



# *CLBC Family Leadership Intern Report: A Year in Review*

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## Introduction

In December 2007 I was hired for a year as the first CLBC Family Leadership Intern. I was able to apply for this position because of the privilege I hold as the mother of a 7 year old little girl who has a label of a developmental disability. I accepted this position because I was impressed with CLBC's commitment to learn from and support family leadership and because I was excited about the possibility of building reciprocal relationships with the government funded crown agency our family receives service from.

My job was to provide CLBC with a family perspective on policy, service delivery development and strategic planning, while at the same time build on my leadership skills by participating in high level projects and gaining an understanding of the complexities of social policy administration.

## Summary of work

Over the last year I have had the opportunity to become immersed in the 'community living' sector. My first few months were spent learning about the history and evolution of CLBC's service delivery model and the policy and practice framework that support its implementation. I have since worked closely with many senior management and project directors at head quarters, as well as with individual field staff around the province. I am also grateful for learning opportunities outside of CLBC with agencies like B.C Association for Community Living and the Family Support Institute.

One of my opportunities was to meet with a diverse group of families around the province to ensure my 'family perspective' was well informed and representative of the people CLBC serves. It was also an opportunity to learn more about family leadership and how government organizations, including CLBC, service providers and the community at large can better support families in their journey.

It was this time spent gathering with families and listening to their stories that supported me to bring a family lens to the work I contributed to over the last year. Some of that work included:

- ◆ Development of CLBC ethics committees
- ◆ Writing of 'Family Support' and 'Individual and Family Support Planning' policies
- ◆ CLBC Child and Family Advisory/Reference Group
- ◆ CLBC Employment Initiative Advisory Committee
- ◆ CLBC Strategic Plan for 2009-2010 - 2011-2012

## Observations

My participation in high level meetings and consultations gave me an opportunity to work with a tight group of people who are clearly committed to the CLBC vision and mission. As a mother of a child with a disability, I feel comfort and inspiration knowing how hard people are working to think differently about the potential of, and possibilities for, individuals like my daughter. From the inside, CLBC feels like an organization that honours the voices of individuals and families. Yet, as I got the opportunity to spend time with families in their community, I observed that some families feel isolated from the organization many of them helped to create. Families report that when invited to participate in the work of CLBC they often don't have enough of the 'whole picture' to understand what they are providing input to, or how it will make a difference.

From the inside, my role as Family Leadership Intern felt respected and integral to the work of CLBC. On the outside, families too want to feel integral to the direction of the organization that serves their sons and daughters. Part of meeting this challenge lies in ensuring families are included in the various mechanisms and processes that exist to learn from their knowledge and experience.

Below are some questions I have gathered that might be useful when considering strategies to strengthen the relationship between CLBC and the families they serve.

- ◆ How can the mechanisms that support CLBC to get a diverse family perspective be improved?
- ◆ Are there other ways to help families feel better connected to the work of CLBC?
- ◆ How can CLBC create an organization known for trusting and respectful relationships?
- ◆ How can CLBC better learn from and partner with those they serve?
- ◆ What can CLBC do to better to close the feedback loop with families so they can know how information they share is used?
- ◆ How can CLBC support capacity for family governed services?

## Recommendations

In reflecting on my time as Family Leadership Intern, I have put together a summary of recommendations that may be helpful in both supporting the leadership and expertise of families, as well as building capacity of CLBC and its staff to work in partnership with those they serve.

### **1. Tools for Context**

It has taken some time to feel confident in providing a 'family lens' to the work of CLBC. And while I certainly don't know all the answers to the above questions I do know that my 'capacity' as a parent, and my ability to work alongside the organization that serves my family, has been tremendously strengthened by a new understanding and clarity about the nature of the system. This includes the CLBC service delivery model and policy and practice framework, as well as understanding the matrix of community and agency relationships.

To support CLBC to build family capacity there must be tools families can use to understand the context in which they are becoming leaders. CLBC continues to get better at communicating ‘who’ they are, but communicating CLBC’s role in relation to the bigger picture of both government and community is critical. A good way for CLBC to start supporting family leadership and capacity would be to develop tools such as visual maps to assist families to navigate the various systems and processes they inevitably have to travel with their sons and daughters.

## **2. Coordinated Connections**

There are many exciting ideas and initiatives happening across the province. However, some families feel quite isolated in their work and advocacy and in their efforts to be creative. CLBC has a great opportunity to support the connection of creativity and innovation not only between families, but amongst the community and CLBC staff.

A well thought out system of coordination would offer opportunities to partner with local families in creating formal linkages throughout the province. There is much potential for helping CLBC to become truly family friendly through intentional networks and coordinated connections between families, staff and community. I believe there are opportunities for empowerment when families feel part of something bigger; when we sense that what we do is bigger than ourselves and has the potential to affect the lives of others.

## **3. Broadening and Tightening the Feedback Loop**

I have participated in many CLBC organized consultations and discussion forums that were meant to draw on the knowledge and expertise of a diverse group of people. I had an opportunity to bring together families around the province to facilitate conversations around leadership and inspiration. What I have noticed, however, is that the diversity of those we invite, or those that are willing to attend is sometimes limited, and needs to be broadened to include more of the people CLBC serves.

While it may be that many community members, self advocates and family members lack experience, or context in which to feel that they can make meaningful contributions, it is for that exact reason I believe CLBC needs to broaden the diversity of those they are in conversation with. I believe families will feel much more included if there is commitment from CLBC to not only invite ‘outside’ in, but to regularly report back how family voice is influencing policy and practice.

## **4. Family Forums**

Families have an enormous amount of knowledge and lived experience waiting to inspire new ways of thinking and working. I see great potential for CLBC to think differently about the ways they listen to families so the voices of families can influence both policy development and best practice within CLBC. Family forums, designed and run by families, could invite CLBC, community and other partners, to learn about *their* definitions of things like ‘family support’, ‘community development’ and ‘supported employment’.

Bringing families together to share ideas and resources, as well as to create family designed training sessions for those working with their sons and daughters, has potential to build capacity for both families and staff.

## **5. Partnering with Young Family Leadership**

Families of young children and 'transitioning youth' are the future of 'community living'. This population either already does or is ready to 'buy-into' full citizenship and the right to belong and be included in every aspect of community life. I believe there is a place for CLBC to partner with this energy, and to work collaboratively with MCFD to support younger families to challenge the mainstream assumptions of what is possible for their child. I see my role with CLBC over the past year as a testament to the importance of this relationship. There is nothing more empowering for a mother of a young child with a disability to know I am influencing what the future can look like for my daughter by working alongside those who work in systems like CLBC.

This sense of hope and possibility is needed by an organization that is attempting to transform traditional ways of working alongside people with developmental disabilities and their families. If we want to continue to think about new ways of doing this work there needs to be a way to ensure this link to young leadership is not lost. We need to be in partnership across the lifespan so that families are the ones envisioning and building what life can look like when their son or daughter becomes an adult.

## **Closing thoughts**

As I make these recommendations in my last weeks at CLBC I feel comfort and confidence knowing that staff and management are already working hard to address issues and develop tools for families to feel better connected and supported. For me, 'capacity building' and ultimately, empowerment and leadership, comes from knowing my story will be used in a way that creates real social change. It also comes from having a clear idea about the context in which I am living my story.

My participation in CLBC's organizational processes has begun to teach me strategies in not only articulating my own guiding principles in a way that might influence policy and practice, but how to also incorporate a more diverse family lens and to be able to recognize when there are voices missing from the table.

In terms of my own leadership skills, I now have a new connection to families, community leaders, and policy makers that has prepared me with a broader perspective of the community living movement in all its changes and challenges. I look forward to knowing how CLBC will continue to build strategies to partner with those they serve, so that the interdependence between families and CLBC can become the strength that guides us all toward "*Good lives in Welcoming Communities*".