

Although the CARS process requires community participation at many levels, no voice is more important to the process than the voices of the people who are most effected by the service decisions being made in the community – the users or potential users of community services. The CARS process focuses on giving a voice to the users of community services. It is difficult for service providers, policy makers and government officials to do their job well if the users of services do not have a clear voice, and a major role to play in the development of community services and supports. For instance, if you are using the CARS process to improve service for families and young children then parents must be involved in the process. If you are working on services for youth – youth must play a major role in the CARS process, and so on.

Users of services are becoming less accustomed to having a clear role in the development and ongoing operation of community services - except perhaps at the very beginning of service development. I'm sure you can think of many examples in your community or in other communities where community members got together to start a much needed service or support. Maybe they built a new child care centre, or opened a youth drop in or started a meal program for seniors. These community members probably spent long hours painting an available space, canvassing the community for support or raising the funds needed to make a dream a reality. They clearly had, or saw a need for the service which created the passion to see it through. Years ago when few services existed in our communities, all services and supports were the result of the passion, collective vision and community action of community members. Now services exist in every community – no community is without some services and supports. The result is the creation of a service network across our communities, our regions, our provinces and territories and across our county.

In rural remote and northern communities however, we are losing the closeness and familiarity of our service network as services become more regionally based. Even if a service began due to the efforts of community members – that service today is likely a part of a larger network of service organizations or government departments. We have learned a level of dependency on this service network and all it entails. And somewhere between the excitement and clarity of a collective responsive community vision and the boundaries, mandates and challenges of service provision we lost that service user- or potential service user voice.

Service users have lost their role as “leaders” in service development and are now usually recognized only as “needers”. Often when Rural Voices does presentations or workshops we ask participants how they view service users. For example, we ask those working with families if they see parents as “leaders”, “partners” or “needers”. When they stop to think about it, many people tell us that although they saw parents as leaders at the beginning of the development of a service, they realize that once the service was established, they began to see parents as only “needers”. Some can give examples of parents as “partners”- meaning that although action or activity is initiated by someone else, parents are asked to participate. The most common

example of this is parents being asked to sit on an advisory committee. This does give some voice to service users, but it is very limited at best. What we have lost over the years is the realization that responsive sustainable service provision is very difficult without a strong service user voice.

That is not to say that service providers and government representatives do not engage the community in the development or ongoing operation of services and supports – in fact they do. Service providers have community members sit on committees, fill out surveys or govern on a Board of Directors. But this participation soon becomes bound by service mandates, guidelines and limitations. Community members and service users are quick to learn that they must participate within a service provision reality. What we tend to lose over time however is the creativity, the blessed ignorance and the passion of community members with a need who have not been stifled by political, financial or legislative boundaries. Ignorance is bliss! Never has that been truer than in the area of service development. What we are trying to recreate with the CARS process is that ability for community to move forward unbounded by present service delivery systems. We want them to “dare to dream” and to work for services and supports that will truly meet their needs.

The best way to ensure responsive service development in a community is to let those who need the service participate in the development and operation of the actual services and supports designed to meet their needs. If communities focus on responsive services, they will listen to the suggestions of participants regarding the types of supports and services they need and what these services should look like.

### **How do we begin to recreate a service user voice?**

People in our community are all different in their willingness, ability and/or availability to participate in community processes. Some will quickly add their voice to the process – others will be more challenging to convince. Many have never been offered the opportunity to participate and will need support to do so. Most people however, given a comfortable format, are pleased to participate in a process that is working towards improving the quality of life in their community. CARS has developed a process that uses the participation of community people in small comfortable groups to slowly build a strong service user voice. This process includes the following steps:

- **Gathering the Voices:** completing as many kitchen table meetings as possible
- **Grouping the Voices:** Looking for patterns/themes *within* each meeting  
Looking for patterns/themes *between* each meeting
- **Sharing the Voices:** Summarizing the patterns/themes *between* each meeting into key messages
- **Broadening the Voices:** joining the key messages to other data/voices gathered, like questionnaires, research findings, key informant interviews, larger group meetings
- **Creating a Common Voice:** using all the voices above to create a common community vision

Together we can rebuild the leadership of service users and encourage others in joining us in once again “hearing their voices”.