

Promising Practices in Creating Welcoming, Culturally Inclusive CILs that Promote Equity

Introduction

It is not enough to just declare that we are inclusive of everyone. To reach and serve the entire community of persons with disabilities, CILs must address our consumers' overlapping or intersecting social identities. Identities such as race and ethnicity, sexual orientation, and gender do not and cannot exist separately from disability. CILs must be intentional in the way they organize themselves and conduct business.

Diversity may be defined as differences in culture, ethnic or racial classification, self-identification, tribal or clan affiliation, nationality, language, age, sexual orientation, gender identity or expression, socioeconomic status, education, religion, spirituality, physical and intellectual abilities, and other factors that distinguish one group or individual from another.¹

Intersectionality means having multiple social group memberships and identities that expose an individual to different types of discrimination and disadvantage.² This concept was first defined by law professor Kimberlé Crenshaw to bring attention to how discrimination affected Black women by looking at the intersection of race and gender.³ In a Time article, Crenshaw states “[Intersectionality] is basically a lens, a prism, for seeing the way in which various forms of inequality often operate together and exacerbate each other. We tend to talk about race inequality as separate from inequality based on gender, class, sexuality or immigrant status. What’s often missing is how some people are subject to all of these, and the experience is not just the sum of its parts.”⁴ More information can be found at: <https://diversity.gwu.edu/resources-intersectionality>.

We must acknowledge our unconscious biases and limitations and take steps to address them. The purpose of this factsheet is to provide relevant suggestions, tips, promising practices, and lessons learned from nine small and large CILs across the country that participated in ILRU's [Disability, Diversity and Intersectionality \(DDI\) project](https://www.ilru.org/topics/inclusion-diversity-underserved-populations) (<https://www.ilru.org/topics/inclusion-diversity-underserved-populations>) along with ILRU's ongoing work related to inclusion and intersectionality. It is our hope that this resource will support your CIL wherever you are on your journey to becoming more welcoming, safe, and culturally inclusive for everyone.

¹ Goode T, Jackson V. Presentation for National Council for Community Behavioral Health, Resource Center for Behavioral Health and Primary Care Collaboration, Learning Collaboratives, September 2009; Baltimore, MD.

² Sue, D.W., Rasheed, M.N., & Rasheed, J.M. (2016). Multicultural Social Work Practice: A Competency-Based Approach to Diversity and Social Justice. Available at: <http://works.bepress.com/janice-rasheed/1/>.

³ Adewunmi, B. (2014). “Kimberlé Crenshaw on intersectionality: “I wanted to come up with an everyday metaphor that anyone could use”. *The New Statesman*. Available at: <https://www.newstatesman.com/lifestyle/2014/04/kimberle-crenshaw-intersectionality-i-wanted-come-everyday-metaphor-anyone-could>

⁴ Steinmetz, K. (2020). “She Coined the Term ‘Intersectionality’ Over 30 Years Ago. Here’s What It Means to Her Today”. *Time Magazine*. Available at: <https://time.com/5786710/kimberle-crenshaw-intersectionality/>

Race and Disability Issues

The institutional component of racism includes the systematic distribution of resources, power, and opportunities to primarily benefit people who are White and exclude people of color. Institutional racism includes disparities in political power, education, employment, income, health care, housing, criminal justice, and more. People are often not aware of how racism is an integral aspect of these widespread institutional systems.

It's important for CILs as agents of transformation to understand that the foundations of racism still play a pivotal role in the work that we do and affect many of our consumers. It's an issue for all people of color and our centers as allies and service providers.

Acknowledge Intersectional Identities

It's important to acknowledge who people are. Centers do not need to ask people to choose between their different identities and what advocates think they might need. Why not start by acknowledging who people are before finding out what they need? Also, although an individual may belong to a certain identity group, never anticipate or assume what their needs are. Always ask them what their individual needs are. This simple approach may start overcoming racism and White supremacy.

Be Open to Doing the Work

Creating a culture where intersectional issues are addressed requires a lot of work and does not happen overnight. In order to be effective, a commitment needs to be made to diversify the CIL at every organizational level (governance, community involvement, operations, services, etc.) and with every stakeholder (board, staff, volunteers, consumers, and community partners). This effort needs to be a priority and you must be willing to commit time and resources to it.

Start by taking an inventory and assessing where you are and where you want to be with staff and consumers with intersectional identifies including racial, ethnic, linguistic, sexual orientation, gender, etc. Consider whether or not your CIL:

- Creates appropriate materials and activities for recruiting, hiring, and supporting staff who have differing identities;
- Analyzes census and other data to inform outreach and other activities;
- Represents the racial and ethnic diversity in your service area including consumers, board and staff - and listens to their voices;
- Discusses intersecting identities often and considers these issues our work;
- Develops policies and procedures that are inclusive of all people and addresses differing identities of consumers and staff;
- Employs a variety of training methods and opportunities to assist staff in better understanding systemic racism, equity, and institutional bias and applies these when working with diverse consumers;
- Actively partners with and supports community/state identity organizations by serving as members; participating on their boards, committees, and workgroups; attending events; educating on disability and independent living; and jointly serving consumers;

- Plans outreach strategies with identity serving partners for engaging and recruiting consumers, staff, and board members, and volunteers in diverse communities;
- Designs programs and services to meet the needs of all consumers;
- Welcomes and communicates effectively with linguistically diverse consumers;
- Creates a safe place where consumers with diverse intersecting identities do not face common mainstream stereotypes and marginalization.⁵

Considering the above factors will improve your CIL, but to take a full assessment, visit <https://www.newstatesman.com/lifestyle/2014/04/kimberl-crenshaw-intersectionality-i-wanted-come-everyday-metaphor-anyone-could> or complete the “Intersectionality Checklist” available in the footnotes section of Page 3. Share the assessment results or jointly go through the questions with staff and board members. Collaboratively make plans and act as quickly as possible on any areas that need improvement. Continually assess where you are, set goals, and be aware of additional intersections with disability, such as religion, gender identity, sexual orientation, and socioeconomic status. Another viable option is to hire outside equity and diversity consultants to assess your needs and create plans to improve diversity, inclusion, and equity efforts. Some CILs have found conducting assessments, creating plans, and making organizational changes to be easier and more effective when guided by outside experts.

Create an Environment of Belonging

CILs know how to create accessible environments that are welcoming to people with all types of disabilities. Unfortunately, we often fail to consider how to create that sense of belonging for people whose disability identity intersects with one of culture, ethnic or racial classification, language, age, sexual orientation, gender identity or expression, socioeconomic status, education, religion, or spirituality.

An important goal is to create the feeling that consumers, staff, and board members with all types of intersecting identities and disabilities **belong**. People with intersecting identities are not coming into “our” home; they are coming into “their” home reflected in the physical spaces and programs where people understand and share their lived experiences. There are a number of ways to foster that feeling, described below:

- Entrance sign displays are easy to read and understand with written directions, pictures or arrows, as well as tactile or auditory guides.
- Friendly trained greeters at your front desk assure consumers that they have come to the right place, make them feel important and welcome, and treat them with respect and dignity.
- Pictures, photos, signs, flags, and posters reflect the faces, interests, values, customs, and activities of different communities. Your visuals promote civil rights and reflect the diversity of the communities you serve.

⁵ “Intersectionality Toolkit” at <http://briguglio.asgi.it/immigrazione-e-asilo/2015/marzo/toolkit-intersezionalita%27.pdf> and “Intersectionality Checklist” at <https://www.sparqs.ac.uk/ch/Intersectionality%20Checklist%20FINAL%20Oct%202018.pdf>

- All staff, board, and volunteers are committed to inclusion and receive ongoing effective training.
- Staff speak the languages represented in your community, especially staff in the reception area. Program materials are provided in the primary languages spoken in your community.
- [LanguageLine](https://www.languageline.com) translating services (<https://www.languageline.com>) or a comparable instantaneous language interpreter resources provide language access when staff do not know the language.

Target Programs and Learning Experiences to Different Populations

Intentional programming is another important aspect of assuring equity. Create the same opportunities for consumers across identity groups, which because of inequities may mean creating specific programs that address oppression and past inequities. Separate peer support groups or programs are a way to intentionally focus on certain identity groups, specifically identity groups that are multiply marginalized. Consumers may be helped the most by others with lived disability experience and deep understanding of culture and biases generally found only in peers with similar identities. While classes and support groups for people with specific intersecting identities meet a need, it is also possible to make integrated programs inclusive. Design programs with different learning styles in mind. Incorporate visual prompts and materials that do not require reading or writing as part of activities. Factor in the perspectives from consumers and staff from different racial and ethnic backgrounds to ensure the programs are cultural competent and inclusive.

Location, Location, Location

Locating your CIL in a geographic location with easy access to many different identity groups would be ideal, especially if your city is segregated or has neighborhoods where people who share a culture or language are located. There may be certain areas of the city where other racial/cultural groups do not feel safe and will not usually go. If moving is not an option, consider and plan how your center might create that sense of belonging. If your CIL is not located in communities of color, you must prioritize going into those communities, building relationships with trusted community-based organizations (CBOs), and identifying what their needs are by listening. The next section provides examples of how different CILs have done this.

Move Beyond the Walls of the CIL

Many people prefer going to a neighborhood-based place, somewhere that feels comfortable and familiar. People want to go where they see people like themselves. CILs create this feeling of belonging and acceptance for many people, but not everyone may yet feel that way about your center.

The Center for Independence of the Disabled, New York (CIDNY) enhanced feelings of familiarity, and made it easy to find out about their services, by placing bilingual staff in other community organizations.

Central Coast Center for Independent Living (CCCIL) also learned that it's much easier and more effective to find your target audiences if you go where they are rather than

waiting for them to come to your office. CCCIL believes that their community is their office. Staff go where people are receiving services, learning, working, shopping, recreating, socializing, etc. CCCIL becomes part of the neighborhood where they listen, observe, provide information, network, and create channels for two-way communication.

Enlisting Staff in Outreach Efforts

It is important for your staff to represent the community you serve, particularly when doing outreach. Some staff members may feel that outreach requires them to step out of their comfort zone. CCCIL has found that it helps to pair an inexperienced staff person with someone who has done outreach well. An experienced staff member can help a new person overcome their initial reluctance, introduce them to people in the community, and learn effective outreach strategies. Together they can achieve success and improve outcomes.

Advocate to Change Systemic Racism and Other Forms of Discrimination

After improving your outreach, inclusion, and services, the next step is providing support in advocating with partners from diverse communities. Reforming and working to eliminate racist policies in criminal justice, housing, education, employment, and other systems will help people of color with and without disabilities. For example, youth of color are more likely to experience harsher enforcement and punishment due to discrimination and stigmas. And, this disparity is amplified for youth of color with disabilities. Changing discriminatory state and federal laws and policies is an effective way to reduce systemic barriers and decrease the number of people who are disproportionately unemployed, homeless, or incarcerated.

It's important for us as a disability community to get behind social movements. Support may include a variety of actions including: marching in protests; posting on social media; writing a letter to the editor or appropriate officials; providing training to police department and schools; and meeting with community leaders and legislators. It's critical for our centers to engage in changing detrimental policies. Join with other groups and organizations to strengthen your voice and advocacy efforts.

Outreach that Works: Know your Community through Data

Data will accurately reveal the populations in your full community. Reviewing available data about who makes up the communities you serve is the first step to make sure that your center is inclusive and effectively serving all populations.

CIDNY uses zip code data to learn more about where people with disabilities and high concentrations of different ethnicities are living. After identifying a zip code with a high concentration of ethnic groups, CIDNY works with people in a respectful way by learning about their local issues and barriers, available accessible resources, and who the community leaders are.

Data has resulted in more effective community outreach, engagement with local groups, and focusing resources and assets on the communities they serve. Ultimately, these data have helped CIDNY continually remove barriers that result in discrimination.

CIDNY recommends researching who lives in your area, what their key concerns are, and the top inequalities that need to be addressed. Consider where you can have an

impact on the issues that exist. Google Maps can be searched using the nearby function for community organizations that might be partners.

Work with local city or government planners to incorporate that data, so community programs will be responsive to everyone who lives there. Data from the [American Community Survey](https://www.census.gov/programs-surveys/acs/data.html) (<https://www.census.gov/programs-surveys/acs/data.html>) is particularly helpful because it is possible to drill down to get specific local pictures.

Commit Time and Resources

Make it a priority to commit time and resources to conducting outreach and marketing in the community. The numbers take time to build, but they will positively change with continued strategic effort.

Since 2002, CIDNY has targeted language-specific media, including television and radio stations, as well as local newspapers. Reporters have been invited to talk with bilingual staff at events focusing on community needs and access for people with disabilities.

CIDNY also makes a point to have fun with celebrations. For example, they celebrated the Lunar New Year with local advocates, staff, and consumers.

Match the CIL's Approach to the Community

After listening to families, Central Coast Center for Independent Living (CCCIL) discovered that there was a conflict between how the IL movement and the Latinx community view independent living. CCCIL discovered that working with Latinx individuals involved making space for the whole family, and began to transform their services to better fit the community and culture.

Immigrants bring their cultural beliefs when they move to the United States. Recognize and accept their culture, even if you their beliefs are different from your own. Immigrants tend to identify with who they are culturally and ethnically before identifying with their disability. Let them know that our centers are a safe space, regardless of their legal status. Demonstrate that the CIL is trustworthy, welcoming, and identifies with people of color.

Reach Out to Legislators

Making a difference in our communities also means connecting to local and state policy makers. Serve on city or county councils and commissions whenever you can. Educate legislators about constituents that they may not know much about. When legislators become familiar with your services, they may refer individuals or families with members who have disabilities, or make connections with other groups that you didn't think about.

All Communities Have Diverse Populations

It may not seem as important or be more challenging for your CIL to promote diversity, inclusion, and equity when your area doesn't seem very diverse. Diversity exists in both rural and urban environments, but you might have to look for it. Diversity also relates to religion, economic status, age, gender, sexual orientation, veteran status, and other characteristics that you may not be considering.

That is why it is important to look at data, including the census and other surveys which capture the composition of your population. Remember that the proportion of racial and ethnic groups is growing. Spending time in the community at places where everyone frequents, such as the grocery store, gas station, etc., may help you identify other diverse populations that the census had not identified.

Free ongoing technical assistance on how to track data for your area and how to analyze it's meaning is available at The University of New Hampshire Institute on Disability at 603.862.4320 or email contact.iod@unh.edu. You will also find many resources for gathering, analyzing, and utilizing data on the ILRU website at <https://www.ilru.org/topics/gathering-analyzing-utilizing-data>.



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