

State Agency Promising Practice

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Nevada's Regional Forums: Creating a Shared Responsibility for Improving Employment

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Background

The Nevada Governor's Council on Developmental Disabilities sought to engage community stakeholders and acquire knowledge to further the employment agenda by funding three regional summits. Using the State Employment Leadership Network's (SELN)* self-assessment preliminary findings as a basis, the summit steering committee created a framework for summit participants. Through a rigorous planning process and comprehensive 2-day summits in three regions of the state, Nevada was able to create a shared, multi-stakeholder plan of action with the goal of improving the current employment support system for individuals with developmental disabilities.

Implementation

The development of Nevada's regional employment summits began by establishing a steering committee charged with the organization and facilitation of the summits. Because it is widely recognized that a range of employment philosophies exist in the state, it was critical to have representation from the full range of the disabilities community included on the committee. As a result, members included, but were not limited to, representatives from Medicaid, Vocational Rehabilitation (VR), Department of Education (DOE), Department of Developmental Disabilities, facility-based programs, elected officials, supported employment providers, individuals with disabilities and their family members. There were a total of nine monthly steering committee meetings and multiple working groups that focused on planning a structure for open communication culminating in documented outcomes and a statewide strategic plan to increase employment options for Nevadans with developmental disabilities.

Budget limitations and restrictions in travel resulted in changing the plan from holding one statewide summit to holding three regional summits (Reno, Las Vegas, and Elko). Although a range of disability groups were

represented among steering committee attendees, it was decided that the focus of these summits was on individuals with

developmental disabilities. Twelve trained facilitators at each summit guided participants through the process. The method for facilitation was dubbed the "Nevada Hybrid Model", where the Model utilized components from "Future Search", "World Cafe" and "Thin Slicing"**. As the lead for the organizational subcommittee LaVonne Brookes, a previous consultant in private industry and current Chief Executive Officer for High Sierra Industries, a supported employment agency, who had spear headed the development of the Model subsequently led the training of facilitators across the state.

Invitees to the summits represented a broad stakeholder group including parents, self-advocates, businesses, and representatives from DOE, VR and state DD agencies. Upon arrival, invitees were split into small working groups, which had been prearranged to include members from each of the represented areas of focus, providing for a range of perspectives. These smaller working groups rotated through workshops with the following topical foci from the SELN assessment: employer engagement, leadership, strategic goals and operating policy, finance and contracting, training and technical assistance, and services and service innovation. Every thirty minutes, each small group concluded one topical workgroup and moved to the next providing an opportunity for everyone to have input in each topic area.

In each 30-minute session, participants used post-it notes to identify what they thought were the most salient issues in that topical area. With guidance from a facilitator, these notes were posted and then organized to identify emerging themes. This exercise allowed

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all attendees to collaboratively quantify priorities in each breakout session, with each participant given three votes for their top priorities. At the end of each 30-minute breakout, facilitators collected the notes and organized findings. These findings were prepared for presentation at the beginning of the second day of the summit with those issues that received the most votes rising to the surface as major areas of concern.

On the second day, invitees got to choose which of the findings they wanted to work on to develop goals and a plan to achieve them. Each planning group required at least 8 invitees to be considered viable. Through this process, the findings were further prioritized. If a group was not viable it did not have a plan of action developed. This did not mean it was not considered important, but rather, that there was insufficient support to work on an action plan at this time. All areas of concern went forward to the final report. The small planning groups were then charged with designing a plan for improvement by the end of the second day. These plans were then presented at the First Stakeholders Meeting for further refinement as a statewide strategic plan. Initially 80 individuals from the original invitees were invited. The Stakeholder meeting resulted in attendance from 40 representatives. Again, LaVonne Brooks led the facilitation of this meeting. Facilitators were used again to guide this group of 40 through the development statewide goals culminating in a strategic plan.

Impact

Participants reported many benefits from the summits, most importantly, increased communication and collaboration among various stakeholder groups. Because of the structured process of using sticky notes, identifying themes, and then developing findings, all participants felt their perspectives were heard. These findings were used in the development of the statewide strategic plan. The summits also appeared to have a profound impact on creating a shared responsibility for improving the current employment service delivery system among a broad range of stakeholder groups.

Suggestions for replication

- » Nevada's robust, multi-stakeholder planning process ensured a forum for open communication. The majority of the summit time was allocated to discussion.
- » Focus on action plans. A hallmark of the Nevada summit was that participants developed concrete action steps in response to the highest priority themes.
- » Utilizing the expertise of a centralized team to develop a structured protocol and train facilitators ensured consistency across the three regions.
- » Deliberately engaging all stakeholders, including those with divergent opinions, allowed all parties to find common ground and share in the responsibility of systems change.
- » Designing a data collection system allowed for participant feedback that could be quantified and prioritized.
- » Planners always remained goal oriented. Determined to use the summit as groundwork for a strategic plan, they incorporated quantifiable priorities in each topical area that could easily translate into regional and statewide goals.

*The SELN is a membership collaborative of state developmental disabilities agencies that share a common commitment to improving employment outcomes. See www.selnhub.org/ for more.

**For more information on each of the models referenced, see

www.futuresearch.net/method/whatis/index.cfm
www.theworldcafe.com/

For the Thin Slicing method, consider reading *The Power of Thinking without Thinking* by Malcolm Gladwell, Back Bay Books, Little, Brown and Company, 2005.

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