

WHAT HAVE SUPPORT CIRCLES GOT TO DO WITH SUCCESSION PLANNING?

This article was written by Jeremy Ward, a part time consultant with Pave the Way. It first appeared in Crucial Times, March 2007, Issue 38. Published by the Community Resource Unit Inc in Brisbane.

Disability Services Queensland defines succession planning in its Disability Planning Initiative as *'developing a vision for the person with a disability and planning formal and informal networks to support the family as their needs and circumstances change over time'*.

For many families, however, succession planning may have the grindingly dull ring of legalities, with visions of dark timber bookshelves and mountains of papers tied with red tape. Families, fearful of the future for their relative with a disability, may recoil with horror at the prospect of having to deal with this issue by making a trip to a lawyer in an office reminiscent of a set from *The Young and the Restless*.

But talk to families from the country, with properties they want to pass to the next generation, and this is very familiar territory. Planning to them is part of survival and their vision of maintaining their family dream through to the next generation often informs their every day decisions. It's about planning their succession. Who will succeed them? Who will come after them to keep the family vision alive?

Families with a relative with a disability who reflect deeply on the question, *'What will happen when I'm gone?'*, often come to ask, *'What is it that we really want when we are no longer able to provide the love and support we now provide?'* On reflection, many conclude that what they want is people. People who will continue to provide the love and support they provide, who will look out for their family member and help them to plan, who will do the advocacy, who will ensure that trustees follow the family's vision and who will be there to keep their family member safe.

Planning to ensure an individual is supported to live in their own home, to maximise financial security, to craft a will to the best effect and to set up trusts are all of obvious importance. But without the people to ensure that good supports continue, that services keep focussed, that trustees follow the vision and that the fundamental needs and wishes of the relative with a disability are addressed, the best legal structures and the most generously endowed trust funds will mean little.

Many families who embark on succession planning come to see that planning strategies to keep their relative safe and secure and following their dream, their vision, is of crucial importance. Not all families reach this conclusion at the same stage in their journey but with time, support and encouragement, most get to it. It is not an easy conclusion to reach. And seeing this as the critical issue is not the end of the journey, it's just the beginning.

The key to keeping people safe is to build networks of support around them. One strategy is to develop a support circle; a group of people committed to the individual in the long term. Support circles are not necessarily made up of all a person's friends or even all their family. Ideally a support circle will include a mix of family, close friends and allies who come together out of a strong commitment to the individual and family.

Support circles have been used to support people with a disability for over thirty years. They have been used by families and individuals to address a number of issues – to help an individual move into their own home, to help a family with advocacy or to assist people to develop friendships and social involvement.

As a success planning strategy the purpose of the support circle is more long term, indeed life long. If a well-established and resourced support circle is set up, it is more likely that there will be a group of people to carry on the family vision, to help the individual to plan and to ensure they are loved, safe and supported when family alone are no longer able to do so. Over time, members of such a circle may even step into informal and formal decision-making roles, for example, as a trustee, alongside or as alternatives to family members.

The building and consolidating of a support circle takes time and needs to be nurtured. Families, who have found success with support circles as part of their succession planning, report that clarity of purpose, namely long term safeguarding, is critical to success.

If, for example, a family is driven by an urgent need to develop informal day-to-day supports, care will need to be taken to ensure that the support circle is not seen as the answer to that need. The role of a long term support circle will be to assist the family to find a solution to that sort of issue, not to be the solution.

This is not to say that individual members of support circles do not provide practical support to the person with a disability. Many do. However, such support best grows out of their relationship with the individual and the family, rather than from a particular expectation, perhaps unspoken, that it is implicit in their role as circle member. It grows from personal commitment. As the support circle develops and the dreams of the individual and the family are shared, circle members see natural opportunities to offer their particular experience, energy and skills.

As with all aspects of succession planning, the development of a support circle is part of family business. It is private to the family and needs to remain in the control of the family. This is not the business of services. It is not service planning. The aim is for support circles to assist and support people to live a good, safe and secure life. Good service planning is very important but services are just part of the picture to achieving a good life. Services do not make a life.

Family-support agencies might play a role in supporting families to embark on succession planning, including discussing with them the value of developing a support circle or network and how the service might best be of assistance. But it is not service business to do this for families.

Other services have developed ways of “arms-length” support through employing facilitators whose work is distinct from other parts of the service. For example, an accommodation support service might employ facilitators to assist families with these issues and report directly to a Board of Management, rather than a service manager. This means that the work of the facilitator can remain with the family and not be confused with service business.

So, what have support circles got to do with succession planning? For increasing numbers of families a support circle is a key strategy in their planning, offering all family members some peace of mind. While this strategy requires the building of trust and comes at a cost – in time, commitment and energy – it provides a practical answer to their question: *‘What will happen when I’m gone’?*