

PASSING~A Workshop that Works: Using the PASSING Instrument Collaboratively to Assess the Quality of a Human Service

Elizabeth Neuville with Paul Snyder & Emily Robinson

Background

IN JANUARY OF 2013, the PASSING instrument was used in a small human service in Pennsylvania as a means for service evaluation and assessment. This was the first time in close to two decades that PASSING was used within this organization in this fashion, although it has been consistently taught as a part of a workshop for many years. Both the evaluation team and the service workers learned a great deal through this, and we hope to communicate some of this learning to others who may serve on an evaluation team, request one, or host one.

PASSING as an Evaluation Instrument

FOR THE PAST 30 YEARS, PASSING, and its predecessor instrument, PASS, has served dual purposes. It is a 42-item assessment tool that, when used by experienced evaluators, provides an in-depth assessment of the quality of a human service based on the framework of Social Role Valorization. Assessed services receive a numerical score based on the assessment scale, and the accompanying sub-scores and recommendations can yield a multitude of ways to improve service quality.

It can also be used as a foundational tool for a workshop, in which participants who have attended an in-depth theory workshop in Social Role Valorization can deepen their learning. In this situation, the tool is used by a small team of

SRV-trained participants, under the leadership of an experienced team leader and a senior workshop supervisor. Team members evaluate several human services (usually two), by conducting extensive interviews, observing the service in operation, and spending time with the people who are served by the program(s).

Many PASSING course graduates find participation in a PASSING workshop a clarifying and illuminating experience, as they observe the principles they learned in the theory course “come alive” and be evidenced in a human service. In fact, many participants who go on to take on leadership roles as educators and implementers of SRV report that attendance at a PASSING workshop was one of the most impactful professional and personal learning experiences they have ever had. Although first-time attendees at an SRV theory course often report the experience to be extremely valuable and helpful, experienced SRV teachers have noted that the specifics of SRV—such as the use of the conservatism corollary or the use of role expectancies, for example—seem to fade quickly and become “fuzzy” to SRV course graduates. PASSING graduates, however, become much clearer about SRV theory itself, and the specifics of it seem to “take hold” in their minds.

It is this latter purpose that has become the primary use of PASSING in recent years. The organizations which teach PASSING tend to do so for the purposes of staff training, and rarely are

the recommendations and results of the evaluation provided to the assessed service. Of course, this makes sense, since the purpose of the PASSING workshop is staff training and development, not to improve the assessed service, which in this circumstance is referred to as a practicum site. It must also be assumed that the team members are generally new to the tool and are just learning how to use it, and so are not conducting a true assessment, and are not in a position to offer feedback and recommendations. The vast majority of PASSING events conducted throughout North America, and perhaps in Australia as well, fall into this category.

Pennsylvania, where this use of the PASSING instrument for service evaluation recently took place, has a history of using PASS (the predecessor tool to PASSING) as an evaluation tool, and it was used systematically to gauge service quality from the 1970's through the 1980's. The ending of this project signaled the end of the use of PASS/PASSING systematically in this state, and this seems to be mirrored in national and international practice as well. PASSING as an evaluation tool is rarely used in its full form to assess service quality. In fact, within Keystone Human Services, the organization which operates the assessed service, it should be noted that the last "official" PASSING evaluation was conducted in 1995, although since that time, over 100 employees have been trained in PASSING via on-going PASSING training workshops held within this organization.

There are many reasons why PASSING as an evaluation tool has become virtually unused. It is a lengthy instrument to implement, with its accompanying processes of analysis and team consensus, requiring multiple days and the use of a team of raters to conduct. Often, the results of the evaluation signal that major changes are needed to improve the structure of the service and the practices within it, and these improvements may be difficult and perhaps impossible for the assessed service to implement. After all, PASSING requires team members to look at what is happen-

ing within the service, not why it is happening. This "what, not why" formulation means that often there are non-programmatic issues which drive what is done within the service. These issues are often unrelated to the actual needs of the people served, but are difficult for service providers to change or manage. For example, a service may have little control over who actually moves into a small community home, thus making problems in the grouping of the service recipients exceedingly hard to change. The reality that the grouping may be causing big problems in both the image and the competency of the people living there is one that many service workers may prefer not to tackle, or a reality that they may not be fully conscious of, as there is no easy solution to "fixing" the problem. Recipients of recommendations from PASSING evaluations have not always appreciated the feedback, nor felt it was "fair," as it did not take into account the realities of working within a highly regulated, controlling, bureaucratic system of funding, governance, oversight and management, or the hard work that many people may put into trying to make changes, but not succeeding.

In the fall of 2012, the director of a number of small community homes within Keystone Human Services, Paul Snyder, attended a PASSING workshop as a participant. At the conclusion of the workshop, he requested that a PASSING assessment be conducted by the Keystone Institute on a small community home that he supervises. Initially, my colleagues and I advised him to have a series of program visits conducted by our internal SRV leaders with informal feedback based on PASSING. We also suggested the possibility of using one of the abbreviated PASSING tools that have been developed, for example by Flynn et al (1999). He responded that he wanted a full PASSING evaluation, including the full interview and observation process, holding the foundation discussion, assigning each and every rating, and providing verbal recommendations resulting from the evaluation available to the entire team of service staff. This would be the very first

evaluation at Keystone since 1995. It was interesting that I found myself trying to talk him out of doing the very thing I had been recommending for years across Keystone Human Services. Paul's determination convinced me, and my colleagues and I set about planning for the very best experience for all. We had important discussions about which of the homes that Paul supervised would be the most fertile ground for both accepting and using the evaluation results. A community home where three people with disabilities lived was selected, based on the significant amount of SRV training the support staff had been exposed to and their response to it, as well as the situation in the home itself, where the team felt unsure about what was needed in the lives of the three people they served, but also had a strong sense that things could be better.

Preparation & Groundwork: Setting the Stage for a Fruitful Evaluation

WE MET WITH the direct service and management team of the home as a group ahead of time, in partnership with Paul as the senior leader of the work group. This was very important, as we were able to be clear about the purpose of the evaluation, what to expect during it, and our availability to work with them over time to coach them on any changes that would be made as a result of the process. We explained the PASSING process itself, what to expect during the program visits, and who the team members likely would be. They had many questions, many of which came from a valid concern that we would be interrupting the home lives of the three people living there, and that they would be uncomfortable. We had very good discussions and brainstorming with them about ways to minimize the team presence. After all, there would be five of us in a small ranch home where three people live, and there were often three service workers on duty at any given time. Rotating our presence so that some people were reviewing records in another area of the house, having single team

members accompany people when they left the home for activities, and simply being aware not to crowd together, were all strategies we decided to use. At the request of the service staff, we agreed not to take notes in front of the people living in the home, and made it clear to the service workers that we would be friendly and focused, with an eye to disrupting as little as possible and being respectful guests to the people living in the home. In general, they expressed some weariness, and wariness, of so many "outside" groups and people sending policies, procedures and new initiatives their way, without being fully aware of the people they serve and their specific needs, and how these policies and directives impacted the work they are doing. By the close of our meeting, they were willing and accepting, but also not certain that they would be able to make changes because of the scarce funding, rigid rules and policies, and other non-programmatic constraints they felt they were burdened with.

We also made sure that privacy concerns and confidentiality agreements were settled ahead of time, and had each team member sign confidentiality pledges, in addition to the service staff gaining releases and permissions from the people served, families, and higher level service leaders within the organization.

Team members were recruited carefully, with potential team members discussed with Paul ahead of time. We knew it was very important to have some team members familiar with formal services of the type we were evaluating, but felt as strongly that we wanted team members who worked outside the more formal systems. We were fortunate to recruit an experienced team member who works in protection and advocacy services in another state, and another team member from another country who works primarily with families, in a less formal and highly individualized fashion. One team member was a supervisor in a service very similar to the one we were to evaluate, who had just recently attended PASSING himself, and "took to" the process. My role was as

team leader, and my colleague at the Keystone Institute, Pam Seetoo, completed our team. Three of the five members had significant experience as team leaders, but none of us had served on a team with the sole purpose of assessment. We had initially planned for six team members, but were glad in the end that there were only five of us, given the physical size and layout of the home, as well as the impact on the people served and the service workers.

Content & Process of the PASSING Evaluation

THE PASSING EVALUATION itself was scheduled over five consecutive days. The first two days were spent in a lengthy interview with the program management (about 4.5 hours over two days), and the remainder spent with the people who lived in the home. The remainder of the time on these two days was spent immersed in observation, conversation, records reviews, informal discussion, and accompaniment as the three people who live in the home experienced life. Team members accompanied the people as they participated in any activities outside the home, went to a day program or ran errands. Some team members arrived early in the morning to see how things happened within the home at that time of day, others stayed into the evening. As much as possible, team members were asked to reserve judgment, and simply collect as much information as possible that would pertain to each of the rating areas, and to get to know the people who live in the home as well as possible in such a short time, both directly and indirectly through the eyes of the service workers.

The third day and evening was spent assigning individual ratings and holding the foundation discussion, which is an in-depth examination and exploration of the life experiences and characteristics of the people who use the service, the team perspectives on what the needs of the people are, what needs are most pressing, and what we might propose would ideally meet those needs. We also

discussed what people are receiving through the service, what responsibility or “purview” the service might have in meeting those particular needs, and what the people are receiving from the service. As a preparatory exercise, we also had a brief but important discussion of the “culturally valued analogue” for the service, in other words, what exists in society which valued people have or do in the area this service operates. In the case of the service we saw, that analogue was “good home,” and we were able to deepen this discussion by fleshing out what the attributes of “good, valued home” might be in the lives of people of widely variant ages.

The end of the third day and evening, as well as much of the fourth day, was spent conciliating the ratings among team members. At the conclusion of this process, we identified the over-riding themes, and prepared for our verbal feedback to Paul and the program managers on the next morning. We began the final day with this meeting, where recommendations were made, and all PASSING team members were present for this.

Reflections & Learning from the Process

AS WE CONDUCTED THIS ASSESSMENT, it became clear that this was a much different experience than any of us had previously had with using PASSING as a part of a practicum workshop. It did provide an excellent learning and leadership development experience for each of us, but, first and foremost, assisting the program to identify major strengths and areas for improvement, and giving them strong recommendations that they could use, were the prominent focus areas of conducting the assessment.

One area that was very different from a PASSING training workshop was the tone and conduct of the assignment of team ratings. Anyone who has been on a practicum team recalls that the process of helping each team member understand the rating itself, differentiate it from other ratings, collect the relevant evidence and data, and assist all team members to come to agreement on

each of 42 ratings can be a lengthy process, and one marked by the learning curve of the team. As experienced raters on this team, we spent far less time on the actual rating/conciliation portion of the process than had been our experience in PASSING training workshops. In contrast, we spent a great deal more time discussing and agreeing upon recommendations that emerged from our conciliation process. As a team leader, this conciliation process was extremely different in terms of focus, as I did not have to concentrate firstly on the learning of individual team members and the team as a whole. Instead, we were able to focus on what should be, as well as what could be. As we worked our way through the ratings one by one, themes began to emerge that we wanted to address, as well as long and short-term recommendations based on these themes.

The Feedback Process to the Program

BECAUSE SO MANY STRONG THEMES and recommendations came out of this process, by the time we began to focus on what feedback to give to the service workers and how to deliver this, we realized our work was all but done. We organized the verbal report to them by covering the strengths of the service, and outlined in brief the findings from the foundation discussion. This set the context for describing the four major themes we felt required focused attention, and within each of those themes gave concrete recommendations, both short and long-term, which we felt were important to address and move towards. We were very careful to avoid recommendations that might make only a cosmetic difference, and when there was a danger of this, we made sure to connect that recommendation back to the larger themes, so service workers could see the mindset and rationale behind the recommendation.

On the final day of the assessment, we prepared our feedback carefully and thoughtfully, with an eye to the tone and the setting. We asked Paul to decide who he would like to have present at the feedback meeting, and he selected both the on-

site manager, Emily Robinson, as well as the assistant manager. He asked if we could meet directly with the service workers who are in direct support positions as a follow-up. We found the discussion with Paul and the two management staff to be open, honest and sensitive to the sometimes hard issues to reckon with and face. At the same time, the open, two-way discussion about the recommendations helped all of us to see that the way to move forward was possible, plausible, and that some real difference could be made in the lives of the three people with existing resources. Some of the recommendations were more daunting and harder to put into place, but they were ones that all could see as true and real, and we agreed that knowing that those issues existed within the service left possibilities for change more likely to be taken advantage of, even if not immediately.

We followed up in less than a week with a written summary of the recommendations. This was simply a record of the process and recommendations that we had orally given, and was not a full-fledged PASSING report. We knew it was essential that the service workers have a clear and written set of recommendations which can be shared as the service team saw fit. We did not share this report with anyone else, and left it up to Paul, as the person who requested the evaluation, to share it with more senior management. He did share it widely, which is also an indicator of the earnestness of the people driving this process.

We did not share the scores or sub-scores, and found it helpful to talk about the findings and recommendations without what might have been a difficult distraction at best, and a source of rancor at worst. It is interesting to us that we have never been asked for the scores.

One of the team members met with the direct service staff just a short while later, and found this one of the most rewarding parts of the evaluation. The staff had read the written recommendations, had discussed them, and many of them felt compelled to take on specific issues around the program. One woman, talented at cooking

and hospitality, decided to “take on” the issue of creating mealtimes which would be looked forward to as a time of gracious hospitality, fellowship and even warmth, where the kitchen table becomes a center of household relations rather than a place where log books are filled out and service processes are centered. Others took on issues of assisting a woman to explore and find her own church community, and yet others assisting a young man to take on the role of a vital young man at the cusp of his adult life—exploring and developing his unique personal identity. The enthusiasm and willingness of the staff to see the issues and begin to project the possibilities in people’s lives was very promising, the collaborative spirit was more than we could have hoped for, and their ability to “see” creative extensions of the major themes into actions on their part was excellent.

They also gave us helpful feedback about the assessment itself, confirming that team composition matters a great deal, open communication about what to expect is essential, and our availability to continue to work with them over time and provide assistance and coaching gave a sense that we are in this work together, and all working for the same thing. The suspicion and perhaps even the expectation that the information gathered would be “used against them” in some fashion was one that needed to be managed and handled carefully, and we have to ensure that the future PASSING evaluations are conducted with a high degree of care and sensitivity to these issues remains before us.

Personal Narratives

BOTH Paul Snyder and Emily Robinson, program leadership, were asked to write an overview of their general experience with the PASSING assessment, and these narratives follow.

Leadership Response to a PASSING Assessment

Paul Snyder, Service Director, Keystone Human Services

My interest in a PASSING evaluation occurred after I attended an introductory PASSING course. I found the process truly enlightening and thought-provoking. I thought PASSING would be a wonderful tool to assess where my program was in terms of meeting the principles of Social Role Valorization. There are a lot of barriers to implementing SRV and in order for us to be successful; it has to be a way of life. It has to permeate all that we say and do.

I found that the process is more than the evaluation tool. Great thought had to be given to the team, their receptiveness and understanding, the impact the evaluation would have on day-to-day events, the make-up of the team of evaluators, and of course the findings and recommendations. We took great care to keep the focus on the recommendations and away from the actual score. Only members of the PASSING team know the score. All parties found PASSING to be a great learning experience.

The findings and recommendations were honest and fair. They gave us a lot to think about. It was surprising to learn that most could be easily implemented. We also realized that we have to be very conscious of the findings and recommendations in order to keep us moving forward. We face several challenges now. How do we keep it going? How do we get others involved? And when can I do the next one?

Program Response to a PASSING Assessment

Emily Robinson, Program Director, Keystone Human Services

WHEN Paul approached me with another one of his “grand ideas” to have a PASSING evaluation done at Robin Road, I was a bit hesitant at first. I had never been through PASSING and was a bit nervous about the “grade” we would get. We try so hard to do the best we can for the people we support, but I also know how short we fall in pursuit of the vision and mission we strive to uphold. Once my nervousness and hesitations were addressed by the PASSING team, I was fully on board and excited for the opportunity to help enrich the lives of the people living at Robin Road.

For me, the 4.5 hour interview process was by far the most eye-opening and challenging part of the process. The questions that were asked were very straight-forward and focused a lot on what we thought the most important needs were for the people we support. Whereas I knew that the most important things in life are having people that love and care about them in their lives, the follow up question of “what are you doing to support that?” was hard for me to swallow. With all the rules and regulations, combined with the pressing medical needs of those living in the house, it makes it very difficult to focus on what really matters. The way our system is set up, we are constantly looking whether we are “compliant” in the eyes of the state, but there is not much focus on the principles of SRV and ensuring that we are doing all we can to promote fuller, richer lives. The interview process helped to show me in a raw and somewhat painful way, that there is so much more we can do to make this happen!

The recommendations given to us at the end of the PASSING evaluation have been such a wonderful and useful tool for us at the community home program. There were so many things that could be improved immediately that have already had a positive impact on the lives of the people we support. These ranged from small things, like storing medical and personal care items that are medically-imaged out of sight, to larger things, such as considering options to replace the huge van sitting in the driveway signaling that some-

one with a disability lives here. We have been able to find many small ways to enhance people’s images that will go a long way in paving the path towards establishing the freely-given relationships that are so needed by the people living in the home.

When beginning the process, I was hesitant because I did not want to feel judged or looked at negatively because of all the shortcomings they were sure to find. What I found was just the opposite—the team members were clearly people who cared deeply, whose role was to help open our eyes to the vast array of ways that we are wonderful at our jobs, as well as helping us to reach new heights for the people we work for. By keeping us aware that everything we do really does have an impact on the people we support, it helps us to be more thoughtful and to continue to make efforts in the right direction.

Future Considerations

WE HELD A FINAL MEETING, not about the specific PASSING evaluation, but about the lessons learned and the experienced of the assessed agency and the PASSING team members. In attendance were the agency Executive Director, Regional Director, Residential Director, and Paul. All agreed that this was a very useful and helpful process, and has direct benefit to the people served as well as the staff. The difficulties and dangers of implementing a wider scale use of PASSING were discussed. Factors that we must take into consideration are the relatively few experienced PASSING team leaders available, the costs and necessity of bringing in those who are from “outside” the service agency, and the need to avoid, in general, the use of direct colleagues as evaluators of similar programs in the same agency. There is also a tendency to “ramp up” initiatives that prove promising, but we know that careful planning and individualized work before and after are part of what made this assessment so positive and successful. Future efforts should preserve this level of care and forethought. Noth-

ing will end the positive momentum more than systematizing the use of the PASSING assessment tool without proper planning, leadership development, capacity building, and follow-up. We look forward to assisting with the selection of promising ground for a future PASSING evaluation within 12 months, and of having the opportunity to serve and support programs interested in providing high quality services to people in a human service system which often makes it difficult to do so. ☺

REFERENCE

Flynn, R.J., Guirguis, M., Wolfensberger, W. & Cocks, E. (1999). Cross-validated factor structures and factor-based subscales for PASS and PASSING. *Mental Retardation*, 37, 281–296.

ELIZABETH NEUVILLE, PAUL SNYDER & EMILY ROBINSON work for Keystone Human Services.

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