



The Ian Potter
Foundation

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Grantee Learnings

Disability

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Key learnings from Disability grant recipients

Introduction

This document is intended for future applicants and grantees in the Disability program area. It contains the summarised learnings of all Disability grantees over the past seven years.

The information documented here has been taken from the final reports of Disability grantees, which were submitted to The Ian Potter Foundation following the completion of their projects. As such, the views expressed here do not necessarily represent the views of The Ian Potter Foundation.

Please note that the guidelines for the Disability program area have recently been narrowed, and as such the learnings in this document may be broader than our current objectives. The current Disability objectives are as follows:

- Encourage innovative approaches to increasing employment opportunities for individuals with disability.

People

Any project will involve different people or groups of people. Managing people and relationships is vital to the success of any project or program. Consulting various stakeholder groups is particularly important within the Disability Services sector. Projects undertaken in this area are aiming to improve the lives and opportunities for people living with disability. This is a diverse group in terms of needs and desired outcomes.

Parents

Sometimes the target participants are the carers, often parents.

Following initial participant feedback, one grantee adapted schedules to move workshop dates to a Saturday making it easier for parents to attend. This change worked well in making the education sessions as accessible as possible for participating families. There was also a positive unexpected consequence of engaging with parents. Through parents' connections were made with special needs schools, resulting in interest from teachers wanting to learn more about canine-assisted therapy to integrate into their school environment through provision of Educational Support Dogs. As a result, the parent workshops have helped facilitate the placement of two Educational Support Dogs directly supporting up to 80 additional young children with autism and other disabilities daily.

Another grantee recommends surveying parents to obtain their feedback. As a result, the grantee learnt that adding student success stories and more information about preparation and attendance at camp was important to parents.

Partners

Partnerships with government departments and other sponsors are invaluable to promoting programs or disseminating information. Grantees recommend engaging with partners early in the project.

For example, building networks via partners are crucial to the promotion of national websites. One grantee found a partnership with Ronald McDonald Learning Program in Victoria helped them spread the word about their online resource.

Partners are often the principal means of access to program participants, so it is important to consult with partner organisations to gauge their needs. Not all partners needs are the same. For example, one grantee found that providing individualised support helped to overcome perceived barriers at partner sports clubs.

Expert reference groups

Using expert reference groups can save time and money. One grantee reports that, after conducting a feasibility study of options, their expert reference group recommended a model of collaboration with other groups in the sector rather than reinventing the wheel. Drawing on the strengths of industry leaders meant developing a model that was cost-effective but met the program objectives.

Regional communities

When delivering programs in regional areas, there are additional logistical considerations.

A grantee realised that unless it had at least four clients booked in for clinics in areas greater than 200km from Melbourne, it was more efficient and economical to run clinics in neighbouring regions and have clients from outlying regions travel to their nearest clinic.

Conversely, as the number of assessments has grown at each of the regional clinics the grantee realised that they now need at least two Occupational Therapists available at clinic days.

Another grantee found there was a large demand for the Occupational Therapists, and consequently sharing their time evenly between all the centres, particularly regional centres, was a logistical challenge.

When providing services to regional participants, it may be easier to go to them. One grantee found that their regional members appreciated having a dedicated staff member meeting them at their local sports program to regularly participate in a wheelchair sports program.

A key learning regarding volunteers is about the best way to provide training. Face-to-face can be limiting in terms of location. Offering training via online resources allows volunteers to access it from home when it suits them.

An additional benefit of providing online training to volunteers is the potential to extend the reach of volunteer involvement in regional/rural areas.

Planning & Program management

Staffing

Within the disability sector, it is important not to underestimate the staff time required to deliver programs.

For one grantee, a major challenge was having only one staff member to implement a place-based and centre-based program for all the participants. Demand for the program was high but with only one staff member, the number of people who could participate was limited. While self-monitoring checklists and visual aids (posters) were developed, this self-serve approach did not work for all participants.

Be realistic about how much your staff can achieve within a given time. One grantee reported that a planned practice advisory group had not been implemented. While this did not affect the development and trial of the new program it did limit dissemination to other practitioners. The group could not be implemented because it was it took all the project manager's time and energy to make the program work.

Staff retention can also be an issue. In one case, the Project Coordinator left the organisation midway through the project. This meant the Operations and Special Projects Manager needed to pick up the project half-way through development which was stressful. However, in the long run, the grantee believes the project benefited from having a senior staff member managing the development along with the Education Support Coordinators' support. A further example of how staffing levels can impact success.

It can also be difficult to find appropriately qualified people to undertake certain tasks. A grantee had funds in the budget for neuro-psychological assessments where clients needed them. However, they grantee was unable to engage a neuro-psychologist as there are only three in NSW and they were all busy. Grantees need to consider where they will source specialist practitioners as well as budgeting for them.

When training staff, one grantee concluded that delivering the modules as a one-day training package rather than in multiple sessions over a longer period would provide more variety and create opportunities for women with disabilities to be involved in a facilitation role. The success of the delivery would be dependent on an experienced and knowledgeable facilitator. The grantee also realised that some women with disabilities would need further training to undertake this role.

With limited time available for health care staff, the grantee is also exploring the option of providing an e-learning package. They could then reach a larger, more diverse audience, allowing health-service staff to complete the training at a time convenient to them.

Scaling up

Increasingly, grants are being made to organisations wishing to scale up successful programs. Our grantees have found some unforeseen issues when expanding a program's reach or replicating it in another location.

It can be difficult to secure commercial spaces which meet requirements for a disability employment enterprise. One grantee scoped three large areas of Sydney (Sutherland, Inner West, and Botany/Mascot) and came up against the same challenges: affordability, ground floor access, public transport links. As a result, they have lengthened this phase of implementation from 3 to 9 months for future hubs.

Bank guarantees against leases are prohibitive to quick scaling, as they lock up operating cash. This cost should be factored in when budgeting. When applying for a grant, the potential funders may be able to assist with this so ensure this item is part of early discussions with funders and/or grant applications.

Expanding organisations should learn 'the perimeter of their reputation' - i.e. know that reach and brand recognition is often closer to home than they may think. It can be easier to expand outwards from an existing location rather than replicating interstate initially.

Also, having satellite hubs is operationally challenging. One grantee found it easier to have a centralised business development and management function, which feeds out to each hub, securing retail and distribution partnerships, generating work of the day, and overseeing consistency in service delivery. This centralisation also helped to avoid unfair competition between hubs and ensure equal remuneration for all participants.

Social Enterprises

For social enterprises, offering a competitive product or service can be challenging. One grantee observed that the social outcomes (i.e. employment of individuals with a disability) and working towards sustainability were effective ways to market services when competing with providers of a similar service at less cost.

National Disability Insurance Scheme (NDIS)

The introduction of the NDIS has added a layer of compliance for many service providers in the Disability sector.

For one grantee the timeline for completing their project was impacted by the organisation's strategic planning and the broader environment of changes to the NDIS. The organisation has a very small administration base, which means there is limited capacity to take on large areas of organisational development. Without additional staff and funding it was difficult to establish the organisation as an NDIS service provider.

Grantees have also had to adjust the timelines of their projects to fit in with NDIS timelines. For example, a grantee met the project goals as outlined, but they needed to find additional resources to allow them to extend the project through to the end of the NDIS trial period (end of June 2016), so that their evidence collecting would be more complete. This was critical to ensuring the momentum they built in re-shaping policy and practice frameworks of the NDIS so they could continue responding to the needs of the target group.

One grantee notes that if people with disability are to be able to access greater job choice through the NDIS they will additionally need to access a greater variety of adapted training courses. The grantee plans to continue to provide feedback to the Government on this matter.

Another grantee reported that throughout the process of stakeholder engagement it became apparent that the needs of the disability sector were slightly different in terms of training requirements than was initially anticipated. This influenced their decision to create a training module to include in a Certificate III course commonly undertaken by disability staff and carers.

Another challenge in the new NDIS environment is ensuring proper follow up. In one case, a grantee found they needed to establish whose role it was to follow through with a mother as there were multiple therapists involved in a family's care, not just a solitary Key Worker. One organisation now allocates families to ensure there is a key contact person identified for this purpose.

Employment Pathways

One grantee assisting young people with a disability to transition to employment found that students who were previously not considered for employment were both interested in and capable of pursuing a pathway to employment if offered a supportive flexible program with both individualised placements and small group learning.

Additionally, the grantee realised that using a small group setting could at times be more like a school classroom (juvenile) than an adult learning setting. In future, they will work to change (mature) the culture of the group sessions to further help participants to transition to a work environment.

Another important key to success seems to be a program's flexible duration. While most transition to work programs are fixed duration, one grantee found that some participants were ready for employment after three months in the program and were successfully referred for employment placement at that stage, while others were only ready after six months.

Working with schools

Working directly with schools can be challenging. Grantees recommend considering developing resources about inclusion and working with the Education Department to incorporate these resources for teachers and students into the curriculum to reach more schools in more efficient way.

It can be overwhelming for teachers trying to choose from the multitude of available teaching resources. It is important to link curriculum with the activities that are to be carried out as part of a Schools Inclusion Program, and if possible publish resources as activity sheets.

One grantee found that teachers completion rate of e-learning modules was largely due to the Education Support Coordinator. This demonstrates that a champion is needed to spread the word to educators. Grantee staff need to be continually talking to teachers and making them aware of the resources available.

Creating Resources

Don't underestimate the time and skills required to professionally and creatively produce resources. Grantees confirm there is nothing to be gained from rushing or short-cutting the process.

One grantee used a team that combined the knowledge and skills of three Teachers of the Deaf with many years' experience, a clinical audiologist, a young writer, and a parent of a deaf child to develop resources. This team approach made this a successful project.

Also, resources will most likely require additions once they have been piloted. One grantee reported that it would have been good to foresee the need for revisions earlier, so they could include it in the timeline when applying for a grant.

One grantee realised that any changes associated with the development of training materials required ethics approval and this resulted in some unforeseen delays to the project implementation. Allow for longer timelines if ethics and pilot testing are required.

Technology

Technology can remove many obstacles for people with a disability but feedback from grantees confirms that costs can be significant and extensive testing is essential.

For community sector organisations, IT investments, while worthwhile, can be costly and time consuming as often they are undertaken without the advice of specialist consultants. For one grantee, trying to find reasonably priced online development partners stalled the project for a significant amount of time as they continued to seek additional quotes before being able to locate a community eLearning partner.

One grantee used Telepractice to deliver elements of their program, providing them with a strong indication of where their Telepractice services and the telecommunications equipment that facilitated it were working, and where they were not. As a result, the grantee changed from Skype to Zoom for its Telepractice activities due to higher quality communication feeds.

Another grantee recognised the need to begin the trialling and testing of an electronic booking system earlier to be able to moderate access rights better for both internal users and participants.

Using an open source platform can be cost-effective but one grantee found that Wordpress required more initial learning time from their staff than expected. However, in the long run it is easier to make changes without the worry of expensive maintenance costs.

Another grantee stated that if they ever consider developing products from a prototype again, checks must be done to ensure the product can progress and be produced. Abandoning a prototype caused the grantee significant delays due to the time involved in sourcing alternative companies, evaluating quotes and proceeding to installation.

Evaluation & Data

Data collection

There are numerous ways to collect data to evaluate a project. When dealing with disability programs it is worth considering the role of surveys and how they can be best delivered.

One grantee concluded that it may be more effective to conduct focus groups with face-to-face interviews instead of a questionnaire to gain direct feedback from people with a disability engaged in their program.

Another grantee stated that the development of a mobile App would be a helpful tool for families. While allowing the grantee to streamline data gathered through the reporting module, it would also enhance the user experience by effectively monitoring the child or adult's progress with quick and efficient access to digital versions of these reports.

Asking the right questions at the beginning is also important. One grantee explained that their pre-survey was effectively part of the membership form so they tried to keep it succinct and limit the inclusion of explanations/definitions. However, the data collated didn't distinguish between a new member and one who has been physically active for some time. The grantee realised that to accurately determine improvements in physical activity over time it was important to capture baseline data to compare with future survey results.

This grantee also reported that some members found the survey questions confronting and personal and either did not answer them or did not answer all of them. The grantee questioned whether individuals accurately recorded key data such as their resting heart rate. Also, depending on a person's level of disability, their heart rate will be different/affected.