

State Agency Promising Practice

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TOPIC:
Collaboration

Massachusetts: Using a Collaborative, Person-Centered Planning Approach to Facilitate Community Employment

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Background

The Northeast Region Supported Employment Project was developed by the North Shore area office of the Massachusetts Department of Developmental Services in 2007. This pilot program, open to any individual with ID/DD who wanted to work, emphasized a person-centered planning approach to achieving the individuals' goals for employment in the community. The project emphasized the individual's choice of employment providers, collaboration with the Massachusetts Rehabilitation Commission (MRC), and use of an independent facilitator to support career and life planning. The project was spearheaded by two DDS administrators dedicated to communicating the value of community-based employment to the Department.

Implementation

The only criterion to participate in the pilot program was that an individual wanted to work in the community. Participants in the project included both individuals who had previously tried community work, and individuals with no work experience at all. Community rehabilitation providers also volunteered to participate in the project, and were required to accept any participant that selected them, to support individuals on whatever schedule was required, and to be or become an MRC vendor.

Each individual participated in a person-centered planning process led by an experienced facilitator. Present at the planning sessions were the individual, family members, employment provider staff, the DDS service coordinator and any others deemed relevant by the individual. The planning sessions varied slightly in duration and structure, but focused on understanding the individual's employment interests and goals while gathering people's perspectives on helping an individual find employment and a fuller life in the

community. The person-centered planning process encouraged the individuals to determine the kind of work they wanted and encouraged family members to assess their knowledge of the individuals' skills and interests and consider whether anyone in their personal or professional networks might have appropriate job leads.

During implementation, challenges arose related to stakeholder collaboration and defining roles on the teams. The experience of person-centered planning was new for most involved, and some were discouraged by the labor-intensive nature of the planning meetings and coordination. In spite of these challenges, teams steered their planning efforts toward finding community employment. They were challenged to reconsider their perceptions of job-readiness and to focus on developing the right supports for a job that matched the individual's skills and interests.

Impact

The project implemented surveys of participants, family members, employment providers and residential providers at the start and the end of the project. Employment providers also completed a job placement log for any individual who achieved employment, and maintained weekly intervention logs that documented the employment support received. Finally, focus groups and semi-structured interviews were conducted with employment providers, facilitators, and service coordinators who supported project participants.

The data collected showed that the pilot program had a direct impact on the employment gains made

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by the participating individuals. Fourteen of the twenty-five participants obtained employment in community settings, taking an average of 139 days to find a first job. The starting pay for nine jobs was minimum wage (\$7.50 an hour), while the remaining jobs paid more, with the highest pay rate at \$10.83 per hour. Individuals worked an average of 13.18 hours per week across all jobs.

While there were challenges in implementation, the project dramatically changed the level of attention given to employment in the area. The pilot also demonstrated the value of including an individual's full social network in defining career goals and reaching out for employment opportunities through a deliberate, person-centered, approach.

Suggestions for Replication

- » Commit to support all who want to work, regardless of their work history, disability, age and support needs.
- » Distribute materials and train professionals on person-centered planning processes in advance of implementation. While person-centered planning encourages innovation and creative group thinking, it can also be time-intensive.
- » Create projects that keep community employment opportunities and individual's employability foremost in the minds of state agency staff. Even in situations where employment was not found, respondents concurred that the project provided both exposure to, and urgency for, community employment.

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