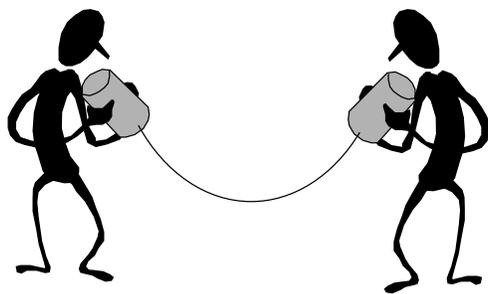


Vermont Developmental Services Communication Initiative



April 2005

**Vermont Communication Task Force
in collaboration with the
Division of Disability and Aging Services**

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Vermont Developmental Services Communication Initiative April 2005

The **Vermont Communication Task Force (VCTF)** was established in the spring of 2000 so that adults with developmental disabilities who live in Vermont can communicate more effectively to participate fully in community life, make decisions and better advocate for themselves. Members include people with experience, knowledge and interest in the areas of communication, literacy and assistive technology. Ongoing efforts of the Task Force provide information, education, training and resources to people with disabilities, family members, service providers and community members.

In the spring of 2003, the Vermont Division of Developmental Services, now called the Division of Disability and Aging Services (DDAS), developed a system-wide **Communication Initiative** with the goal to:

Increase opportunities and supports for individuals to improve their communication and increase awareness of the need for people to communicate beyond the basics and familiar.

A working **action plan** for the initiative was created in July 2003 with outcomes that address the communication issue from three different levels:

- **Individual Level** – Individual Support Agreements identify communication needs of individuals and those needs are addressed.
- **Agency Level** – Developmental service providers all have “in-house” resources to support people to communicate more effectively.
- **State Level** – Division of Disability and Aging Services provides resources, training and technical assistance to support people to communicate more effectively.

The Vermont Communication Task Force, providing a statewide focus on communication, has worked in partnership with the Division of Disability and Aging Services (DDAS), developmental services providers, Green Mountain Self-Advocates, communication and assistive technology specialists, and others to help realize the goals of the statewide communication initiative. The following pages highlight this collaboration to increase awareness and resources in response to the Communication Initiative. Special focus is given to the development and support of a network made up of local communication resource people from each developmental services agency.

Statewide Communication Network

- Held a statewide communication conference to kick-off the communication initiative in May 2003.
- Each agency designated one or more staff to be a local communication resource person at their agency.
- Four all-day training sessions were provided to local communication resource people.
- Technical assistance and training was provided by VCTF and state staff to local communication resource people and individual support teams.



Local Communication Resource People

Training

- The four training sessions (5/04, 10/04, 11/04, 3/05) used a train-the-trainer approach. Attendance by participants was consistent and extremely high, averaging 30 participants per training with representatives from most agencies.

- Training topics included:

- Augmentative and Alternative Communication (AAC)
- Role of the communication resource person
- Action planning
- Adapting activities
- Getting and keeping a conversation going
- Case discussion/problem solving
- Guest speakers who use AAC
- Vermont Assistive Technology Project
- Message passing/levels of communication/ partner skills
- Developing Individual Support Agreement outcomes and communication plans
- Learning vocabulary selection for an individual communication board
- Building a communication board using Boardmaker



- Training outcomes included:
 - To learn how you can better support people to communicate
 - To learn about what resources are available
 - To build confidence in what you may already know
 - To devise a plan for ongoing support and networking opportunities
 - To learn to adapt activities to expand communication opportunities
 - To learn strategies to help people develop conversational skills
 - To learn a process to create “better” boards by developing vocabulary that is needed for conversation/communication in a given activity
- Evaluations were completed for each training. The results were then used by the VCTF in designing each subsequent training. Feedback was generally *very* positive, with high ratings for the training being useful and helpful in one’s job.



Evaluation comments included:

- *I can take what I learned back to support people and help them with the people they support.*
- *Having a system of supports to establish relationship between agencies working toward a common goal.*
- *Hearing other people’s suggestions and experiences*
- *Going over practical AAC ideas. I was able to think of a variety of consumers who would benefit.*
- *Going over the [Individual Support Agreements (ISA)/communication piece was very helpful for my job.*
- *Seeing devices/low tech ideas; discussion around functional applications.*
- *I’ve found I have more confidence in helping teams with communication plans.*
- *Being able to experience setting up a communication board step by step.*
- *To be reminded why we are here and how important our work is in encouraging communication.*
- *Learning that time working with non-verbal person is worth the time in the long run.*

Resources

- Provided a comprehensive communication resource packet to each participant, including large 3-ring binder for keeping resource materials and handouts.
- Provided *Allow Me* workbook with specific activities incorporated into the training.
- Distributed an annotated bibliography of communication resources and other handouts and tools pertaining to the training.
- Distributed updated communication resource guide and funding guide.



System-wide Training and Support

- Periodic training and technical assistance was provided to service coordinators and teams (e.g., incorporating communication supports into ISAs, facilitated communication workshops).
- A full-day communication module was incorporated as part of the statewide service coordination training series.
- Communication training was provided to DDAS staff, including Public Guardians and Community Alternative Specialists (CAS).
- Community Alternative Specialists evaluated the efforts being undertaken by agencies to support people to communicate more effectively. CAS will provide technical assistance on incorporating communication supports into ISAs and offer guidance on the development of communication plans.



Other Accomplishments

- Reliable measures were developed to assess changes in a person's ability to communicate and incorporated into the consumer survey data collection process.
- A link was added onto the DDAS website that has communication resources and other related links.

Next Steps

- Organize a second statewide conference (11/2/05) on supporting people to communicate more effectively.
- Continue to provide technical assistance, training, materials and support to local communication resource people.
- Work with Green Mountain Self-Advocates to increase participation of people in self-advocacy activities who have limited communication.
- Work with agencies to provide incentives and supports to the local communication resource people and continue to build capacity for communication supports at each agency.
- Further incorporate communication training into agency training plans, including staff orientation and introductory, pre-service and in-service training.
- Continue to develop opportunities for home providers and other contracted workers to attend communication support training.
- Develop and increase DDAS staff knowledge and expertise in area of communication.
- Continue to collect and share personal stories (successes and frustrations) about people being supported and able to communicate.

