

Action with Purpose: A Playbook to Advance Change through a Positive Practice Community

Connecticut's Approach to Bridging Aging and Disability Networks



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The [Community of Practice for Bridging Aging and Disability Networks in Connecticut](#) is a state-led initiative funded by a grant from the [Administration for Community Living \(ACL\)](#) through the [National Association of Councils on Developmental Disabilities](#). Its core mission is to break down the long-standing systemic and programmatic barriers between the state's aging network (which serves older adults) and the disability network (which serves individuals with intellectual, developmental, and physical disabilities). The grant recognizes that as people with disabilities age and as older adults acquire disabilities, they often fall into the gaps between these two silos. The goal is to create a coordinated, person-centered, and seamless network that can serve any individual, regardless of their age or how they acquired their disability.

The Connecticut Journey to Bridging Aging and Disability Networks

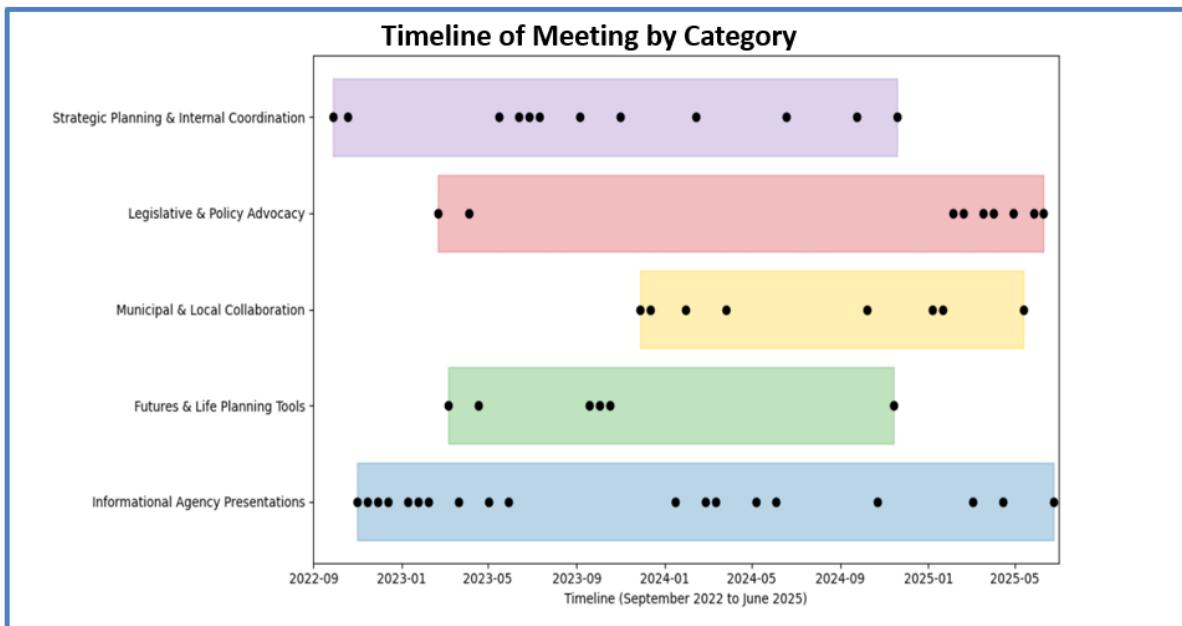
Connecticut launched a cross-agency Community of Practice (CoP) to foster collaboration. Initially aiming to identify a single focus area, leaders quickly realized they first needed to understand each other's roles and resources. They pivoted to a CoP dedicated to information sharing. The Council on Developmental Disabilities led this voluntary, loosely organized, group featuring bi-weekly topics of interest. This flexible environment promoted

"Every meeting brings something new to the table, and I always walk away with useful information or a fresh perspective."

~CoP Participant

shared learning and gradually evolved into a more agile-like management structure. The CoP's iterative and flexible approach guides participants through a series of "bite-size" topics generating a continuous cycle of understanding, potential application, or execution of change.

The CoP held 55 meetings over a nearly three-year period and continues to meet biweekly at the time of this writing. Its activities evolved from initial informational presentations and



"The shift in mindset is significant. There's a stronger sense of collective purpose, of 'we're all in this together,' of working smarter, not harder, and of approaching challenges as a team."

~CoP Participant

strategic planning into focused advocacy and collaborative projects. Key themes included futures planning, legislative action, cross-system collaboration (e.g., with libraries, housing, transit), and responding to state and federal policy changes.

hybrid model that blends Positive Deviance (PD) principles with CoP structures. This hybrid CoP-PD model emerged from a comparative analysis of over 20 organizational frameworks, including affinity groups, learning communities, innovation hubs, and formal change models like Appreciative Inquiry and Theory U. The CT CoP shares core traits with these models—such as collaborative learning, shared purpose, and community engagement—but distinguishes itself by integrating structured problem-solving and adaptive change strategies from PD and other design-based approaches.

The result is a model that is both organic and strategic: it fosters informal, bottom-up collaboration while also supporting structured implementation and evaluation of change. The CT CoP encourages empathic, strength-based learning and cross-system innovation, making it particularly effective in bridging aging and disability networks. This hybrid approach enables the CoP to function not just as a learning community, but as a creative incubator and change agent, capable of adapting to complex challenges while remaining grounded in real-world stories and relationships.

Combining a Community of Practice (CoP) with a Positive Deviance (PD) approach creates a structured, self-sustaining engine for identifying and disseminating organic solutions to complex problems. Connecticut deliberately facilitated a community to continuously discover, refine, and adopt the uncommon, successful behaviors ("positive deviance") already present within its own membership, using the community's social fabric as the vehicle for learning and change. It is not just a group that shares best practices (a common CoP function); it's a group that goes on a collective search for them, focusing on the latent wisdom within its own ranks.

	Community of Practice	Positive Deviance
Focus	Ongoing learning and knowledge sharing around a domain.	Solving one specific, behavioral problem.
Process	Organic, often open-ended conversations and relationship building.	A time-bound, facilitated inquiry process (Discover-Define-Design-Disseminate).
Source of Knowledge	External experts and internal experiences are both valued.	Exclusively internal. The solution must already exist within the community.
Sustainability	High. Designed for long-term existence.	Low. Often disbands after the problem is "solved."
Facilitation Role	Light-touch, often to steward the community.	Critical and directive to guide the inquiry.

In essence, Connecticut's hybrid CoP/PD approach:

- Sustains focus on a core problem while building broader domain expertise.
- Provides a clear, actionable framework (from PD) within a sustainable container (the CoP).
- Validates and empowers the community's own participants as experts, boosting engagement and ownership.
- Tackles opportunities for change through a bottom-up approach.
- Builds the collective capability of the community to solve its own problems, ongoing and often, turning the CoP into a community of problem-solvers.

Connecticut Outcomes and Impact

By blending the informal learning structure of traditional CoPs with the strength-based, adaptive principles of PD, the CT CoP has become a dynamic space for innovation, cross-sector collaboration, and systems change. The hybrid model has led to tangible improvements in service delivery and coordination. For example, service navigators now use insights from CoP meetings to better connect individuals with complex needs to long-term supports. The CoP has also fostered continuity of care by bridging aging and disability systems—such as linking respite care programs for dementia with supports for individuals with Down Syndrome.

Additionally, cross-system training has enabled professionals from aging and disability sectors to share tools and approaches, like supported decision-making and Medicare navigation, enhancing their ability to serve diverse populations. See **Appendix A** for a full list of CT CoP outcomes.

Beyond operational improvements, the CoP has driven cultural change, encouraging a shift from paternalistic models to ones that honor self-determination and collective purpose. It has expanded relationships between agencies, increased awareness of shared challenges, and transformed events like the AgingCT Summit into inclusive platforms that reflect both aging and disability perspectives. Ultimately, the CT CoP functions as a creative incubator, fostering innovation, accountability, and a shared commitment to improving lives across systems.

Key Characteristics of Connecticut's Community of Practice

Asset-Based: Starts from the belief that the solutions are already present within the group.

Empowering: Shifts the identity of participants from "recipients of knowledge" to "owners and creators of knowledge."

Action-Oriented: The community's dialogue is focused on tangible practices and behaviors, not just abstract ideas.

Culturally Sensitive: The solutions are inherently adapted to the local context because they were born within it.

Resilient: Because the solutions are "grown" in the room and owned by the community, they are more likely to stick and evolve over time.

"For our organization, we are re-thinking how we support inclusive practices and identify resources for our families."

~CoP Participant

Key Impacts of the Connecticut CoP-PD Model

Improved Service Navigation and Referrals

CoP participants relay insights to service navigators, enabling better support for individuals with complex needs. Referrals now span across aging and disability systems, connecting people to long-term supports they might not have accessed otherwise.

Enhanced Continuity of Care

The CoP bridges gaps between systems, ensuring services continue as individuals age. For example, respite care for dementia now supports aging individuals with Down Syndrome, maintaining continuity across life stages.

Cross-System Training and Knowledge Application

Training flows both ways: disability tools like supported decision-making are used in aging services, while aging programs like Medicare navigation are taught to disability advocates, improving care coordination.

Cultural Growth and Shift in Mindset

The CoP fosters a culture of self-determination and collaboration, replacing siloed, paternalistic approaches with inclusive, team-based problem-solving.

Transformation of the AgingCT Summit

The annual summit evolved into the Disability and Aging Summit, incorporating accessibility, inclusive content, and disability etiquette—making it a truly cross-sector event.

Expanded Relationships and Collaboration

New partnerships have formed between agencies that previously operated separately, such as Area Agencies on Aging and Centers for Independent Living, enabling joint initiatives and resource sharing.

Greater Awareness of Resources and Commonalities

Participants report discovering overlaps in services and challenges, leading to more strategic use of existing programs and stronger policy advocacy.

Qualitative Improvements in Work and Advocacy

The CoP serves as a creativity space where ideas are incubated and applied in daily work, improving support for individuals and fostering accountability across systems.

"One of the most valuable outcomes has been the introduction to agencies that I otherwise wouldn't have known about or considered reaching out to. The meetings brought together a diverse group of organizations, many of which were new to me."

~CoP Participant

How to Create a Positive Practice Community

Building a thriving hybrid CoP-PD model requires more than just logistics—it demands intentional culture-building, sustained energy, and a shared sense of purpose. To launch and nurture a dynamic CoP-PD model that empowers positive deviant champions, celebrates collective wins, and aligns with broader systems change, start with first understanding the PD-Inspired CoP cycle. Whether you are just getting started or looking to reinvigorate your existing community, the strategies outlined here will support meaningful engagement, amplify innovation from within, and ensure your CoP remains a catalyst for growth and transformation.

A successful hybrid CoP-PD model thrives on a cyclical process that blends learning with action. Begin with **assembly of the community**. Then, initiate **discovery**, where participants surface challenges, insights, and bright spots from their lived experiences. Move into **sense-making**, using collaborative dialogue and reflection to identify patterns and root causes. In the **testing and adapting** phase, participants loosely co-design and pilot solutions, iterating based on feedback and outcomes. Finally, the **spreading and sustaining** phase focuses on scaling what works—sharing practices, building capacity, and embedding innovations into systems. This cycle not only drives continuous improvement but also strengthens community ownership and resilience.



Note: This graphic is a hybrid of several sources including Cooperrider, D. L., & Srivastva, S. (1987). Appreciative inquiry in organizational life. *Research in Organizational Change and Development*, 1(1), 129-169; Sanders, E. B.-N., & Stappers, P. J. (2008). Co-creation and the new landscapes of design. *CoDesign*, 4(1), 5-18; Wenger, E. (1998). *Communities of Practice: Learning, Meaning, and Identity*. Cambridge University Press; Langley, G. J., Moen, R. D., Nolan, K. M., Nolan, T. W., Norman, C. L., & Provost, L. P. (2009). *The Improvement Guide: A Practical Approach to Enhancing Organizational Performance* (2nd ed.). Jossey-Bass.

To create a Positive Practice Community, take the following steps and use the checklist in **Appendix B** and an agenda like the example in **Appendix C** as tools.

In summary, a CoP-PD inspired Positive Practice Community:

- Grounds Innovation Finding Solutions from Within
 - Positive Deviance finds what's already working within the community.
 - CoPs offer the space to share, adapt, and spread those practices.
 - Benefit: Solutions are relevant, trusted, and feasible—not imposed from outside.
- Shifts Mindsets Toward Strengths
 - PD focuses on what's going right, which counters problem-fatigue.
 - CoPs reinforce peer learning and reflective practice.
 - Benefit: Builds a culture of optimism, ownership, and resourcefulness.
- Elevates Lived Experience
 - PD identifies "quiet experts"—those who succeed despite the odds.
 - CoPs give them a platform to teach and inspire others.
 - Benefit: Empowers community participants and redistributes leadership across levels and roles.
- Enables Iterative, Peer-Led Learning
 - PD encourages small, fast experiments.
 - CoPs provide peer support and feedback loops.
 - Benefit: Safe environment to test ideas, learn from failures, and scale what works.
- Strengthens Accountability Through Shared Measures
 - CoPs often use shared goals and indicators.
 - PD outcomes are observed, tracked, and validated by the community.

Role of Project Management in a Successful CoP-PD Model

Project management plays a vital role in sustaining and scaling a hybrid PD-CoP especially as the initiative grows in complexity and impact. While the CoP itself thrives on organic, peer-led collaboration, integrating agile-like project management principles helps ensure that the work remains focused and aligned with broader systems change.

A CoP-PD model typically flows using an agile sprint cycle mirroring PD's emphasis on small and fast changes supporting continuous learning and responsive change.

In addition, agile kanban methods tend to use a backlog to prioritize work. This method works well when identifying topics for CoP-PD meetings keeping meetings purposeful and aligned with participant interests.

Last, agile teams are often self-organizing and inclusive echoing a focus on lived experiences and peer-led structures.

- Benefit: Progress is visible and owned by participants, not just reported to outsiders.
- Drives Sustainable Change
 - PD focuses on behavioral change that already works in current conditions.
 - CoPs ensure continuity and adaptation over time.
 - Benefit: Change sticks—because it is realistic, embedded, and constantly refreshed by peer engagement.
- Aligns with Equity and Inclusion
 - PD surfaces wisdom from overlooked individuals (e.g., caregivers, frontline workers).
 - CoPs welcome diverse voices and experiences into shared learning.
 - Benefit: Challenges power imbalances and centers those most affected by the issues.

Appendix A. Connecticut CoP Outcomes and Supporting Concepts

To develop this playbook, outcomes were gathered through key informant interviews and a survey with CoP participants. Participants responded to a series of questions as noted below.

- What specific benefits have the Bridging Aging and Disability Network CoP helped influence (internally or externally)?
- Do you feel the CoP's efforts have led to measurable outcomes? If yes, what are they?
- What do you value most about the CoP?
- Can you describe a time when the CoP was at its best? What made that possible?
- What successes are you most proud of in the CoP's work so far?
- What possibilities or opportunities are most exciting to you right now?
- If you are familiar with organizational models, how would you characterize the CoP?

In summary, participants shared the following outcome themes.

- **Dedicated and Credible Leadership.** The CoP Lead has personal qualities and leadership that is repeatedly cited as critical to the CoP's long-term success. The Lead is described as "sharp," "dedicated," "organized," with "credibility," and having the "skills and insight" to value and cultivate connections. The Lead is noted as a "champion" and a "convener" who actively facilitates, encourages, and seeks out speakers, and is willing to "disrupt things" and "think outside the box". The phrase "leave the ego at the door" captures the essence of the desired leadership style.
- **Enhanced Collaboration and Networking.** This theme remains extremely prominent and is explicitly named as a core benefit. Participants consistently highlight the CoP's success in fostering connections and partnerships. It has been instrumental in "putting names and faces together with organizations" and introducing participants to new agencies they might not have otherwise known or considered reaching out to. This networking has led to deeper connections with diverse groups, opening doors for future collaboration. The relationships built are vital, especially as funding becomes scarcer, requiring more collaboration just to get work done. Examples include the evolution of the Aging and Disability Summit and new meetings between Area Agencies on Aging (AAA) directors and Centers for Independent Living (CILs).
- **Increased Knowledge, Awareness, and Learning.** This is a central pillar of the CoP's value proposition. Participants consistently emphasize the benefit of learning about activities and programs from other partners, gaining insights into the workings of various agencies, and broadening their understanding of service access. The CoP has fostered greater awareness of the connections between aging and disability. A key outcome is the "cross identification of training". For instance, the aging system has learned about "charting the life course" and "supported decision making" from the disability side, while CILs have received training on the Choices program

(Medicare benefits) from the aging sector. Every meeting brings "useful information or a fresh perspective".

- **Shifting Mindset and Collective Purpose.** This theme is powerfully articulated in the new sources. The "shift in mindset is significant" with a stronger sense of collective purpose of 'we're all in this together,' of working smarter, not harder, and of approaching challenges as a team". These attitudinal changes are considered powerful, even if not easily quantifiable. The CoP promotes an "open mindset" to supporting, collaborating, and non-competition, with a focus on the community rather than self-interest. It has driven "cultural growth" within the aging sector, moving away from paternalistic views towards respecting self-determination, influenced by the disability community's "nothing about us, without us" philosophy.
- **Advocacy and Improved Service Delivery.** The CoP directly contributes to improved service delivery and advocacy efforts. Information learned is immediately applied, for instance, with one participant relaying it to service navigators to help people with complex needs. This has led to a "very real continuity of care" by connecting specific needs (e.g., respite care for individuals with Down Syndrome who are aging) to existing services. One participant uses the CoP to refer aging caregivers and individuals to appropriate resources, expanding support beyond traditional silos to the "whole family". The inclusion of advocates also helps to "hold the agencies accountable". A significant outcome is the transformation of the AgingCT Summit into an inclusive "Disability and Aging Summit," integrating disability etiquette, accessibility, and content that appeals to all audiences. The CoP creates a "larger voice" for advocacy by bridging different communities.
- **Community Building and Support.** The sources underscore the CoP's success in fostering a strong sense of community and belonging. Participants value the "collaboration with diverse colleagues" and the "voluntary, wholehearted, and emphatic participation of attendees". The "physical meeting" itself, described as a "very democratic system," holds tremendous value in bringing people together. This sense of unity and shared commitment was particularly evident during discussions about federal budget uncertainty. The CoP actively invites speakers who often become regular attendees, leading to an "organic way to build a no wrong door system".
- **Practical Resource Sharing and Referrals.** This remains a concrete and ongoing benefit. Participants regularly share information about their programs and learn about others' activities, leading directly to referrals and requests for information. One participant takes notes on organizations and disseminates this information to his service navigators. Another participant highlights her ability to provide information and make referrals to area agencies on aging as a direct result of her participation. The CoP acts as a valuable "resource" in itself, providing access to knowledge and contacts.

In addition to these core outcome themes, participants shared powerful *supporting concepts* that are key to understanding the CoP's unique success.

- **Organic, Flexible, and Unstructured Approach.** This is a dominant characteristic. The CoP operates with "no expectations," "looseness," and "flexibility," allowing discussions to be "very open and free," "very organic," and to "morph into whatever needs to be". This absence of rigid structure and performance mandates fosters an environment of "incubator of ideas".
- **"Discovery of Overlap" as a Core Purpose.** This idea, particularly articulated by an Executive Director, highlights the CoP's unique focus on finding commonalities between seemingly disparate aging and disability communities. It's not just about solving a predefined problem, but an ongoing process of "idea generation," "creation," and "innovation" by recognizing shared challenges and barriers. This creates opportunities to leverage existing programs or influence policy with a larger, more unified voice.
- **Qualitative over Quantifiable Outcomes.** There's a clear recognition that many of the CoP's most significant impacts are qualitative and not easily measured by traditional metrics. While this presents reporting challenges for grants, the value in improved connections, expanded thinking, and better individual support is undeniable.

Appendix B. Hybrid PD-CoP Model Replication Checklist

Engaging and Attracting Champions

- ✓ Identify and personally invite potential champions—know your people and build a strong starter list.
 - ❖ *Example: Use existing networks to identify individuals who have shown initiative or leadership in related efforts.*
- ✓ Host a high-energy kick-off meeting with A-list speakers to generate excitement and draw in participants.
 - ❖ *Example: Feature a well-known advocate or thought leader to anchor the launch event.*
- ✓ Appoint a dedicated leader or facilitator to serve as the connector—someone who builds relationships and keeps momentum going.
 - ❖ *Example: Assign a community liaison or respected peer to serve as the “champion wrangler.”*
- ✓ Establish a consistent meeting cadence to keep the CoP-PD front and center.
 - ❖ *Example: Monthly virtual sessions with calendar invites sent well in advance.*
- ✓ Develop a simple, clear meeting plan with a topic and speaker for each session.
 - ❖ *Example: Create a 6-month calendar with themes like “Navigating Cross-System Referrals” or “Building Inclusive Outreach,” each paired with a guest speaker.*
- ✓ Use storytelling and peer sharing to build connection and trust.
 - ❖ *Example: Begin each meeting with a short story from a champion or participant.*

Supporting Positive Deviant Champions

- ✓ Identify emerging leaders who demonstrate innovative practices.
 - ❖ *Example: Highlight a service navigator who created a new referral pathway between aging and disability services.*
- ✓ Provide platforms for visibility and leadership.
 - ❖ *Example: Invite champions to co-present at summits or lead breakout sessions.*
- ✓ Recognize contributions publicly.
 - ❖ *Example: Feature champions in newsletters or social media posts.*

Celebrating Successes

- ✓ Share spotlight stories at each meeting.
 - ❖ *Example: A story about a successful cross-agency referral that improved care continuity.*
- ✓ Create a recognition wall or newsletter section.
 - ❖ *Example: Monthly 'CoP Hero' feature with photo and quote.*
- ✓ Invite contributors to share their story live or in writing.
 - ❖ *Example: Use a 5-minute 'story circle' at the start of meetings.*
- ✓ Use social media or internal channels to amplify wins.
 - ❖ *Example: Post a video clip of a champion sharing their impact.*

Aligning with Systems Change and Scaling

- Invite cross-sector leaders to participate.
 - ❖ *Example: Include directors from Area Agencies on Aging and Centers for Independent Living.*
- Use data and stories to advocate for policy or funding shifts.
 - ❖ *Example: Present CoP outcomes at legislative hearings or budget meetings.*

Maintaining Engagement and Momentum

- Rotate facilitators to share ownership.
 - ❖ *Example: Assign a different CoP member to lead each meeting.*
- Use energizers and storytelling to open meetings.
 - ❖ *Example: Start with a quote or anecdote from a CT story.*
- Build in reflection and feedback loops.
 - ❖ *Example: End each meeting with a 'what resonated most' round.*
- Celebrate small wins regularly.
 - ❖ *Example: Acknowledge successes.*

Highlighting Quiet Success and Building Connection

- Create space to share “quiet successes” at the start of each meeting—small but meaningful wins that might otherwise go unnoticed.
 - ❖ *Example: An agency lead shares how sharing information about a program with his staff improved resource connection.*
- Dedicate time for open sharing—allow participants to reflect on recent experiences, challenges, or insights.
 - ❖ *Example: Use a “community check-in” round where each person shares one thing they’re proud of or learned recently.*
- Encourage storytelling from all levels—not just champions—to foster inclusivity and mutual respect.
 - ❖ *Example: Invite a new member to share a brief story about their first successful collaboration.*
- Use these moments to surface emerging leaders and build relational trust.
 - ❖ *Example: Note who consistently contributes thoughtful insights and follow up with an invitation to take on a leadership role.*

Appendix C. Standard Agenda Example

Agenda

Welcome & Check-In (5 min)

- Quick round of updates or reflections

Learning Exchange (20 min)

- Presentation or discussion on a relevant topic

Collaborative Planning (20 min)

- Breakouts or group work on current initiatives

Wrap-Up & Recognition (10-15 min)

- Sharing, recognition, or planning

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