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THE INITIATOR

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Studying Housing Needs in West Michigan

What do people with disabilities and their families really want and need in terms of housing? That's the question posed by Disability Network/Lakeshore in a new research study. With the help of a \$7,500 grant from the Grand Haven Area Community Foundation, the answers are coming to light.

"We felt this was a worthy project for our community," says Carol Bedient, the Foundation's Grants and Program Director. "It's so important not to make a decision without involving the people it will impact most."

Since October 2008, Disability Network's Program Director, Stacey Trowbridge, has been collaborating with key stakeholders and Virginia Beard, PhD, a research consultant paid for by the grant. Together, they have assembled an action team of individuals, businesses, and organizations to gather information, collect data, and analyze the findings.

In Phase One, the action team looked at similar communities around the country to identify keys to success. During Phase Two, service providers, school districts, and decision makers shared their perspectives on housing needs, specifically in terms of affordability, accessibility, individual supports, and public amenities. In Phase Three, people with disabilities and their families and caregivers discussed their thoughts about the same four components in focus groups.

"What we're hearing so far is that supports play a bigger role than anything else," says Trowbridge. "Affordable housing, supportive

services, and other public amenities, as a whole package, are not accessible to the majority we serve."

Dr. Beard adds, "It's been really good to hear such a wide range of different perspectives. Stacey and I didn't just come up with survey questions we thought were good. We let the stakeholders in our workgroups decide what questions to ask. It takes longer, but the outcome is better when it's formed by people who have a stake in it."

One of those people is workgroup member Krista Mason, who says, "Until now, we've had a one-size-fits-all approach. Most families are interested in seeing a continuum of housing options, including housing with supports to help the people who live there succeed. People should be able to live in the housing of their choice, that affords the kind of community relationships they would like. We can solve that by supporting a variety of housing models including group homes, independent living, and non-profit models."

After analyzing data from the first three phases, the workgroup will develop recommendations for the future. The project's final report will be ready to share in October 2009. At that time, the group's recommendations will be used to create implementation plans and secure funding. A summary of the project will also be posted on www.dnlakeshore.org as a resource for other groups pursuing similar projects.



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—Krista Mason

Make Your Voice Heard

In the final phase, the research team will visit existing groups in the community to discuss the workgroup's recommendations. Dr. Beard explains, "We want to go to places where people with vested interests are and say, 'Here's what we found. Does this resonate with you? Tell us your story.'"

Do you have a story we should hear? If housing for people with disabilities is a concern for your group, we'd love to meet with you. Please contact Stacey Trowbridge at 616 396 5326 or stacey@dnlakeshore.org to schedule a discussion in July or August 2009.

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Volunteers

We rely on our wonderful volunteers for so much of what we accomplish. To find an opportunity that fits your skills, interests, and schedule, please contact Annie Hilchen:

616 396 5326

Donations

As a non-profit organization, we welcome gifts of all sizes. You may make a tax-deductible contribution by calling 616 396 5326 or mailing a check (payable to Disability Network/Lakeshore) to:

Disability Network/Lakeshore
426 Century Lane
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Join Us

Your gifts of time and resources can help us change everything for the better.



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Who we are

Most people equate disability with limitations. It's our job to change the perceptions and realities that prevent people with disabilities from sharing in the community. Every year, we provide training, mentoring, and referrals to help people with disabilities and their families live productive lives. Because disability touches so many people, we also work on a larger scale, helping governments and businesses make changes that benefit not just those with disabilities, but everyone in the community.

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