

Reaching People with Disabilities through Healthy Communities

Karen Sullivan, Butte-Silver Bow, Montana

This project has impacted my life because:

I believe, prior to this project, that I had unconscious bias in relation to people with disability and how issues related to inclusion were to be prioritized – I believed that ADA guidelines would result in the appropriate work being done, on any newly built landscape or other projects, and that people with disability would benefit from these guidelines. I came to learn that “disabilities are me.” I am an aging individual (I just turned 60), and as I age my ability to do the things that I want might be limited. And rather than having inclusion be an “add-on” to any project I might be involved with, or determining whether funds were available for that add-on, inclusion became a new paradigm for me, in that inclusion should be in our thought and planning processes from the beginning, that inclusion should be a core value to how we work moving forward. The input of people with disabilities on any given project has been invaluable, and has made our work more vibrant and meaningful.

The most influential policy, system, or environmental change to me was:

The most influential environmental change to me was our work at Stodden Park. We were able to incorporate from the very beginning of this park improvement project a different mindset into how this project would be carried out. Prior to the *Reaching People with Disabilities through Healthy Communities* project, the Americans with Disabilities Act compliance officers, like myself, would be invited into a project “at the appropriate time” and weren’t really at the decision-making table. On the Stodden Park project, because of the Reaching People with Disabilities effort, we were there from the beginning, and inclusion became part of the project’s entire framework. Today, we have a zero entry to our beautiful new public pool, chair lifts into the pool for people who use wheelchairs, and an all-abilities playground. Though not part of the Reaching People with Disabilities project, we were also able to incorporate a ramp onto the park’s new carousel. The new park, and these distinguishing features, are the talk of the town and our region. We couldn’t be more proud.

As a result of this, I/we:

I am not sure the inclusive elements at Stodden Park would have been accomplished, were it not for the *Reaching People with Disabilities through Healthy Communities* effort. I’m sure there would have been ADA compliance, but because we were able to be at the table from the beginning, and because inclusion became a core value to the overall park improvement project, we have a destination park that is inclusive for all.

What was the emotional connection, self-efficacy, or “ah-ha” moment for this project?

From the very beginning, learning that disability rights are civil rights stuck with me, and that inclusivity

is a social justice issue that just happens to make our work more equitable. My a-ha moments continue – Butte, Montana is an old copper mining camp, and it is a Superfund city [an area identified by the EPA as requiring a long-term response to clean up hazardous material contaminations]. We are on the cusp of a major cleanup of historic mining activities; the cleanup will occur over the next coming years, followed by restoration of these areas – tree planting, and the building of bike lanes, walking paths and other amenities. How cool is it that what we have learned from the Reaching People with Disabilities project will be carried forward in the years to come, and that inclusivity on this work will be a core and reigning value? This project has changed how we work, and my community is now benefiting from that paradigm shift—and will continue to benefit from it into the future.

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