

The Role of Independent Facilitation as a Crucial Safeguard for Individuals and Families

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Independent Facilitators are deeply aware of the importance of family to the individuals they support. Where there are no existing family connections, effort is made to recognize those people who love and care for the individual and who are prepared to stand by them over time and foster these kinds of relationships. The foundation of the work is relational. Independent Facilitators form and help create trusting and lasting relationships over time that lead to individuals and families being far less likely to go into crisis and needing to rely solely on the service system for support. Independent Facilitators are unencumbered and free of conflicts of interest because they are not part of an organization that offers residential or day support programs. They also do not have any responsibility related to assessment, eligibility, service provision or funding allocation or oversight.

These crucial safeguards arise almost exclusively outside of the traditional service system. The need arises among individuals and families within the context of creating a meaningful life in community where the individual is supported to take up his or her citizenship and make his or her contribution alongside others. While the individual may choose a range of services and supports, it is this vision of community inclusion that sets it apart from other person-directed planning models. The role is fundamentally derived from a social justice perspective meaning that individuals who have a developmental disability have every right to take up their citizenship and participate alongside others in their community.

The Safeguards

Safeguard 1: Long Term Commitment

Those experienced with Independent Facilitation understand that to work meaningfully with individuals and families one must make a long-term commitment. This commitment is about entering into a relationship and discovering what is possible and even desirable over time.

People and families have consistently expressed their desire that Independent Facilitators provide continuity of support over time. This commitment to the person and their family means a great deal to them. One of the most highly valued aspects of this kind of support is that families know that there will be an effort to stay connected and engaged over time. It is typical for Independent Facilitators to be there to support a range of transitions in a persons' life -- leaving school, moving out of the family home, losing support workers, deaths of loved ones. Individuals and families take comfort in knowing that the change they are considering will not have to be rushed into unnecessarily, and that they can build capacity and courage over time in a thoughtful way that involves all the key people.

TRUST BUILDS OVERTIME:

Individuals and families have had a lot of experience with service workers coming in and out of their lives. This is why the long-term commitment is so essential so that trust builds as the relationship evolves and endures. It is assumed that if an Independent Facilitator cannot make a long-term commitment to an individual they would not assume the role and would endeavour to find a replacement. When families come to know that the person is genuinely willing to stand by them over time they begin to take the risks inherent in holding a vision for the future and embracing changes. Because the relationship is so essential for positive changes to happen, it is important that individuals and families have some say in who the Independent Facilitator is.

Independent Facilitators help to put the control and authority for a person's life around the kitchen table. Since they will be there over time, Independent Facilitators can invest more in developing the relationship and laying a strong

foundation for trust so that they can help the family to work through their fears, their concerns and take a candid look at the risks involved in change. Alleviating ones' fears and doubts helps people to see possibilities they didn't see before. When individuals and families understand that the relationship will grow over time they are far more willing to consider how things might unfold in the immediate, midterm, and long-term time frames without feeling pressured.

VISION IS ENCOURAGED:

Independent Facilitators have numerous ways of encouraging and assisting individuals to develop a vision for their lives and be able to speak to others about that vision. They do not have any preconceived notions about what that vision ought to look like. They are less likely to direct individuals into existing services for the sake of convenience. They do however help individuals and families to “think outside the box” and discover what is readily available in their local communities. Independent Facilitators are not restrained by the policies, procedures and requirements that are present within service agencies and this brings forth more creativity and custom solutions. Independent Facilitators help individuals to claim a life for themselves and not be discouraged about how long it takes to see the changes they are looking for.

CAREFULLY ASKING THE TOUGH QUESTIONS:

Independent Facilitators help everyone understand and recognize the ongoing necessity for thinking things through carefully and evaluating whether things are working or not. At times, they assist by causing people to pause and ask themselves tough questions that they may have been avoiding. Basically, this involves getting people to be more reflective and having them stop and think before acting. This planful approach is a really valuable safeguard to decision making.

BELIEF IN THE PERSON:

A fundamental belief of Independent Facilitation is that the individual is capable of being a creative source in his or her own life. Independent Facilitators nurture a sense of possibility and self-reflection. They are aware of the importance of ongoing conversations and the need to create opportunities for people to share their stories and inspire one another to take risks. They have a deep understanding of social devaluation and the need to put in place safeguarding strategies so that the individual can avoid further devaluation.

Safeguard 2: Broadening and Strengthening Social Networks

Independent Facilitation acknowledges the centrality of helping to broaden and strengthen the individual's and the families' social networks.

FREELY GIVEN LONG TERM RELATIONSHIPS:

Independent Facilitators help the individual and family to build a sense of belonging and kinship with others. They help to identify and facilitate the coming together of significant people in order to broaden the planning context and deepen the social fabric of the individual's life. They are committed to helping to build long-term relationships that are freely given and that will offer moral and practical support over time to the individual and to the family. These relationships help to care for the development of the individual's voice and their own story and sense of self over time.

STRENGTH OF INTERDEPENDENCE:

By bringing people together in this way Independent Facilitators help families realize that they don't have to make all the decisions and that they can involve others in the decision-making process alongside their son/daughter. Having others engaged over time that are willing to nurture their connection with the individual and support the persons' autonomy is a critical safeguard once the individual's parents are no longer alive.

SUPPORT FOR DECISION MAKING:

Independent Facilitators assist in bringing people together intentionally to aid the individual in supported decision making and entering into planning conversations. This broadening of the conversation with others assists greatly in gaining fresh insights into, not only the challenges that they are dealing with, but also the resources that can be brought to bear. Others are there to witness an individual's life as it unfolds. They have many people who identify with their story and deeply understand and appreciate who they are and what they need and want. This helps to embolden the individual to take the next step because they know that they have many people who are there to lend a hand. Fostering a context for Supported Decision Making is a key aspect of the Independent Facilitators role. It assists the individual to have a greater sense of autonomy and control over their life.

STRENGTHENING FAMILIES; BRINGING THEM TOGETHER:

Independent Facilitators also help to strengthen families by introducing them to other families who may have similar experiences and who may be able to offer mutual support. Bringing families together to share stories and gain strength from one another is key to the role of broadening the perspectives of family members and expanding their social networks. When family caregivers feel less isolated they have more energy to deal with the day to day challenges they face. Linking families for the purpose of mutual support is invaluable.

Safeguard 3: Taking Direction from the Person

Independent Facilitation acknowledges that each person has the capacity to express their will and their preferences in some way and can be involved in directing and taking charge of the key decisions in their life to the extent possible.

LISTENING, DRAWING OUT AND STRENGTHENING THE INDIVIDUAL'S VOICE:

Independent Facilitation is focussed on taking direction from the individual and helping him or her to develop a stronger sense of self and a vision for the future. This involves being present and listening in such a way that the individual strengthens their voice and their capacity to speak up for themselves in whatever way possible. This commitment to honouring and drawing out the individual's voice is a significant step in demonstrating to others how to listen carefully to what is being said and contributes greatly to deepening and extending relationships. Facilitators work over time to increase the individual's opportunities for making decisions and taking charge of their life by helping others recognize the way in which they assert their will and make choices.

Helping to strengthen an individual's voice also leads to them being more able and willing to enter into dialogue with those that matter in their lives about things that are troubling them and what they envision for themselves. It helps them to understand who they are and what their own story is. When individuals are consciously listened to over time they begin to be eager to tell their own story and listen to other's stories. Facilitators aim at creating a safe place for all voices to be heard and understood so that the best decision can be made overall. There is a focus on helping the individual hear the perspectives of others and think through the options that are before them in any particular situation so that they can make informed decisions. This commitment to supporting people to have a "say so" in their own life

and begin shaping their own life goes a long way in safeguarding them against becoming silenced and not taken seriously by others.

HELPING THE PERSON BE UNDERSTOOD AND HEARD BY OTHERS:

Families shared how Independent Facilitators help them pay more attention and be more mindful to the body language and gestures the individual may be using as a form of expression and communication. They can also help to find ways to build a more universal form of communication so that the individual is better understood by more people, as well as helping families think more broadly about how their sons and daughters may be communicating through their behaviours. The role of helping individuals be better understood and heard by others is a vital safeguard in all respects.

Safeguard 4: Commitment to Community Development and Innovation

Independent/Unencumbered Facilitation and Planning Organizations are committed to taking a broader community development approach to supporting individuals to build meaningful lives.

An essential aspect of the long-term commitment Independent Facilitators make is the possibility it creates for using more collaborative, community development oriented approaches. There is more potential for finding synergistic remedies to challenges that an individual may be facing, among a number of people and organizations. Independent Facilitators assist individuals and their families to explore and develop significant membership in community places and within community organizations.

Independent Facilitation Organizations are committed to sharing ideas among families and exposing them to innovative practices and ideas from diverse places and organizations. They encourage dialogue between different government sectors so that best practices can be developed and obstacles can be addressed.

Safeguard 5: Building Capacity

Independent Facilitation is committed to building capacity among individuals and families.

VALUED SOCIAL ROLES:

Independent Facilitators can help families better understand the impact of supporting adults to have valued social roles in the community and how that can happen. They assist individuals to have a better sense of self and personal identity as they begin to explore work, leisure, and community roles.

CAPACITY FOR MANAGING SUPPORT WORKERS:

Independent Facilitators are able to strengthen the individual's and family's capacity for hiring, training and managing support workers for direct funding arrangements. This acts as a tremendous support for ensuring individuals get the most from their one-on-one support workers.

Safeguard 6: Resilience

Independent Facilitation fosters resilience within families.

A leading premise of the work is to believe and be present to the resilience of families. Independent Facilitators set out to help families grow stronger by helping them identify their own capacity for coping and “doing the right thing” with and on behalf of their sons and daughters. Families are not used to having their strong points highlighted and built upon. They have grown accustomed to feeling judged and worn down by the “system”. Part of helping families build resilience is in acknowledging the steadfastness of the bonds between them and the ways in which they have uniquely faced challenges and adversity and successfully overcome them. As well, Independent Facilitators make an effort to reflect back to individuals and families what kinds of capacities they see that they are developing over time. Independent Facilitators help families figure out what it is that makes it easier for them to cope better on a day to day basis, and then supports them to strengthen that capacity. Knowing that there is someone who is listening to them and is supporting them to advocate and develop coping strategies goes a long way to building resilience.

Safeguard 7: Acknowledgement of Gifts

Independent Facilitation is committed to helping those surrounding the individual acknowledge their gifts and what they have to contribute to their communities.

Safeguard 8: Assistance Through Difficult Times

Independent Facilitation can assist individuals and families through difficult times and help to sort through conflicts.

Families are strengthened knowing that Independent Facilitators are able to respond quickly and stay with them and their family member every step of the way when they come into crisis by helping them to sort through the next steps so that they manage to keep their decision-making autonomy and remain as stable as possible. Families say that Independent Facilitators help to validate their families by really listening to their experiences and helping them to articulate the challenges they are facing. They also help by educating families and helping them navigate between the diverse services and supports that may be available to them.

WALKING ALONGSIDE:

Independent Facilitators play a role in walking alongside families in times of vulnerability and weakness when they feel stuck and unable to act. At these times, the Independent Facilitator role is to remain steadfast, listen deeply and help the family understand and acknowledge where they are at. They can also help them determine what kind of support would be most useful in gaining back the will to act.

NEUTRAL VOICE:

Independent Facilitators are skilled at facilitating safe conversations that are aimed at sorting through conflicts, big and small, in a way that honours the individual and the individual's vulnerabilities. They are able to bring a neutral voice and offer a process for gaining clarity to the conflict at hand.

Independent Facilitators are extremely helpful in supporting individuals and their families to avert crisis by identifying potential problems before they have a negative impact and to develop back up plans. Sometimes it is essential for Independent Facilitators to point out the implications of not taking action.

Safeguard 9: Documenting Plans, Reviewing Actions

Independent/Unencumbered Facilitation and Planning recognizes the importance of documenting plans and action steps and regularly reviewing and evaluating their usefulness.

A key role for Independent Facilitators is to ensure that there are reliable ways to capture planning conversations and track action steps so that they can be reviewed and revised over time. The focus is on putting together concrete, thoughtful plans for taking the next step and ensuring that they are aligned with the individual's vision for the future.

Independent Facilitators are acutely aware of the need to ensure that any planning process that they use is able to capture a moment in time and at the same time permits the exploration of possibilities that are wide open and far-reaching. The planning process engages others in thinking creatively about how the individual can take up their life in such a way as to maximize their dreams and minimize their risks. Tangible and honest safeguards are key to any planning document and therefore need to reflect both the individual's capacities and vulnerabilities.

Independent Facilitators help families develop legacy documents that lay out the details of providing care so that families can turn over responsibility to others if the need arises.