



Qualitative Report Response

The Northern Will County Special Recreation Association (NWCSRA) team is extremely grateful to Campfire Concepts for conducting the NWCSRA Qualitative Research Study and all individuals who took time to be involved in the focus groups. The quality of design, implementation and participation has provided important feedback to assist with future planning for the organization. Project Team of Jarrod Scheunemann, MS and Andrew Kerins, PhD, facilitated focus group discussions, recorded feedback, and synthesized data collected. Four distinct groups were targeted by NWCSRA staff (staff) and the Campfire Concepts team for participation in this study. Contributors included: NWCSRA Board members (Board); staff; participants, care providers, and families; and current or potential partners.

Four main themes emerged throughout the process:

1. Impacts of COVID-19 Pandemic
2. Opportunities and Concerns with NWCSRA and LCSRA Merge
3. Communication
4. Outreach & Community Partners

Impacts of COVID-19 Pandemic

The impacts of COVID-19 were seen to be significant for all involved with the study. Mitigation limits and mask wearing limited opportunities as some participants were either unable to participate or chose to stay away due to the pandemic. Economic forces, such as staffing shortages, supply chain issues and inflation, face the agency as mask mandates have been lifted. Participants have shown greater willingness to return to in-person programming. Focused efforts have been made in the areas of staff recruitment, retention and training as well as program development and planning for upcoming seasons to offer a more robust calendar of program offerings.

The sentiment that was expressed by one board member appeared to capture what was expressed in each of the focus groups. *“We are eager to see what the SRA can do once we get back to normal. It feels like we have a brand-new car parked in the garage and we’ve only been able to sit in it. That’s still a great feeling, but the car is ready to do what it was meant to do!”*

Opportunities and Concerns with NWCSRA and LCSRA Merge

The merge of LCSRA with NWCSRA has increased capacity, pooled resources and made it possible to increase the quality of recreation opportunities for individuals with disabilities within the region. The direct service area has a population of nearly 300,000 residents, which is roughly 40% of Will County. Coming together during the initial stage of a global pandemic has been challenging; however, the staff have blended and worked to create a new identity where the mixture of family feel and innovation have come together. The focus is to move the agency forward while maintaining relationships with participants, families, and community partners. Identified concerns raised in this study have been limited facility, transportation and programming opportunities. The majority of these concerns have been directly related to pandemic mitigation limits; however, others have been part of the adjustment process with the merge.

The agency is working with each member agency to provide an increased number and variety of recreation opportunities in each member district. The distribution of programs throughout each member agency has been greatly enhanced and will continue to be a priority. In addition, transportation options for residents to travel to programs outside of their member district have been greatly enhanced for future programming. The goal is to provide direct programming and/or transportation within an individual's own community in each service area by the fall of 2023.

Communication

Communication is the lifeblood of continued participation and growth of the organization. Some concerns with the ability to receive timely information and challenges with the manual registration process were addressed in the focus groups.

The agency focus has been to update internal and external networks of communication. The internal phone network has been updated to provide staff with the ability to be connected to each other to increase accessibility and responsiveness to address programming concerns. External communication has been enhanced with the deployment of a new website and Amilia registration system. Online registration will begin in Fall 2022 with a multitude of capabilities to enhance the ease of registration, assist with recruitment of programs, allow for additional opportunities to collect feedback to improve service delivery, and provide updated access to program and billing information.

On-going communication will be enhanced with the introduction of a quarterly agency newsletter and podcasts in 2022 to deliver updates on programs and services beyond the information from the seasonal brochure, website and social media. NWCSRA's Administrative Coordinator position has been changed from a part-time to full-time position to provide enhanced opportunities to address recreation registration concerns and relay upcoming program opportunities.

NWCSRA staff has devoted significant time to rebranding the organization to create a new shared identity. A variety of new logos will be utilized to display the pride in NWCSRA throughout office, vehicles, website and marketing materials.

Outreach & Community Partners

A key to growth of the agency is to collaborate with community partners. The agency is fortunate to have a wealth of committed professionals who work with and advocate for individuals with disabilities in our service area. The ability to connect and communicate with these professionals and community leaders will greatly enhance opportunities to collaborate and provide additional valuable resources to NWCSRA participants.

A quarterly networking group has formulated as a result of the focus group discussion. NWCSRA will assist with facilitating this group and develop a shared calendar of events to find ways to further collaborate to share resources, deliver recreation programs, develop facilities and fundraising/grant opportunities.

In addition, NWCSRA staff will continue to involve community partners in special events as well as participate in community resource and member agency events to promote agency services and connect with current and future NWCSRA participants.