



*STRATEGIES FOR IMPLEMENTING CONSUMER  
DIRECTED SERVICES: AN ORGANIZATIONAL  
CULTURE OF CHANGE AND INNOVATION AT  
GATEWAYS COMMUNITY SERVICES*

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

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April, 2012

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The preparation of this report was supported through a subcontract with the Research and Training Center on Community Living and Employment, University of Minnesota, supported by the U.S. Department of Education, Office of Special Education and Rehabilitative Services, National Institute on Disability and Rehabilitation Research (NIDRR), through Contract No. H133B080005. Members of the Center are encouraged to express their opinions; however, these do not necessarily represent the official position of NIDRR and no endorsement should be inferred.

Appreciation is expressed to Dotty Treisner, Sandy Pelletier, Peter Van Voorhis, and Rachael Zubal-Ruggieri for assistance in arrangements for the site visit and in the preparation of this report. Additionally, appreciation is expressed to all who shared information and experiences with me that contributed to this report.

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**Background and Context**

Gateways was established in 1981 in the greater Nashua region of New Hampshire, as Region VI. It is one of 10 regional agencies throughout the state that contract with the state to coordinate, implement, and deliver services. Gateways supports approximately 160 adults and 70 children with developmental disabilities and their families with consumer directed services that enable them to live with their families, with friends, or on their own in the community. Additionally, Gateways provides a wide variety of other services for people with developmental disability labels including: intake and eligibility, early supports and services, family support, and service coordination. In 2002, Gateways began offering consumer directed services to elderly people, and they currently serve 160 people statewide. Gateways also operates a Partners in Health program that offers support and resources to families of children with chronic health conditions (e.g., asthma, blindness, diabetes, muscular dystrophy, cancer, etc.) from birth to age 21.

Since its inception, Gateways has focused primarily on providing individualized supports to assist children and adults to remain at home in the community. At the same time, throughout the 1980s, they also developed some facility-based services, such as group homes and sheltered workshops. During the 1990s, efforts were made to reduce the size of these congregate services, and to develop more personalized supports. In the late 1990s, Gateways completed a merger with the PLUS Company, creating a subsidiary relationship. The PLUS

company operated the remaining traditional services, so that Gateways could focus on the consumer directed supports. The PLUS Company is also shifting its emphasis away from facility-based services toward individualized supports in the community. While Gateways and the PLUS Company have distinct identities, they also share some back room operations. For example, the CFO (Chief Financial Officer) for both organizations is the same person, and all of the billing and payments for both companies are processed by the same work group. Additionally, Gateways has created innovative employment initiatives through its LinkAbilities program. This is “a nonprofit resource which expands the work force by connecting employers, job seekers with disabilities, and support services.” Finally, Gateways has established the Center for Excellence in order to assist other organizations in the state to develop consumer directed services.

This report is based on a site visit to Gateways in March 2010. It describes some of the circumstances and strategies that contributed to and facilitated the organizational evolution. It is part of a series of reports on organizational change toward individualized supports.

### Foundations for Change

A number of factors influenced the development and evolution of consumer directed services at Gateways. For one, the state context has been instrumental in promoting individualized, consumer directed supports. New Hampshire has been a national leader in the move away from facility-based services to community supports. An administrator at Gateways reflected on the impact of the closure of Laconia, the state institution: “For some of us, we were there when we closed it, and it energized us as a system to believe we could do

anything, we could take risks, we didn't have to move in increments." Additionally, the state has been a leader in provision of opportunities for self-directed supports and self-determination. Second, the organization's grounding in the principle and values of normalization/social role valorization has prompted ongoing examination and transformation of services. Additionally, the agency's board has been a key influence on change. As one administrator put it, "We have a strong board who constantly challenge us to look at things, even if they seem to be working okay." Finally, over the years the organization has made significant effort to listen to and respond to the needs and desires of families and individuals with disabilities. Based on this, they have been prompted to redesign services and refocus priorities. As one administrator remarked: "Parents and self-advocates are really the major driving force." All of these factors together contribute to an organizational culture of change and innovation that promotes ongoing examination and evolution of the organization and the services they provide.

### Consumer Directed Services at Gateways

In 1997, the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation initiated a project to promote self-determination (e.g., including individual budgets and consumer control) within services for individuals with developmental disabilities and their families. This project first focused on implementing self-determination within the southwest region of New Hampshire, and it was then implemented to varying degrees in other regions throughout the state, as well as in more than 18 states nationwide. Based upon their organizational culture, when conversations about self-determination began in the state, Gateways began to explore the incorporation of consumer directed services. Key to this has been making the time and effort to infuse

consumer direction throughout their organization. As one administrator stated: “We have taken it and operationalized it; others may talk about it, or use it as an orientation, but we have continued to look at what it means operationally.” This is an ongoing process, as they continually refine and re-examine what they do and how they do it.

Gateways views traditional services as a “restaurant” type of approach, in which the agency or vendor creates the menu, and the consumer or family selects from the menu. In contrast, they view consumer directed services as a “supermarket” approach, in which the consumer or family decide on the recipe and purchase the “ingredients.” The guiding principles they utilize include: choice, control, cost effective decision making in purchases of supports and services, quality, community-based services, and independence.

Consumer directed services entail a substantial shift in control from the agency to families or individuals. In order to effectively implement consumer directed services, Gateways emphasizes the need for close and trusting partnerships between the organization and families. The family or individual manages the budget, structures the routine, recruits and supervises workers, and authorizes payments. Based on an “agency with choice” model, Gateways is the employer of record, and manages the payroll, worker’s compensation, and employer taxes. Additionally, Gateways provides health benefits to workers, pays authorized expenses, bills Medicaid, and oversees state certification. Since Gateways is the employer of record, they have final say on hiring and other employee actions. However, as emphasized previously, this is done within the context of close and open relationships with individuals and families.

To assist families with service planning and coordination, Gateways has three Customer Services Agents. The primary role of the Customer Services Agents is to assist families with annual planning and to serve as a resource for information and referral. As an alternative, families can choose to independently contract for additional service coordination. In addition to the Customer Services Agents, Gateways created a Claims Agent position. This person maintains budgets and streamlines payment requests.

Carla.<sup>1</sup> Carla is 40 years old and lives with her mother, Helen, in a small town in New Hampshire; they live with Carla's sister and her family. Carla does not communicate verbally, but can easily make her feelings and preferences known to others, particularly those who know her well. Since 1987, Carla and Helen have received support from Gateways. At first, Helen chose a provider agency for daytime support. To supplement this, Helen hired someone privately. In 1998, Gateways offered them the opportunity for consumer direction. Through this, they have continued to pay a vendor to provide some daytime support. In addition, they pay a community member to provide additional support. Over the years, they have been able to adjust their individual budget and the way it is used. For example, with a change in workers, they have adjusted the hours and pay; also, after Helen retired, she began receiving pay for 4 hours per week of support for Carla. With support, Carla has multiple, diverse involvements in her community. She works at a small café one day a week. She regularly volunteers at Meals on Wheels and at an animal shelter, goes horseback riding, and attends Zumba classes. From Helen's perspective, it is critically important to have Carla live at home, where she is surrounded by her family and community members who know her well.

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

Additionally, Helen appreciates being able to “recruit workers that fit our values.” Finally, she appreciates the fact that the consumer directed program has been flexible, with the ability to change as circumstances in their life have changed.

Tory. Tory acquired her disability as an adult due to a brain aneurysm. She had been living in Virginia, but moved to a rehabilitation facility in New Hampshire to be closer to her family in the Nashua area. Tory’s family wanted to assist her to move out of the facility, so someone at the facility suggested they contact Gateways. Gateways assisted Tory to move into her sister Marcie’s home. Tory has a large family, including four children of her own, and seven siblings. Living with Marcie situates her in the midst of this large family network.

Gateways assisted with making the arrangements for Tory to move, including making adaptations to the house. Additionally, they helped Tory and Marcie hire support staff. There are three people who each work 35 hours per week. One of these people is another one of Tory’s sisters, and another is a young woman who has been a friend of the family for several years. After Tory first moved home, she attended a facility-based day program, but she was not happy there, so the support workers do community activities with Tory instead such as cooking, go to the YMCA, doing volunteer work, and the like. Marcie reflected: “At first when she came home, it was kind of overwhelming, having all the people in the house, and dealing with everything. But, Gateways has been very helpful in helping set everything up. Gateways is like a net when you’re on the trapeze.” Further, she commented: “Having her at home, instead of a group home, is wonderful. There is no way she would have made the progress she has made, and we all love her to death.” Tory also deeply appreciates being home. As

she put it: “What’s better than being home; I get up when I want, I eat when I want; I have lots of control of my life now.”

Within the context of consumer directed services, Gateways administrators and staff are continually launching new initiatives. A few of these are described briefly below:

- [My Gateways Internet portal](#). My Gateways is a newly developed Internet based portal for people who receive services from Gateways. It is designed to give people “improved access to their accounts, easier access to customer services, more awareness of important dates and events, and a more efficient way to process requests and forms. This will give people access to their annual and monthly budget statements. They will also be able to electronically submit budget changes.”
- [LinkAbilities](#). Staff at Gateways recognized that employment was a gap for many people they supported, so they initiated LinkAbilities. This is a project to work with community partners to: develop joint ventures between private and public partners to encourage the advancement of the regional work force; encourage consumer empowerment; and conduct outreach to people with disabilities to enhance their professional lives through training based on industry standards. In particular, there is a focus on transition for youth from school to work, and on assisting people to establish small businesses.
- [Transitions in Caregiving](#). After developing consumer directed services for people with developmental disabilities, it became clear to staff at Gateways that this approach would also benefit people who are elderly. Thus, they began the

Transitions in Caregiving program. It is a statewide program funded by the Federal Administration of Aging to support caregivers of frail or elderly people who need assistance in daily living. After eligibility is determined, an individualized plan is developed by a local case manager. The caregiver can hire staff or purchase other needed supports. Gateways is the fiscal manager and employer of record, which means that Gateways hires the staff for the caregiver and pays the authorized bills. (Gateways Newsletter, Winter 2011).

- [Center for Excellence in Consumer Directed Services](#). In recent years, a growing number of organizations around the state are working to implement consumer directed services and are seeking advice and assistance with this. Thus, Gateways established the Center for Excellence in Consumer Directed Services. The Center provides consulting services to agencies to cost-effectively implement consumer directed services.

### **Strategies for Operationalizing Self-Determination**

The organizational culture at Gateways that promotes change and innovation has been critical to the implementation of consumer directed services. Within this context, there are numerous specific strategies that have been key in this transformation. These are summarized below:

- [Starting small](#). By starting to implement consumer directed services with 10 people, staff in the organization could learn from this experience about what needed to change in the organization in order to implement CDS on a larger scale.

- [Ongoing meetings to review organizational procedures.](#) In order to fully operationalize consumer direction, it was critical to have ongoing weekly meetings that included those with decision-making authority. These meetings involved review and revision of all organizational procedures, and associated paperwork, to ensure a fit with the organizational shift to consumer control.
- [Emphasis on working in partnership with families.](#) In order to develop effective consumer directed services, Gateways staff recognized that they would need to shift and strengthen their relationship with families and place an emphasis on working in partnership with families. This has entailed building honest, trusting relationships. It has involved open and sometimes difficult conversations with families about budgets and costs of services. For example, an administrator explained, “A family might see what we bill for case management services, and they might think, I don’t get that much CM, so I have to remind them, this is a congregate cost.” A key aspect of partnership with families, and what really seems to make consumer directed services work for families, is that Gateways is the employer of record. As an administrator explained: “They don’t have to do all the work themselves, the payroll, the quarterly reports, tax forms, things like that. People want to be involved. They get to choose the employee and manage that person, but they don’t have all the overwhelming paperwork stuff to do.” Finally, as the employer of record, Gateways has liability related to the people who are hired by individuals and families. Thus, while families have significant choice related to this, there are rare occasions when, as a Gateways administrator put it,

“You have to be able to say, I don’t think this is going to work.” It is important, however, that this is done within the context of an open, trusting relationship with families.

- [New staff roles](#). The organizational shift has necessitated a shift in staff roles and hiring different types of people for these roles. For example, while traditional service coordinators were regarded as “being in control” and as “caregivers,” today the role of service coordinators is to empower families and individuals and “walk alongside of them.” The organization has devoted significant time and energy to “bringing everyone on board.” As one administrator put it: “This requires continual conversation with your staff.”
- [Education and training for all stakeholders](#). The director of Gateways reflected that, “Systems change requires a lot of education.” Significant time and resources have been devoted to education of diverse stakeholders. Gateways contracts with the Institute of Professional Practice at the University of New Hampshire as a training resource. One administrator reflected: “We had some terrific training for the board and staff; our trainer created wonderful visuals, for example conceptualizing the idea of consumer directed services as similar to a grocery store in comparison to traditional services being similar to a restaurant, that helped people understand the difference that consumer directed services would make.” Ongoing training is provided to service coordinators and to families on a wide array of topics including: mapping, organizing information, and so forth. The organization has put some effort into educating consumers about directing their

own supports; it is their intention to put more emphasis on this type of training in the future.

- [Use of new technology.](#) Gateways staff have explored diverse uses of new technology in their work. For example, they have developed some web-based training for families; they created the Nashua Autism Network, which entails possibilities for families to connect with each other via the Internet; and, as described above, they have developed “My Gateways,” an Internet portal giving people on-line access to their accounts and other information. Their use of technology has been facilitated by the availability of staff with knowledge in this area and time to devote to this.
- [Promote cost efficiency and flexibility.](#) As part of the organizational shift to consumer directed services, it was critical for the organization to examine cost efficiencies. For example, they realized that everyone does not automatically need a service coordinator on an ongoing basis; rather, they can contract for this service if and when it is needed. An example of cost flexibility is shifting funds from employment/day services to residential services, so that people who are elderly can retire.

### **Impact of the Organizational Shift to Consumer Directed Services**

The organizational shift toward consumer direction has resulted in significant change within the organization and beyond. Within the organization, consumer directed services is the orientation of first resort, rather than fitting people into available programs. If people do not want this, Gateways will connect them with providers of more traditional services.

Second, Gateways has become more of a provider organization, as they found that, in order to

best implement consumer directed services, it has been more effective to do it themselves rather than spend time trying to convince other provider organizations to do so.

According to staff and administrators at Gateways, consumer surveys reveal a high degree of satisfaction with and less complaint about consumer directed services . Satisfaction is measured monthly with an overall rate of 98%. Once in consumer directed services, no one wants to leave. Anecdotally, there has been a reduction of need for behavioral and psychotropic interventions in people’s lives.

The organization has found that consumer directed services are more cost effective than traditional services, such as group homes. One administrator commented: “Group homes lose a lot of money, and there is a high rate of staff turnover.” Additionally, in comparison with other regions in the state, Gateways provides consumer directed services in a very cost-effective manner. Within one of the most expensive regions in the state, Gateways’ average cost of services is lower than other regions, and they serve more people off the waiting list than any other region with the money allocated to them.

Staff at Gateways have learned many lessons from the experience of developing consumer directed services. Perhaps most importantly, they have learned to avoid preconceived ideas of what families need. And, they have learned that the key aspect to effective services is working in partnership with families, within a trusting, honest relationship. Additionally, through their experience of providing consumer directed services to people with disabilities, organizational staff realized that this type of support would be very beneficial to many elderly people. By observing decision making of elders, they recognized the importance of making increased efforts to involve people with disabilities in decision making related to

their services. Second, in services for elderly, they must make dollars “go a long way.” This has given them some insights into increasing cost-efficiencies in services for people with disabilities.

Finally, the development of consumer directed services at Gateways has revealed the need for further development of consumer directed services statewide for people with disabilities as well as for seniors. It has promoted change in other organizations, as more families and individuals request this type of services. In order to help foster this change throughout the state, Gateways has worked to help offer services statewide (to people with disabilities and elderly people) and to help other organizations develop increased capacity for providing these services.

### Challenges with the Organizational Shift to Consumer Directed Services

At the organizational level, one of the challenges is balancing between creating new services and conversion of some of the traditional services. Gateways has directed significant attention to development of new consumer directed services, and they have worked on closure and decreasing the size of group homes in the region. At the same time, they recognize that there is more work to be done in their region on transformation of some of the traditional services. Second, Gateways has focused primarily on supporting family life, and not as much on supporting adults to live on their own in the community with consumer directed services. Again, they recognize that there is more work to be done in this regard.

At the state level, funding has previously favored the traditional system of services. Thus, some organizations are still hesitant to move toward consumer directed services, as there is more financial risk. Administrators at Gateways have been engaged in dialog with the

state regarding ways to shift spending methodologies and incentivize the provision of consumer directed services.

### Conclusion

In focusing on consumer directed services, Gateways has found that, “while some people do not want consumer directed services, most people do.” However, they have found that consumer-directed services must be workable for families and individuals. Key to this has been the open and honest relationships and partnerships they have forged and, in particular, the fact that Gateways serves as the employer of record.

Critical to their organizational change toward consumer directed services is their organizational culture of change and innovation, encompassing a continual reexamination of themselves, a willingness to try new things, and investing the time and effort to fully operationalize a change to consumer directed services.