

Service Provider Promising Practice

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TOPIC:
Agency Culture

New England Business Associates (Massachusetts): Everyone is Job-Ready

Background

New England Business Associates (NEBA), a community rehabilitation provider (CRP) in Springfield, Massachusetts, provides individualized employment services to local youth and adults with intellectual and developmental disabilities. This organization sets itself apart from other employment providers in many ways, from its appearance, to the attitudes of its staff, to the manner in which it provides services.

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Implementation

NEBA was founded in 1983 as an alternate employment option for people with disabilities. From its beginning, NEBA has provided individualized employment services. Jeannine Pavlak, NEBA's director, has been with the agency since being hired as an employment consultant in 1990. She says, "It was clear, from the initial day for me, walking in as an employment consultant, that we were to get people jobs--real jobs, real wages. So that's always what we've done."

NEBA has the appearance and atmosphere of a typical recruiting agency, with a suite of offices and meeting rooms. Employment staff members share the philosophy that all people with disabilities can find work in a community setting, and that anyone referred for employment services is job-ready. Families learn about NEBA from other families or through its marketing efforts at local high schools, and seek out its employment services for their young adults with disabilities. They may also obtain referrals through the Massachusetts Department of Education or Department of Developmental Services (DDS). Adults are also referred to NEBA through the Massachusetts Rehabilitation Commission.

NEBA only provides individualized employment services. Job developers discuss career goals with job seekers, present options to them, and support them to make their own choices. Job coach supports are faded out as quickly as possible, but employment staff maintains enough communication with the individuals to learn whether or not a new job is a good match. In cases where the job is not a good match, a job developer can help the individual keep up workplace routines and behaviors long enough to responsibly transition into a different job prior to giving notice.

NEBA faced some challenges during its early years that persist to some extent. Although there were many programs to serve people with IDD in the 1980s, they emphasized sheltered work or "work readiness" programs. Referrals to an agency that only provided individualized employment services were actually difficult to obtain.

NEBA staff focus on developing employment possibilities when engaging family members or funding agencies and addressing their concerns. Staff may need to work with these stakeholders to address an individual's need for significant support, or questions about the impact of employment on Social Security benefits. Some families have logistical concerns around scheduling and transportation. These concerns can be addressed through a



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referral split between NEBA, which develops the employment possibility, and additional services that can support the individual while not at work. If the family requests that an individual's working hours or time spent receiving employment services be cut back to the point where a meaningful employment possibility becomes difficult to develop, NEBA staff may encourage the family to obtain services from an agency that does not specialize in providing employment services.

Impact

The message that everyone receiving services through NEBA is ready for a job in the community is reinforced through the corporate atmosphere of NEBA's office space, the philosophical believe of staff that all are job-ready, and the professional interactions between staff, individuals with disabilities, and family members. Visitors to this agency immediately form the impression that each person being served by NEBA is served individually and with commitment.

NEBA's individualized service approach has had a positive impact on people who are committed to finding community employment. Although they serve a smaller number of people than are served by other employment programs, Pavlak believes that this also helps NEBA maintain the quality of its employment services and achieve better outcomes.

Suggestions for Replication:

- » Establish a peer support network with CRPs that have adopted the philosophy that everyone seeking employment can work in the community.
- » Engage in cross-agency discussions to clarify the practical implications of this position. Implement an individualized employment services approach with one person at a time to maintain the quality of the individualized services.
- » Critically evaluate your own agency culture, staff attitudes about competitive employment, and philosophy about job readiness.

For more information on this practice contact thinkwork@umb.edu



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