

# Evaluation of Max Higbee Center's Weekend Program



By: Meagan Sanders, Elise  
McCulloch, Megan McCoy, Sarah  
Taussig and Carri Zinkan

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## Acknowledgements

### ❖ *April McMurry*

April is the executive director of the Max Higbee Center. She has been working with this organization for the past four years and has brought many new ideas, programs, and resources to this organization. We would like to take a moment to thank her for not only allowing our group to evaluate a program at Max Higbee Center, but also working with us to make sure our surveys would provide the most beneficial information for both the organization and our class project! Thank you, April, for all of your support and assistance with this evaluation.

### ❖ *Members*

We would like to thank the members of Max Higbee Center who took the time to answer our survey questions. The information that was provided was extremely helpful and allowed us to see how the members have been affected by the weekend program.

### ❖ *Volunteers*

We would also like to thank all the volunteers who either completed our survey or answered our survey questions over the phone. This information was not only helpful for our evaluation project but it will also be beneficial to the Max Higbee Center board and the executive director.

**Thank you all very much!**



## **BRIEF HISTORY OF MAX HIGBEE CENTER**

Max Higbee Center (MHC) is a grassroots organization that was founded by educators and family members of people with developmental disabilities. This group of people saw a need for quality recreation opportunities for individuals with developmental disabilities in Whatcom County. Max Higbee was a Western Washington University professor who spearheaded the process of completing a needs assessment and program plan which soon led to the opening of what was originally called Max's Place. Now, referred

to as Max Higbee Center, MHC's mission states: "to provide community-based recreation programs for youth and adults (14 and older) with developmental disabilities with three broad aims". The first aim is "to provide opportunities for personal enjoyment & enrichment through a diverse range of leisure activities". The second aim is to "promote the social, physical, cognitive and emotional growth & development of participants". And the third aim of MHC's mission is "to assist participants to achieve greater independence in their lives & increase involvement in the community".

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## **EVALUATING MHC**

As a component of Raine Dozier's Spring Program Planning and Evaluation course offered in the Human Services Department at Western Washington University, we chose to evaluate Max Higbee Center's weekend program. The weekend program celebrated its 25<sup>th</sup> anniversary this February and has been around the longest of all the MHC programs, also attracting the most participants. Our evaluation team hoped to talk to the members and volunteers who have seen change within MHC in order to understand exactly what their thoughts about the program are, what new ideas they have for improvement and how this program has affected them in their daily lives.

## **SAMPLE & DATA INSTRUMENTS**

The population that Max Higbee Center serves are members, youth and adult 14 years and over with developmental disabilities. In addition to surveying members, we also chose to survey volunteers who have worked at the weekend programming with MHC. We collected our

data by attending two weekend activities when members and volunteers were present. Members of our team sat down with MHC members one-on-one to administer the survey. Although we sat down with 14 members, no names or identifying characteristics were written on the surveys themselves. We read each question and recorded the responses. To help ensure that members comprehended what the questions were asking, we had clarifying questions asking for specific examples from their experiences. This also allowed us to ensure that we understood what their response was. Member surveys consisted of six yes/no questions, two open-ended questions and one multi-part question that allowed for both yes-no answers and comments. The "member surveys" were easy to extract data from, as many of the questions were basic yes/no answers, yielding both quantitative and qualitative data.

The "volunteer survey" consisted of nine questions, all of which were open-ended. We distributed the surveys out to those volunteering at the weekend programs we

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attended; we called volunteers who had given written permission to be contacted and we also electronically sent some via email. We received just 16 volunteer surveys back. As we looked over the volunteer surveys we noted small patterns in the responses, which allowed us to categorize answers. As a team we collaborated and read over each volunteer survey, discussed the responses and came to a consensus on what category each answer would be placed in.

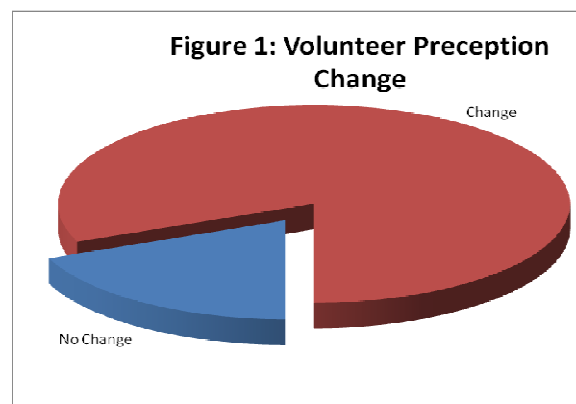
(For copies of Member and Volunteer surveys please see Appendix A and Appendix B).

## RESULTS

### Volunteer Results

The results from our volunteer survey yielded information that both confirmed our initial beliefs and surprised us. First inquiring about what knowledge or experience the volunteers have had prior to volunteering at MHC, the majority reported that they had no previous experience with this population. As that response was anticipated, the next question asked about any changes of perceptions, if any, the volunteers have had through their contact with MHC members. Over eighty percent of the results reported that the volunteers had experienced some type of change in their perception of people with developmental disabilities, shown in Figure 1.

*“People with developmental disabilities are more independent than I thought. We’re not babysitters, but rather friends.”*

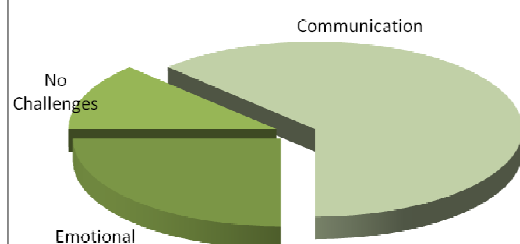


One volunteer commented *“People with developmental disabilities are more independent than I thought. We’re not babysitters, but rather friends”*. Volunteers are changing their idea of what it means to interact with someone with disabilities, highlighting the idea that MHC does affect their perception. It is important to note that, not one person who reported a change, also reported that it somehow affected their perception in a negative way.

It was also a goal of ours to see what skills or type of experience, if any, volunteers have gained by spending time at the weekend program. All volunteers reported that new skills were acquired during their time with MHC. Responses were across the board, but essentially broke down to: gained experience in communication skills, higher comfort levels and understanding, and the development of new relationships. This information reiterates the fact that volunteers are able to take something positive away from MHC.

However, some of these same volunteers were clear that they have faced challenges along the way. Figure 2 shows the two types of challenges volunteers have encountered: communication and emotional challenges.

**Figure 2: Challenges faced by Volunteers**



Communication proved to be the greatest hurdle for volunteers out weighing the emotional barriers some volunteers also reported. A survey response reads *“As someone who has very little experience working with developmentally disabled individuals, I had a pretty hard time knowing how to interact with them...and didn’t feel comfortable”*. If volunteers are having emotional or communication difficulties when interacting with the members, it adversely affects their purpose for being at the weekend program. By asking the volunteers about their challenges, MHC can see where they can use improvements.

### **Member Results**

As previously stated, fourteen member surveys were conducted with the assistance of one of our team evaluators. Of these fourteen members, everyone one of them stated that being a member of the Max Higbee Center has been a positive experience in their life. One member stated, *“its fun here and we get to make things and hang out with friends.”* This unanimous answer shows the overwhelming positive

affect MHC has created for its members; this is a place they have fun and feel safe.

Just over sixty-four percent of the members surveyed stated that coming to MHC has provided the opportunity to try and explore new activities. According to the members surveyed, this includes going to the YMCA to workout, singing karaoke, playing bingo and card games, and walking around downtown Bellingham.

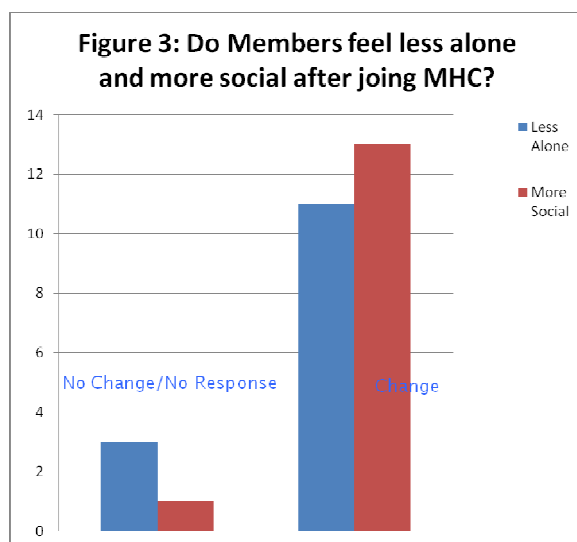
Other questions that were asked included information about their independence and safety. There were three main areas which yielded strong results in one direction. The first being, seventy-one percent of members stated they feel they are more capable of performing daily tasks on their own. When asked what type of activities they feel they can now do on their own after coming to MHC, responses included going shopping, going to the YMCA to workout, cleaning, filling up their own water bottles, doing laundry, and using the public bus system. One member stated, *“I help my sick aunt with chores at her house now, which is nice to help her out.”* This shows one example of how helping this population becomes more confident in daily activities allows them to not only help themselves, but become less dependent on their family and other agencies.

Next, when asked about safety, seventy-one percent of members surveyed stated MHC has made them feel safer when they go to downtown Bellingham. Also almost ninety-three percent of members surveyed stated that after becoming a member at MHC, they better know how to navigate downtown Bellingham. Many members reported they use both the city bus and specialized transportation, which enables them to run errands, go to the mall, see friends, or go to the library. MHC’s outings in the community give the members these opportunities, allowing them to become

familiar with the Bellingham area and the bus routes, providing them the confidence to be able to go into the community outside of the weekend program.

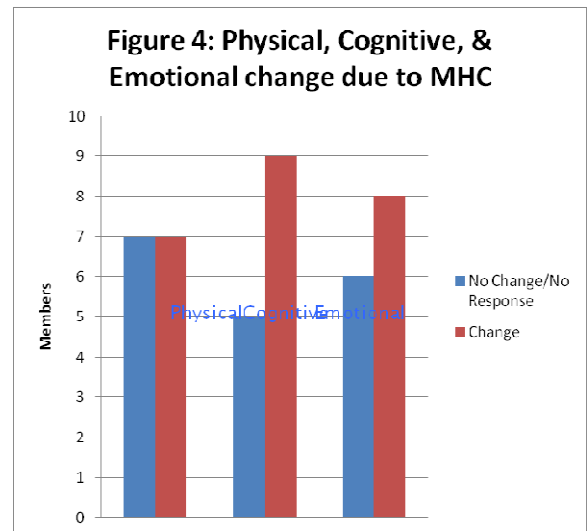
*“its fun here and we get to make thing and hang out with friends.”*

Seventy-eight percent of members said that they now feel less alone since they started coming to MHC. It provides them a safe place to spend time and to meet new friends, Figure 3 displays this information.



Of those members who said they feel less alone, they report mainly hang out with family and friends, including other Max Higbee members.

Figure 4 shows the results of a multi-part question about their physical, cognitive and emotional growth.



Fifty percent of the members felt that MHC has helped them become more physically active. This data matches well with the reality that normally about fifty percent of members, sometimes more, choose to participate in physical activities during the weekend program. This question helped us confirm that the members understood what we were asking, making the data more reliable. They reported enjoying karate, walking to coffee shops, and doing beginners yoga.

Over half of the members surveyed felt being involved in MHC activities helps them grow cognitively. While it was difficult to make sure the members completely understood this question, some were able to report they learned how to do new art projects at the center that they could also do at home. Another member said that she learned about relationships and friendships from asking questions and talking with weekend staff.

Majority of the members also felt that MHC has helped them to have more control over their emotions. One member said that it was easier for him to control his emotions at the center than it was for him to control his emotions at home. When asked why it was

easier at the center he talked about being able to talk to staff and friends when he is upset or has a problem with someone or something. Overall, it seems that most of the members felt that being involved with MHC has helped them learn how to control and express their emotions.

## RECOMMENDATIONS

The data collected shows that the major area where the volunteers feel MHC is lacking is in their training and support from staff. Fortunately, a simple recommendation is to implement a volunteer support meeting once a month. This can be a set time and day of the week, for example, every third Tuesday from 6:30 – 7:30 pm. It could be a non-mandatory meeting time which can include snack food brought by the volunteers. The meeting should be a run along the same lines as a focus group, meaning that the facilitator should come prepared with a topic or two for discussion, but let the group's conversation flow naturally. The objective of this time is to give the volunteers the opportunity to learn from each other's experience and also get support. Support from others sharing the same experiences can help the volunteers on many different levels and will result in a happier volunteer. Another way for volunteers to gain more support in training would be to create a training manual which can be both given to volunteers when they are filling out their paperwork and that can be kept on sight at all times. This can be a "How to Binder" which can make all the different policies, and procedures easy to find and understand for a volunteer at any level of participation. However, previous to either of these mentioned recommendations, our team suggests MHC offer a comprehensive orientation to interns or new volunteers every quarter. The orientation would be one night, where the director and staff brief new

volunteers on subjects like boundaries, communication techniques, or special directions for specific individuals. Volunteers would be given an opportunity to ask questions and possibly shown scenarios. These recommendations appear easy to implement and would strengthen the volunteer aspect of MHC.

The main area for improvement, according to the data collected from the members of the weekend program, was to have more activities and outings in the community. Activities in the community were reported as the members' favorite types of activities and overwhelmingly they expressed wanting more outings. This is also in line with the MHC goal as a program to make the members more comfortable and knowledgeable in our community. More outings could mean obtaining more volunteers and more planning, but the data shows the benefits to the members would be great.

## LIMITATIONS

While we were able to gather useful information for this evaluation, there were a few limitations that should be discussed. Sixteen volunteer surveys is a small sample, and we are aware of that fact. Due to volunteer availability and timing, it was the most we could gather, but such a small number may over-represent a pattern.

In addition, our team attempted to ensure that all the members were able to understand all of the survey questions being asked of them, but we cannot be completely positive that all of members entirely understood every question. The ability levels of the members at MHC are so different that it was difficult to make one survey to fit all abilities.

The members were also interviewed by four different people, all having different levels



of experience with this population and with these particular individuals. This could have had an effect on the responses that we reported the members answered. Also, the question about physical, cognitive and emotional improvements were not only

difficult to word in a way that made sense, but it was also hard to tell if the members were able to distinguish if MHC was responsible for the growth or if this was an outside source of education.

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## CONCLUSION

While there are limitations in this evaluation, as a team we feel that we gave an honest representation of the data we were able to collect. With such small samples, our information may over-represent these volunteers and members' opinions, however the data is still valuable to consider. It was a task in asking comprehensible questions for this particular population, but we feel by molding the questions as best we could, the answers were intentional and the members understood.

In conclusion, the purpose of this evaluation was to gain information about how MHC was affecting the members of the community. Through the information we gained from both the members and volunteers, it is apparent that MHC is extremely beneficial to their personal lives and the Bellingham community. With the recommendations stated this program can only continue to excel in the future.

## **Appendix A**

### **Volunteer Survey**

Purpose: How has Max Higbee Center affected the community members who have come in contact with this organization?

1. How did you hear about Max Higbee Center?  
(a) School      (b) Friends/Family      (c) Volunteer Center      (d)  
Other \_\_\_\_\_
2. What knowledge/experience did you have with working with people with developmental disabilities before volunteering at Max Higbee Center?
3. How has your perception of people with developmental disabilities changed after volunteering at Max Higbee Center?
4. What skills/experience have you gained from volunteering at Max Higbee Center?
5. What do you feel is the purpose of Max Higbee Center?
6. In what ways has Max Higbee Center benefited you?
7. What keeps you coming back to Max Higbee Center?
8. What challenges have you face while volunteering at Max Higbee Center?
9. Do you have a favorite moment or memory? If so, please explain?

## Appendix B

### Member Survey

Purpose: How has Max Higbee Center affected the community members who have come in contact with this organization?

|                                                                                                                           |                                                                                                                   |
|---------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|-------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| 1. Has Max Higbee Center been a good experience in your life?<br>(a) Yes<br>(b) No                                        | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• What was good about it?</li> </ul>                                       |
| 2. Do you feel that you can do more things on your own after coming to Max Higbee Center?<br>(a) Yes<br>(b) No            | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• What things do you do on your own?</li> </ul>                            |
| 3. Do you feel you know how to get around town better after coming to Max Higbee Center programs?<br>(a) Yes<br>(b) No    | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• How do you get around town?</li> <li>• Where do you go often?</li> </ul> |
| 4. Do you think Max Higbee Center has enough outings/trips into the community/downtown?<br>(a) Yes<br>(b) No              | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• What downtown/community outings have you gone on?</li> </ul>             |
| 5. Do Max Higbee Center program activities make you feel safer when going downtown alone?<br>(a) Yes<br>(b) No            | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• What makes you feel safer?</li> </ul>                                    |
| 6. Has Max Higbee Center given you the chance to try new activities that you have never done before?<br>(a) Yes<br>(b) No | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• What new activities have you done?</li> </ul>                            |
| 7. What is your favorite activity that Max Higbee Center offers?                                                          |                                                                                                                   |
| 8. Do you feel less alone because of Max Higbee Center?                                                                   | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Who do you hang out with?</li> </ul>                                     |

|         |  |
|---------|--|
| (a) Yes |  |
| (b) No  |  |

9. In what areas do you feel you have grown since coming to Max Higbee Center?

(a) Social

(c) Physical

(d) Cognitive

(e) Emotional