



Expert Insights From Stanford J. Perry, Executive Director of AHRC Nassau

Stanford J. Perry is CEO of AHRC Nassau and its affiliated organizations, which include Brookville Center for Children’s Services (BCCS) and Citizens Options Unlimited, Inc. (Citizens Inc.). Perry’s leadership of high-performing organizations has been evident during his 30-year career in human services. We sat down with him, and he shared his insights and expertise on a variety of pressing issues impacting service providers of children and adults with intellectual and developmental disabilities (I/DD).

Not surprisingly, Perry identified staffing – the ability to attract and retain staff, particularly direct support professionals (DSPs) – as the greatest challenge facing the I/DD sector. “We are beyond the critical point,” Perry said, adding, “I think we are seeing a culmination of a lack of government funding over many, many years; wages depressed for a long time; and more jobs available than people to do these jobs.”

He suggested, “We need to rebrand this work and continually advocate for the appropriate valuation and funding of work done by DSPs. These are not jobs that can be done remotely. These jobs are up close and as personal as it gets.” He stressed this means more than providing a living wage but instead how to bring value to this work within a new generation of employees as DSPs are sometimes the most important person in the life of a person with I/DD. Pay and benefits should start recognizing the demands and complexity of the work.

Lessons Learned: Focus on Connecting

Perry said that the most important lesson learned from the pandemic (which, he stressed, is still

not over for providers) is the importance of “communication, communication, communication.” It is essential to be in touch with employees, families, and other stakeholders to keep them abreast of trends, information on vaccines and boosters, new research, and more to support them and empower them to protect the health and well-being of people with I/DD.

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day, to stay on top of the guidance and information coming from multiple state, federal and local sources. It was important to quickly disseminate that information to our entire workforce. This was necessary to ensure they were armed with the most relevant, timely, critical information to make decisions and keep people safe and free from harm,” Perry said. “How we communicate using the systems and processes we have speaks to the culture and the values of an organization.”

This ability to communicate fully, promptly, and openly needs to continue long after the pandemic

continued on page two

is in the rearview mirror. Perry said, “Organizations that developed processes to ensure open lines of communication need to continue these efforts. The culture of organizational monologue is over.”

In addition to sharing information, he stressed, organizations should be using communications to celebrate accomplishments – both large and small – honoring workers’ efforts and achievements and celebrating diversity. Perry said, “We must find ways to engage all members of the workforce and be creative in how they can feel included and valued.”

Leadership: Walking the Walk

To be an effective leader in the I/DD sector, Perry said, “You must embrace value. You must be an active listener who hears the needs of people with I/DD and their families. Then, you need to follow the listening with planning, engagement, and the delivery of outcomes and results. You need to walk the walk.”

Effective leaders help ensure everyone has a seat at the table and an opportunity for their voices to be heard. “We need to integrate diversity, equity and inclusion into everything we do. This enables us to be a richer, stronger organization,” Perry said. “We value the opinions of the people who comprise our workforce, and we build on those ideas and insights.”

The Building Blocks of Trust and Transparency

“Transparency is so critical to an organization’s success. Everyone must be informed about concerns, challenges, and/or threats to the organization. We don’t just share the good things,” said Perry. “We acknowledge the challenges, but we also talk about what we’re doing to overcome them.”

This is significant, as it’s important to have difficult conversations. For instance, Perry said, “I’ve had meetings with employees where we talk

transparently about wage inequity and what we’re doing to address this. This is a major concern, but transparent communication and engaging people in discussions about this challenge truly makes a difference. Keeping employees informed and updated on the organization’s advocacy efforts on their behalf helps to build strong, resilient teams and loyalty to the mission of the agency,” said Perry.

Transparency builds trust, Perry stressed. “It’s important to tell people the truth. That is how trust is built. Without a foundation of trust, he emphasized, “It’s hard to do anything else.” At his organization, he said, “We value honesty. It’s part of our culture and how we choose to operate.”

Seize the Moment

During the pandemic, I/DD and home- and community-based services (HCBS) received much positive attention, which has opened some doors. Perry explained, “It is important to seize the moment – that, as a community and as a voting bloc, we engage policymakers and legislators and broaden our efforts. With every minor victory we achieve, we need to build on the dialogue to leverage future opportunities to increase wages and make other positive changes.”

He stressed that it is important to continue these efforts related to wage increases “to ensure more than a one-and-done victory. We must continue to engage our policymakers, elected officials, and community leaders to provide input and feedback on future plans and proposals related to the field of intellectual and developmental disabilities. The I/DD community, including people with lived experiences and families, must be at the forefront of advocacy, if we are to expect sustained improvements in the service delivery system.”