

State Agency Promising Practice

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Communication

New Hampshire: Translating Research into a Position Statement About Integrated Employment

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Background

New Hampshire's Bureau of Developmental Services, Department of Vocational Rehabilitation, other state and local service providers, advocates, and families are committed to increasing the employment rate and the quality of employment outcomes for people with developmental disabilities. These stakeholders met to craft an employment position statement. They framed their discussions according to factors that research has found to be common to "high-performing" states in providing integrated employment opportunities. Then they developed an employment position statement that satisfied all the groups involved, and communicated their shared belief in the importance of integrated employment as a means toward community inclusion.

Implementation

For 30 years, people in New Hampshire have promoted community inclusion and have approached integrated employment as a means toward that end. New Hampshire has been a national leader in providing services and supports in people's home communities. The empowerment of families and the use of self-determination and person-centered planning have been strong components of New Hampshire's service-delivery model. However, after examining its own employment data, the New Hampshire Bureau of Developmental Services (BDS) determined that between 2005 and 2010, the number of people working in community jobs had stagnated.

To help find solutions to this problem, the BDS implemented an employment summit in April 2010. They anticipated that this summit would be the first in a series of meetings to develop an employment policy. The summit, led by an outside facilitator, was attended by people with disabilities, family members, employment service providers, the Department

of Vocational Rehabilitation, case managers, family support coordinators, area agency representatives, BDS administrators, self-advocates, sheltered-workshop administrators, and training coordinators and staff from the Institute on Disability at the University of New Hampshire.

The summit participants considered New Hampshire's status and progress around integrated employment based on a set of characteristics that research indicates are common to "high-performing" states. These include clearly defined goals and data collection, strong agency leadership, interagency collaboration, ongoing training and outreach, communication, local control and flexibility, and respect for innovation.

Structuring their discussions within this framework helped participants focus on particular areas in need of further attention, such as providing employment services to all adults, partnering with school systems to develop stronger transition programs, and educating individuals and families to think about employment in terms of careers rather than jobs. Some of the participants formed a smaller work group to outline the characteristics and content of an employment policy.

At subsequent meetings beginning in July 2010, the employment policy work group addressed these areas as they discussed the content and characteristics of a potential employment policy. They also studied the processes by which other states developed their employment policies to align with their values and objectives.

Through this process, the work group determined that a policy mandating employment might result in

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placements in noncompetitive jobs or other low-quality outcomes. Instead, they focused on removing systemic barriers to integrated employment. They also emphasized the need for agencies to partner with schools and employers. The main goal was to raise expectations about people with disabilities, thus creating integrated employment opportunities.

Impact

By December of 2010, the employment policy work group had created a final position statement. The statement addresses the need to raise expectations around integrated employment; provide education and training to individuals, families, and employment-service providers; and reach out to schools and employers to transform their expectations of individuals with disabilities in integrated employment.

The position statement communicates the pledge by all members of New Hampshire's regional service system to work to develop employment opportunities. At the systems level, the members pledge to find and eliminate employment barriers, fund integrated employment opportunities, support workforce development initiatives, and fund training and support for employment staff. Collaboration with partners and continuous improvement of system-wide services are emphasized.

At the individual level, system members at the direct support level commit to helping individuals and families access the tools and information they need to make decisions about employment services. Commitment to supporting the early transition from school to work, internships, and other career development efforts are emphasized. Finally, members at the direct support level commit to partnering with employers, treating them as customers and meeting or exceeding their needs.

This position statement helped the people of New Hampshire articulate what they will do to improve integrated employment outcomes. Establishing such a clear vision has been helpful as agencies

consider how to redirect funds toward meeting specific goals, such as providing benefits counseling to all employment-services recipients. Turnout at subsequent meetings to discuss employment priorities has been high because the process has remained transparent and open to all interested participants.

The position statement also influenced the strict criteria used to nominate success stories. These stories are used for marketing and promotion of employment through video clips and in paper and electronic format.

Suggestions for replication

- » Study other states' efforts to increase integrated employment outcomes. Understand stakeholders' values and the context in which policies and initiatives could work.
- » Invest time to meet with stakeholders. Have a transparent, open process to keep motivation for participation high.
- » Gauge the strongest needs of stakeholders rather than forcing change. The strongest needs here were for establishing a culture of employment through education and outreach.
- » Communicate a clearly written vision. This is the first step toward making other changes, such as developing new partnerships or reallocating funds to support the initiative.
- » Set clear action steps with timelines for completion. This keeps everyone motivated and on task.

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