



*“TRUSTING OUR PROCESS”: ORGANIZATIONAL  
TRANSFORMATION IN THE CONTEXT OF  
A CULTURE OF INNOVATION  
THE ARC OF RENSSELAER COUNTY*

A Case Study in the Organizational Transformation Series  
from the Center on Human Policy

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**INTRODUCTION AND OVERVIEW**

From the time of its founding The Arc of Rensselaer County has had a primary orientation to supporting people to live in family and community settings. At the same time, over the years, they also developed some facility-based residential settings. Currently, the organization provides residential supports to 160 people. Of these, 94 (60%) live on their own or with one other person; the remaining 40% live in households comprised of 3-8 individuals.

Since the 1980s, the organization has been engaged in a synchronistic transformation toward person-centered supports and, more broadly, the development of an organizational culture of innovation. The transformation has been synchronistic in that it has occurred due to a combination of factors, some that were more circumstantial and some more intentional.

This report is part of a series on organizational transformation. It describes some of the strategies used to promote change by The Arc of Rensselaer County. It is based on a site visit in March 2010 in which interviews were conducted with people supported by The Arc of Rensselaer County, family members, and agency staff and administrators. The report is based on the organization at that point in time. All names used in the report are pseudonyms.

**Setting the Stage: “A Percolating Culture of Innovation”**

The Arc was established in New York State in 1949, and in 1950 a group of parents formed the Capital District Arc, a three-county organization. The Arc of Rensselaer County grew out of the Capital District Arc. Initially, The Arc of Rensselaer County focused on

community-based supports for individuals and families. However, by the 1970s, as New York State began to pursue deinstitutionalization, pressure was placed on private providers to serve people coming out of institutions. This was a struggle for The Arc, as it resulted in the development of facility-based services. Even in the midst of this, though, with the influence of key parents and a key state administrator who favored community services over facility-based services, their mindset was on restricting the number of facilities and restricting the size of them. Within this context, three major factors set the stage for innovation within the organization:

Board retreat/decision: A key event that spurred innovation was a Board retreat in the early 1980s. At that time, existing service settings were filled, and the agency needed to make a critical decision about the future development of services. A decision was made that the organization would not create ICF/MR settings, and would focus on smaller-scale settings. Over the years since that time, this has meant a focus both on creating new services that are person-centered, and working to reduce the number of people in facility-based services and reduce the size of the existing facility-based services.

Exposure to national thinkers and innovators. Since the 1980s, the organization has emphasized learning from national thinkers and innovators, with respect to both service design and organizational development as a whole (discussed further below). This ongoing exposure to national innovators has inspired the development of new, creative approaches and the questioning of older traditional approaches. It has been instrumental with assistance in creating alternatives to facility-based residential services, in closing and downsizing group homes, and in developing alternatives to facility-based work and day services.

Focus on organizational development. In addition to a focus on change in service design, there has been an intentional effort placed on organizational development, and in particular, the development of a culture of innovation. This has been accomplished through emphasis on an organizational commitment to core values, the infusion of ideas, cultivating creativity, staff engagement, leadership development, and collaborative teamwork (see further discussion beginning on p. 12).

This foundation has set the stage for significant organizational evolution. Some of the specific opportunities for innovation are described in the following section.

#### Opportunities for Innovation

Over the years, staff at The Arc of Rensselaer County have created and taken advantage of multiple opportunities for innovation across many different types of services and supports. Some of these are described below.

Developing individualized residential supports. As noted in the introduction, from the outset, The Arc of Rensselaer County has attempted to create community supports tailored to the needs of individuals and families. Following a time period in which they developed some facility-based settings, they have recommitted in a variety of ways to the development of individualized supports. This began with the board's commitment to focus on smaller settings. In the 1990s, this evolved into a commitment to not create any new settings with more than three individuals, and to ensure that each person had their own bedroom. This occurred at a time when most providers in New York were developing residential settings for four or more individuals, and when some providers were operating residential settings with as many as three people in a bedroom. Since the early 2000s, this has evolved into a

commitment to develop new services based on individualized, person-centered planning processes.

They approach the design of individualized supports in varying ways. Nine individuals are supported through funding streams specifically designed for self-direction (CSS and the Portal, in New York State); however, since this type of funding is limited, most of those for whom The Arc of Rensselaer County has designed individualized supports are funded through traditional Medicaid waiver IRA (Individualized Residential Alternative) funding. The organization uses person-centered processes to design unique arrangements to assist people to live in their own or shared places, with a combination of paid and unpaid support from agency staff, families, and community members. A few examples are provided below.

Dennis.<sup>1</sup> In the past, Dennis lived in an institution and then a group home. He had difficulties living with other people, sometimes leading to aggressive behavior, so it was critically important for him to have his own space. Staff at The Arc of Rensselaer County assisted Dennis to find his own apartment in downtown Troy, where he has lived for 10 years. At first, he received only drop in support, for a few hours a day. However, as he has grown older and his health requires more monitoring, the organization felt it would be wise to put extra support in place. In a situation like this, they sometimes use a “paid neighbor” approach. Dave lives in the apartment upstairs from Dennis. His regular job is as a manager for one of The Arc group homes. Then, for 8 hours of overtime work per month, he is an “extra set of hands and eyes” for Dennis. He drops in to see him in the morning and evening, and when needed checks his blood sugar. Dennis spends a lot of time outside around his

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<sup>1</sup>All names used in this report are pseudonyms.

neighborhood collecting bottles and cans and doing odd jobs for people. He is interested in motorcycles, and through his wanderings in the neighborhood has gotten to know some individuals who own motorcycles as well as people at the local motorcycle shop. As a staff member described, “Everybody in his neighborhood knows him, and lots of people look out for him. They call us if they have a concern.” With support from the agency, Dennis also volunteers at a local food pantry.

Ted. In the past, Ted lived in an institution; then his sister helped him get his own apartment. He lived downtown for a few years, but then realized he wanted to be in a quieter location, with easier access to some of his favorite hiking trails. In this new apartment, Ted was set up with a primary support person to assist him 5-10 hours per week. This person helps him with things such as shopping, cleaning, banking, cooking, and his medications. To supplement this support, Julie, who works as a manager for The Arc, moved into an apartment in a neighboring building within the same complex. She and Ted knew one another, as she had provided support to him in his first apartment. Julie is paid 9 hours per month for her support of Ted. Additionally, the agency contributes \$600 per month toward her rent. She is available overnight if he needs anything. Additionally, on weekends, they often go hiking, camping, or spend time with Julie’s family. Julie characterizes their relationship as “more like friends, than a work relationship,” and the time she spends with Ted often far exceeds the hours she is paid to provide support. This is not out of necessity, but because they share common interests in the outdoors and enjoy spending time together. Through The Arc’s Community Inclusion Project, Ted takes part in other social events and gatherings, and he works about an hour a day at a local garage. Overall, Julie’s support adds

significantly to the quality of Ted's life as well as to the safety net that surrounds him in the community.

Matt. In 2002, Steve was working in the group home where Matt lived. The manager told Steve that Matt seldom got away from the group home for any length of time, and she suggested that Steve take him home for the day. As Steve recalled, "It was an eye opener getting Matt out of the group setting. I had work to do, mowing the lawn, using a power washer. Without me asking, he's helping me lift this heavy thing into the car. He was helping me do everything. " Since that day, even though Steve moved to a job in another group home, their relationship has progressed and they have spent a significant amount of time together. They regularly go to church, spend time at Steve's home, and have traveled to New York City and taken a cruise together. As Steve described the relationship: "We enjoy each other's company." In the Spring of 2010 they moved into a house that is rented by Matt. Each has a separate living space, Matt on the second floor and Steve on the first, but they will share a substantial amount of time together, including most meals, chores, leisure activities, and more travel. Steve is paid for 40 hours of work per week, and his rent is covered. From Steve's perspective, this is much more than "a job"; the arrangement was created based on his and Matt's relationship with each other. Steve thinks of this as entering into a "partnership" with Matt, where they will be "like family" to each other. Matt's budget includes some funding for extra support staff as needed, to supplement the support that Steve will provide.

Phil. Phil described his quest to live in a home of his own: "I've been trying to get my own place for some time. It took a massive amount of years." Phil uses a motorized

wheelchair, and requires a significant degree of support. In the past, Phil lived in a developmental center, and then a group home. He then moved into consumer-directed services through another agency. However, this situation was difficult for him in a number of respects. He was living in a place that was not fully accessible, and he also was living with a roommate because he had been told that was necessary. Also, it was complicated, as he was dealing with three different agencies, one for staffing, one for service coordination, and one for support brokerage. He now receives staffing assistance, service coordination, and brokerage through The Arc of Rensselaer County. For Phil, this works better than having to deal with three different organizations. He has his own apartment, and hires his own support staff, who provide 70 hours per week of assistance during the day time. At night, he has a paid neighbor available in case he needs assistance. Phil chose this location because he has a few friends who live here and they enjoy frequent visits with each other. He is currently looking for work.

James and Mark. James and Mark are brothers, 33 and 37 years old, who share the house where they grew up. James and Mark both have significant disabilities, and their parents have been connected to The Arc of Rensselaer County since they were children. When they were in their 20s, their parents began looking at different residential options. They visited a group home, and determined that this would not be a suitable option for their sons. The agency assisted them with personal futures planning. As their mother recalled: “The mapping was great. It was creative and wonderful. When they asked, what would you ideally want—it occurred to me, I’d want the two of them to live together, in their community.” Based on this planning, James’ and Mark’s parents thought of creating an

addition to their house so that James and Mark could have their own space within the house. As Alice reflected about this decision: “In my mind, it was very easy and very logical. In the state’s mind it wasn’t quite so easy or logical. So we had to do a lot of advocacy and a lot of teaching.” Bob and Alice had many meetings with state officials, who were particularly concerned about the public’s perception that Bob and Alice might profit from the expansion of their home by selling it. It was finally agreed that Bob and Alice would pay for the addition, and then The Arc would have a 30-year lease on the addition, with a substantial financial penalty for ending the lease early. Alice recalled that The Arc was very supportive as they went through all the negotiations for this arrangement.

Over the 12 years since their home was renovated, much has been learned by the family and agency about what works best in terms of supports, and they have made adjustments accordingly (e.g., to staff schedules, etc.). Also, initially James and Mark went to a day habilitation facility, but it was not very satisfactory to them or their parents. So The Arc moved their day services funding from the facility to their residential program, and the two receive flexible, individually tailored day supports, which includes volunteering in the community, recreation, and more. The family has a large social circle within the community, and because James and Mark have been able to stay within this community, they are able to participate in community activities and gatherings surrounded by people who know them. Additionally, with staff support, they are able to travel to family weddings, reunions, camping trips, and other events.

Alice reflected that her relationship with The Arc has been “very positive. “ Further, she commented that over the years she has seen the organization evolve and that a strength

of the organization is that “they have always been progressive; they don’t get stuck; they are willing to try new and different things.”

Closing group homes, moving people out of group homes, and decoupling resources.

Since the 1990s, The Arc has been making efforts to move people out of group homes. In 2001, they focused on closing a 10-person group home, in which “nobody liked each other.” With funding from the New York State Developmental Disabilities Council, they hired a consultant to assist with person-centered planning. The process took about a year, and was facilitated by the fact that The Arc rented the group home rather than owning it. Everyone moved to a place of their own or a shared home. One of these people was Beth, who moved into her own apartment with a paid neighbor in an upstairs apartment. This neighbor is a nurse who works for The Arc and who has known Beth for a number of years. While in the group home, Beth was admitted to the mental health unit of the local hospital several times per year. Following her move, these admissions have ceased.

In addition to this focused group home closure, The Arc continually looks to assist individuals to move out of group homes. Altogether, since 2001 they have assisted 20 individuals (in addition to the 10 who moved from the one group home) to move from group living to individualized supports, and this is an ongoing effort. When people move out of a group home, the agency may continue to operate the group home, but with fewer individuals, rather than simply “filling empty beds.” For example, Tracy lived in a 7-person home. That home now has 5 people. Tracy moved into her own apartment, and also has a paid neighbor, who is paid to provide approximately 30 hours per week of support. She has been on psychotropic medications for decades, but within 6 months following her move, her

medications were cut by 70%. Additionally, over time in the community, she is less reliant on her paid neighbor, and it is likely that her level of paid support will be reduced in the near future.

As they have created individualized settings, they sometimes established shared support resources across different individuals. Recently, they have come to recognize the importance of attempting to provide an individualized set of supports to each person. An administrator reflected:

I think when we were breaking people out of congregate settings, we missed the boat a bit, by setting up shared staffing. Individualized staffing, when possible, creates a more personalized support situation. Further, if a person leaves the agency, this then provides a free-standing bucket of money for someone new. We don't have to say to them, we have an apartment at 107<sup>th</sup> St. The more we can decouple, the more we can have that conversation with people.

Work and day services. Beginning in the 1980s, The Arc of Rensselaer County began a shift away from facility-based employment and day services. Since that time, the number of people in the workshop has decreased from 140 to 65; 85 people are supported through individualized supported employment. An administrator reflected: "At first we did some enclaves, but they didn't work." The Arc was one of the first organizations in the state to begin developing community-based day habilitation opportunities, or the Community Inclusion Project, as it is now called. Teams of staff assist individuals to become engaged in individualized activities in the community; 55 people are currently supported through this project. In 2006, the organization began blending employment and day habilitation funding.

This helps in supporting individuals with significant needs in the community; people can combine volunteer activities with paid employment, and benefit from the higher funding levels for day habilitation as opposed to supported employment.

School to community transition and postsecondary education. Since the early 1990s, The Arc has developed increased capacity to support individuals in the transition from school to employment. Beginning in 10<sup>th</sup> grade, high school students are given an opportunity to start with job shadowing; participate in internships during their junior year; and experience summer employment after their senior year. This has been facilitated by strong partnerships that the organization has developed with VESID, with the Rensselaer County Workforce Investment Area (the one-stop center), and with other school districts (e.g., to share staff). The Arc applied for and received a grant from Wal-Mart that will support intensive person-centered planning for students during these transition years. Finally, The Arc has established a partnership with Hudson Valley Community College, and 35 individuals now are enrolled in classes there.

Community connections. Supporting community connections, on the individual and organizational level, has always been an integral aspect of the efforts of The Arc of Rensselaer County. Through the Community Inclusion Project, they assist people to establish community connections based on their interest through volunteer jobs, associations, churches, recreational groups, community education, and other types of involvement. For example, in the area of art, over the years many connections have been made with local and regional artists and art organizations. The Art Project goals are “to introduce CIP participants to various forms of art for the purpose of community inclusion, self-expression, potential career development, mentorship/internship opportunities, small business education and developing

arts related to self-employment.” Additionally, as an organization, they have established a “Build It Forward” initiative, in which they partner with neighborhood and civic associations to engage in selected activities and projects. Numerous staff and people who receive support from the organization participate in this initiative. For example, in the summer of 2009, they collaborated with neighborhood and community members on the Alley Action Project, to clean some of the city’s alley ways and paint murals.

Hands Off Committee. In 2008, the organization formed an ad hoc committee, that is now a standing committee, to examine behavioral support issues. They used a national consultant, and looked at the data they had about when they were using a “hands on” approach to behavioral intervention. Data revealed that 4-5 individuals accounted for 95% of the use of PRN psychotropic medications. Committee members have conducted “deep dives” around these individuals, and others when the need arises, spending in-depth time learning what works for each person in the way of “hands off,” positive approaches. Additionally, committee members have looked agency-wide at promoting positive language and perceptions of people. Overall, one administrator reflected that “this committee has had a profound impact, and that the use of SKIP borders on zero and the use of PRN for behavior control has declined precipitously.”

End of life issues. In the early 2000s, staff at the organization realized that a significant proportion of the people they supported were elderly. They recognized that if they increased their capacity to provide end-of-life supports many of these individuals could remain in their homes and avoid institutionalization. This effort has encompassed a number of steps. First, they requested an increase in their operating budget from the state; until this

point, their operating budget had been among the lowest of Arcs in the state. They utilized some of this increase to add clinical staff who could assist in end-of-life care issues. They have been cautious to do this in such a way that the clinical aspects do not dominate the team decision-making and do not create a “medical model” service. In order to facilitate this work, they have formed a “wonderful partnership” with hospice. They have assisted direct support staff to learn various medical procedures (e.g., feeding tubes, injections). Finally, they have established a partnership with a senior housing complex, where 24-hour supports are available. Eight individuals from The Arc of Rensselaer County reside in four apartments at this complex. An administrator reflected: “We have learned a lot from this work. It has boosted our spirits in terms of our commitment to person-centered work and helping people die at home.” They acknowledge that some of the energy put into this has perhaps been a diversion from helping other individuals move out of congregate settings. At the same time, this work has prevented the institutionalization of a number of individuals over the past several years. For instance, Jean had lived in a group home for many years. At the end of her life, she developed dementia, became nonverbal, and required a feeding tube and multiple medications. Staff knew that she especially loved Christmas, so in the last year of her life, they decorated her room with Christmas decorations, and played Christmas music for her. She was able to die in her home, cared for by people who knew her well, and surrounded by people and things that were most special to her.

### **Lessons: Key Components of the Organizational Culture of Innovation**

Over the years, staff at The Arc have recognized that organizational change is not just about service transformation, but about transformation of the broader organizational culture.

To this end, they have worked to develop a culture of innovation that is the foundation for service transformation. Some of the key components of this culture of innovation include the following:

Values. Historically, the work of the organization has been strongly embedded in values of integration, normalization, and community inclusion. They have designed their services based on these values and evaluated their work based on these values, leading to the affirmation of certain practices and questioning and challenging of others over the years. According to an administrator, it has been important that they have had “a persistence about who we are” over the years, and that they have focused on “being on the path of the person.”

Infusion of ideas. The “infusion of ideas” has been critical to the culture of innovation within the organization. Since the 1980s, the organization has sought advice, input, and consultation from national innovators. This has been instrumental in helping to shape the development and evolution of individualized supports. Additionally, the organization seeks other ways to discuss and infuse ideas, such as staff participation in conferences, workshops and retreats, as well as a book club where staff read books and discuss ideas about organizational innovation, community membership, and more.

Cultivating creativity. The organization invests significant time and resources in the cultivation of creativity in the planning and design of person-centered supports. For instance, there is an administrative position titled the Director of Innovation; this individual facilitates agency adoption of new approaches, for example, self-directed services. Additionally, there is a “cadre of staff” trained in the graphic planning techniques of MAPS and PATH. A key to

their creativity is that they do not begin planning based on the financial issues: “We don’t start by asking the money questions, we start with the planning around the person and then say, can we figure this out financially.” As second aspect of creativity is their creativity with finances:

We’re using the same funding, governed by the same regulations as everyone else in the state. Here’s how it works. First, we have a wizard and a co-wizard who can go into this big bucket of money we have, and scrape it, and they take a little from here and a little from here, and they come back and say, here’s how we’re going to do it, so it’s just a big bucket of money.

Staff engagement. The Arc emphasizes the necessity of going beyond staff training, to foster staff engagement, even when, as is the case with The Arc, that training is values based and promotes inclusion and quality lives. This occurs in multiple ways. For instance, there is an intentional promotion of open exchange and conversation among staff. From the perspective of the director, this engagement in conversation is one of the keys to organizational evolution. The organization seeks staff involvement and input in strategic planning. And, in relation to overall strategic planning, they have adopted a “management by objective” approach that aims to generate conversations and agreements related to the organization’s strategic plan. Finally, but perhaps foremost, the organization seeks ways to engage staff in the lives of individuals who are supported by the organization. This may occur as part of “work” or as a part of regular life.

Leadership development. In order to enhance staff training, The Arc offers staff the opportunity to use the College of Direct Support, a national on-line training program. Staff are

given 60 days to complete the courses, and are recognized with a small stipend and a graduation ceremony. Also, the organization has developed an Accelerated Leadership program. They select 3-4 people per year to participate in this program. Each person is matched with a mentor, and completes a set of readings, interviews with various people in different positions, and other leadership development exercises. Each person is given \$1,000 upon completion of the program.

Collaborative team work. At The Arc of Rensselaer County, there is an emphasis on team work, and staff feel positive about the internal partnerships that have developed between the staff in the office and staff doing direct support. As one administrator reflected: “Team work, and trust in our process, is a cornerstone of our creativity. “We have confidence in our skill sets and our creativity and in the process; and because we know all those things, we don’t have to know the concrete numerical answers, or licensing answers or HR answers, because we trust our process, our skills, our resources, our collegial process.”

## CONCLUSION

From the perspective of administrators at Arc of Rensselaer County, organizational change is synchronistic. As the director put it, “you can’t develop a blueprint, can be achieved by training and dictum.” They emphasize that organizational change requires a focus on transformation of the organizational culture to incorporate a culture of innovation. This then provides a foundation for the evolution of the organization toward individualized, person-centered supports.