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## Title: Culturally Sensitive" Family Support Services: The Massachusetts Example

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## **Culturally Sensitive” Family Support Services: The Massachusetts Example**

It is becoming increasingly apparent that we live in a world that is drawing ever closer together, and bringing people’s of all nations and backgrounds more regularly into daily contact than has ever been the case. For residents of countries with large English speaking majorities such as Australia, New Zealand, Canada, the United States, the United Kingdom and so forth, this has meant a need to develop public services of all kinds that are equitable, responsive and effective for addressing the needs of people of diverse non-English speaking heritages and cultures. This problem is often referred to as the problem of furnishing “culturally sensitive” services.

The State of Massachusetts in the northeast of the United States is well known for its innovative family governed flexible family support services. What is not as well known is the extent to which this system of family support has been able to accommodate the needs of families from cultural and linguistic minorities. The range of these groups is quite extensive and includes Haitian, Russian, Chinese, Cambodian, Vietnamese, Portuguese and especially Latino families. Many of these are recent immigrants to the country, and are still gaining language proficiency in English. Like all families, they face a wide array of family support needs arising out of their family’s circumstances, including the support requirements of their disabled family member(s). On top of this, they have all the additional difficulties to be faced when one’s language and customs are not well known or appreciated by the more dominant majority culture.

### **Key Features Of The Massachusetts Family Governed Family Support System**

The Massachusetts “system” is principally organized as a set of local family controlled and guided flexible family support projects drawing heavily, (but not exclusively), on the funding of one government department. It serves many thousands of families. The character of these projects varies widely as to the needs and priorities of their membership, size and resources available to them. All of these projects receive a “pooled” supply of family support funds annually that are distributed by the family governance committee of the project amongst the participating families. Some families do not opt to use such funds as their needs are better met by other offerings of the project. The present Family Support Guidelines of the State of Massachusetts authorise various features to be common to all of them. Some of the more important of these for achieving culturally sensitive supports are;

- All projects (overall) are family governed and controlled to the extent that families want such authority

- Each family designs, negotiates and oversees the family support arrangements that they believe they need
- Families individually define what “family support” means for them and the projects assist in achieving this
- It is the overall needs of the family that define family support more than the specific needs of the disabled family member, given that “family support” is seen as supporting the family as a whole
- Resources for family support are principally in the form of cash assistance and will vary as to the amount each project assigns to the use of a given family depending on the needs of that family
- Families using these services can vary their demands for family support assistance and need not be locked into a pattern if their needs change
- Families are not required to submit to extensive bureaucratic paperwork or other demands in order to obtain family support
- Families may combine family support resources with any other resource that they believe will benefit their family

### **Principal Beneficial Outcomes For Families**

These preceding features tend to emphasize personally defined needs and choices, flexibility, value and trust placed in families, innovation and creativity coming from families and a general recognition of the contribution of families to their family members with a disability. For families from cultural minorities the philosophy of the family support system is quite helpful as it leads to these positive outcomes for the families affected;

- The cultural and linguistic needs of the family are automatically given priority if the family sees them as being so
- Families can (and do) form their own special distinct family governed family support projects to better address their cultural and linguistic needs
- Families can insist on methods of receiving family support that specifically attend to their cultural and linguistic needs even if they are a member of a more general family support project

- Families can connect with and be linked to other families with a shared heritage or language rather readily, should this be wanted by the family
- The existence and priority of families with distinct linguistic and cultural backgrounds are assumed to need and be entitled to equitable family support provided in a culturally appropriate manner

### The Importance Of Families Defining Their Own Needs

Many families who are used to more conventional “set menu” family support arrangements may well be puzzled by the freedom families have in Massachusetts to autonomously define their own family support needs, and to be able to create one-of-a-kind solutions to their needs. This “open menu” feature is extremely important at the individual level, as there is no necessity for families to have to submit to a manner of family support designed for them by other people. On the contrary, each family has the option of shaping the support they need so that it best works for them.

This entitlement holds true whether the person is an ordinary participant in a “regular” family support project, or whether they belong to a project specifically oriented to their cultural or linguistic group. In both instances, families share the common requirement that the specific kinds of family support they receive be as exactly pertinent to their needs and priorities as may be practical. Families do not have unlimited access to funds so the tailoring of supports to meet their precise needs makes such limited resources more impactful.

This feature is predictably less effective if the family concerned lacks the personal support to exploit it to its fullest. The Massachusetts projects come to grips with this challenge in three specific ways. The first is that each project has their own staff to assist families to “imagine better” and explore alternatives. Secondly, each project can assist the family to connect with people and resources that might expand their sense of what is possible. Lastly, each project has the administrative capacity to individualise support arrangements so that many of the family’s requirements and wishes can be accommodated.

## **Culture, Language And Overcoming Social Disadvantage As Legitimate Elements Of “Family Support”**

Another valuable feature of the Massachusetts system of family support is its willingness to see culture and language as important ingredients of family support, and thus something that ought to be negotiable. In the Massachusetts case, this is quite achievable at the individual level, as has already been described. Less highlighted thus far, is the scope of families to create projects in which their concerns about culture and language are made prominent due to the goals of the project, the identity of the participating families and the working language of most of the everyday interactions.

Many of the projects that have targeted a specific cultural or linguistic minority had been formed with an explicit intent to ensure not only that the cultural and linguistic needs of the group were attended to, but also to ensure that whatever social or economic disadvantages they faced in obtaining mainstream supports were reduced or eliminated. Many of these groups had been statistically proportionate “under users” of mainstream services and part of their intention was to reverse this in favour of the group obtaining its fair share of available assistance and resources.

Frequently, the resources the group would need are locked into mainstream services, in a form or pattern of use that is unhelpful to meeting their needs. The “cultural specific” family support projects help remedy this to some degree by first creating examples of available options that are more responsive to their needs. They are further helpful by providing a point in the system in which pressure can be exerted for change, given that the project staff become quite expert at working the mainstream system on behalf of the participating family. These efforts also enable the formation of an emergent advocacy agenda amongst families sharing common obstacles as well as facilitating a lot of the family networking and leadership development that underpin family advocacy efforts.

### **Conclusion**

The Massachusetts family governed flexible family support system ought not to be seen as being some kind of panacea for the provision of culturally sensitive supports, as it is limited, particularly by the inertia of mainstream systems to respond to the demands of diversity. Nonetheless, within their own efforts they offer to families not only an attitude of support for their culture and language, but also a range of practical supports for keeping their family life workable. Perhaps most attractive in all this is that it builds on the creativity, commitment and personal sense of the needs of these families whilst affirming and supporting them within their own culture and language.

