

## **BRAIN INJURY ASSOCIATION OF VERMONT**

### **Prevention Efforts**

#### **ABOUT:**

Dedicated members of the Brain Injury Association of Vermont (BIAVT) work together to increase the public's awareness of brain injury and its consequences, develop support systems, encourage appropriate rehabilitation for survivors and disseminate information about brain injury. While BIAVT provides many resources for brain injury survivors and their families, the organization's prevention efforts fall into two categories: firstly, primary prevention efforts work to stop brain injuries from happening in the first place; secondly, secondary prevention efforts are aimed at public awareness and understanding of brain injury in order to prevent homelessness, job loss, incarceration, etc. of brain injury survivors due to the public's lack of understanding of brain injury.

#### **GOAL:**

The mission of the Brain Injury Association of Vermont is to create a better future for Vermonters with brain injury and their families through prevention, education, advocacy and support. Our vision is to bring Vermont to a place where brain injuries are prevented and those who already have a brain injury can get all the help they need.

#### **HOW TO:**

The Brain Injury Association was founded in 1999 by Chris Pratt, a high-functioning survivor of brain injury that realized there were very few resources for him in Vermont. After discovering the national chapter of the organization, he decided to establish a local Vermont chapter. He worked with the state's Traumatic Brain Injury (TBI) Medicaid waiver program to get support for the program. Mr. Pratt then contacted individuals to serve on Board of Directors, including a lawyer, a financial professional, brain injury survivor and caregiver and a professional specializing in community re-entry for survivors of head injury. At this stage the organization was somewhat of a "one-man-show" and needed to expand its vision and resources. The Board held retreats in order to develop a strategic action plan.

Mr. Pratt moved on and a Board member became the Executive Director. During this time, the Board functioned as a "working Board"; they secured an intake and referral grant through the State of VT TBI Waiver Program which enabled them to hire one employee and lease an office space. At this point the Executive Director left the organization and the Board initiated a search for a new Executive Director. This included advertising the position, creating a selection committee from the Board members, and interviewing candidates. The new Executive Director started part-time and has expanded his role to full-time. Under his leadership the organization has since been able to get its goals and interventions on track. The Board now functions in more of an advisory capacity.

Primary prevention efforts at BIAVT include the support of national programs like Brainy Bear, in which BIAVT members educate local elementary school students about helmet safety. BIAVT also organizes an annual conference which includes survivor presentations. BIAVT members and staff also speak at conferences and workshops to educate physical education providers, school nurses, educators and the general public on how to prevent and detect brain injury.

The secondary prevention efforts at BIAVT include measures like teaching local college campuses and their site coordinators how to enable veterans returning to school who may have brain injuries to succeed. The BIAVT has a Neuro-Resource Facilitation program which includes putting brain injury survivors in touch with the resources they need to reach their highest potential. This may include assistance in identifying and locating resources to refinance a loan by working with a local credit union or assistance for housing by connecting with the local housing authority. Finally, BIAVT works to promote public awareness of brain injury through support groups and educational outreach. By working with survivors and families in these ways, BIAVT works to foster understanding and prevent homelessness, job loss, incarceration, drug use and other undesirable situations for survivors.

**BUDGET:**

Less than \$250,000 per year.

**BARRIERS:**

- **Lack of Board recruitment:** Because so many organizations and local governments in Vermont rely on volunteer work, many people willing to give their time are already occupied on other projects or are burned out from the amount of volunteer work they have done in the past. Additionally, it is helpful to find volunteers that understand the issue, and these people (including survivors, caretakers, etc.) are often very busy trying to recuperate and/or take care of loved ones. It has therefore been a challenge to recruit new board members. BIAVT has a committee structure in place, but there are not enough people to fill the committees.
- **Funding:** Most of BIAVT's funding comes from federal and state money, including Vermont's TBI Waiver. However, because they do not charge for membership, the rest of their funding comes from donations, annual conference proceeds, small grants, and their annual fundraiser "Walk for Thought".
- **Being a state-wide organization in a rural state:** Because there is a lack of transportation throughout rural Vermont, it is hard to recruit and serve individuals at times.

**BEST PRACTICES:**

- **Partner with other organizations.** Because it is a tough economy and many organizations have limited budgets, it is important to work together in order to avoid duplicating services. This ensures that dollars will be well spent and residents will get the best services possible. Additionally, each organization can refer residents to associated organizations in order to increase awareness and utilization of programs. For example, BIAVT links with the Vermont Coalition for Disability Rights (VCDR), State TBI Waiver Program and other state agencies, the Aging and Disability Resource Center (ADRC) program and many other organizations.
- **Find alternative transportation options.** Many survivors of brain injury cannot drive. Additionally, other family members and BIAVT members that live throughout Vermont have trouble attending events. BIAVT therefore works to connect survivors and members with rides and carpools. Some communities in Vermont are working to set up local community volunteer transportation infrastructure through grants from the Municipal Planning Organizations.

**OVERALL LESSONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS:**

- **Legislators in more rural states are often very accessible.** Connect with them and ask for help when you need it (with funding, legislation, etc.).
- **Make sure your Board members and employees understand and support the organizational goals.** If someone is not connecting with the rest of the team or the vision of the group, don't hesitate to make changes.

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