conferences and AZYLI endeavors.

AZ Youth Engagement Academy (AZYEA)

The Arizona Youth Engagement Academy (AZYEA) evolved as a way to provide ongoing engagement and enhanced opportunities for Arizona Youth Leaders. This is an additional level of training that centers around youth leaders developing skills and practical experience in delivering mentoring, training, and support to other youth. This component is designed to ensure that Arizona Youth Leadership Initiative offerings are peer-based, peer-led, and peer-run. The AZYEA also prepares Youth Leaders for leadership opportunities and positions inside and outside of the Arizona IL Network. The first AZYEA classes were taught in 2017. Currently, all of AZYEA classes are taught by Alumni, further strengthening the peer-based approach.

Arizona Youth Leadership Initiatives (AZYLI) Alumni Association

Following the conclusion of the 2014 YLF, the majority of the 23-person class were in regular contact with each other. Seeing the need to create some structure around those contacts, and to maximize the insights and experiences of the youth, the concept of an Alumni Association was discussed with the youth and colleagues at AZSILC. The youth really didn't know what an Alumni Association was, but after it was described, they enthusiastically endorsed the concept. Objectives regarding the Alumni Association

were part of the 2017-20 SPIL. The first Alumni Association meeting was held in February 2015. The AZYLI Alumni Association operates under a set of Bylaws, similar to that of a nonprofit Board of Directors. Currently, the Alumni Association has a paid, part-time Logistics Coordinator, who is a 2015 Alumni.

Emerging Me: Middle School Matters

An inclusive, self-discovery, and leadership capacity building program for youth who are in the intermediate grades between elementary and high school, *Emerging Me: Middle School Matters* affords youth who do and do not have disabilities opportunities to develop and embrace their identity, leading to enhanced self-advocacy and self-determination. Designed to equalize and unify youth in a shared process, *Emerging Me* provides structured opportunities to learn about the intersectionality of their diversities, and common life experiences by engaging in individual and group activities. These experiences and activities result in the development of a Self-Advocacy Plan, using person-centered practices and planning.

Diverse Ability Incorporated

In considering the longevity of the Arizona Youth Leadership Initiatives, AZSILC determined that the best way to ensure success of the Youth Leadership Initiatives was to have a nonprofit organization assume responsibility for sustaining and expanding them. In early 2017, with the support of the SILC, Diverse Ability Incorporated became a 501(c)(3) nonprofit public charity. It is governed by a Board of Directors comprised of youth and elders who have disabilities and other diversities. Diverse Ability Incorporated is rooted in IL philosophy, and borrows the peer-based framework, as well as ensures that the majority of staff and board members are people who have disabilities and other diversities, and that the majority are youth. Diverse Ability Incorporated's objective is to promote access, equality, inclusion, and the intersectionality of diversity. A number of activities are undertaken to address this objective including peer-based experiential learning, innovative person-centered practices, and maximized collaboration efforts. AZSILC has provided ongoing support as this organization has worked toward and become successful in diversifying funding and expanding and enhancing the youth initiatives. Currently Diverse Ability Incorporated facilitates the Arizona Youth Leadership Initiatives, which includes: Arizona Youth Leadership Forum (AZYLF); Arizona Youth Engagement Academy (AZYEA); AZYLI Alumni Association; and Emerging Me: Middle School Matters.

Strategic Suggestions

Based on the AZSILC's experiences in planning and implementing these Youth Leadership Initiatives, the following strategic suggestions are proposed:

- Take a snapshot – An analysis of strengths, weaknesses, opportunities and threats (<https://www.keela.co/blog/nonprofit-swot-analysis> informs strategic planning, and identifies areas to address, goals, and resource needs.
- Assess Your Assets – Inventory your team, partners, funding, and other assets.
- Know / Use Resources – Understand your resources to put them to the best use.
- Relevant / Realistic – What can you realistically accomplish within the time limit?
- Purposeful / Meaningful - Determine and write your priorities, goals and actions.

- Legal / Ethical - Everyone should know the rules and their responsibilities. Specify how you will spend new, sustained, and other funding sources.
- Transparent / Timebound - Share everything. Be an open book.
- Review / Revise – Continually use, evaluate, review and revise your plan.
- Celebrate / Share Success. Celebrate that you know how to be strategic and your successful actions! Share your successes with everyone in multiple formats - on your website, annual report, newsletters, blogs, and social media, (Santora, 2020).

In the midst of the complex environmental, social, and economic challenges, it is even more critical for SILCs in each state and territory to be strategic and focused in their approaches to support the IL network and individuals with disabilities in the community. Changing and enhancing services and expanding opportunities for individuals with disabilities can be best accomplished through strategic thinking and planning. The strength of the SILCs is not that they always choose the same path, but that they have the same overall independent living goal—full citizenship and inclusion of everyone!

References

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