

# State Agency Promising Practice

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## Maine's Peer- Support Training: Helping People with ID/DD Transition Out of Sheltered Workshops

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### Background

In 2006, a new Maine law mandated the creation of a waiver program that promotes the expansion of supported employment programs for people with intellectual and developmental disabilities (ID/DD). As a result, state funding for sheltered workshops was reduced for seven workshops and approximately 220 individuals throughout Maine.

These individuals received funding under the new waiver program for community supports and supported employment services. As a result, Maine's Department of Health and Human Service's (DHHS) Office of Adults with Cognitive and Physical Disabilities (OACPD) developed a comprehensive work plan. A pilot project, which was included in this plan, focused on those agencies that were scheduled to transition from offering sheltered employment to only integrated employment.

The pilot project is a collaborative effort between OACPD, Maine's Developmental Disabilities Council, a self-advocacy group called Speaking Up for Us, Portland Goodwill, and the University of Southern Maine (USM) Muskie School of Public Service. It helps individuals in sheltered workshops to prepare for the transition into community work. Utilizing a train-the-trainer model, It's Your Life: Building Connections Through Work trains persons with ID/DD who are successfully employed in integrated settings to mentor and support others. This training enables those already employed to provide practical information and support to those individuals who, upon the closing of their workshop, may choose to be employed in their communities as well.

### Implementation

The USM Muskie School recruited, selected, and trained five individuals with ID/DD who are successfully employed in community settings as peer trainers to

develop and present the series of informational sessions. Muskie staff held a series of meetings to create a curriculum and to assist the peer trainers in presenting their employment stories in a variety of mediums, including pictures and video.

Peer trainers were actively involved in developing the curriculum for the project. Muskie staff provided training in effective presentation skills. Core competencies for the ID/DD peer trainers were training and mentoring skills, leadership, and a commitment to integrated employment. Muskie staff provided technical support to the peer trainers in developing written products to accompany their live presentations.

The outcome of this series of meetings was Session 1, a two-hour module consisting of the following: the sharing of personal stories regarding obtaining and maintaining employment; an overview of supported employment services; and advice on developing personal networks to explore employment in the community.

In Session 1, trainers shared their own employment stories and described the differences between

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sheltered work and competitive employment. The goal of this training was to help participants recognize that people with disabilities can be successfully employed in the community, and to acknowledge their hopes and fears about leaving sheltered workshops. The program was offered to seven agencies. A total of 85 individuals with disabilities and 18 staff attended these sessions.

The USM Muskie School also developed another two sessions as part of the series for the identified organizations. Session 2, “Finding the Right Fit for Me”, was offered in December 2008, and Session 3, “Putting it All Together,” was offered in 2009.

## Impact

The project has had positive impact in several ways. First, it has enhanced the “It’s Your Life” presenters’ ability to provide training and build networks statewide. It has also enabled workshop participants to make informed decisions about supported employment and building community connections. The “It’s Your Life” trainers were able to provide practical assistance and reassurance from their own experiences of being employed.

Specially designed evaluation forms were administered at the end of each session. Results showed that 100% of workshop participants enjoyed hearing their peers’ employment stories through video and pictures. 94% reported that they understood how a job in the community is different from their sheltered workshop. 97% reported that, after this training, they understood what types of jobs were available in the community. To conclude

each session, there was an open discussion of participants’ hopes and fears about leaving the sheltered workshop.

## Suggestions for Replication

- » Create a collaborative team that includes a strong group of self-advocates, to increase the relevancy of the training’s design.
- » Acknowledge that participants at sheltered workshops that are converting their services to community employment may find these impending changes stressful.
- » Have peer-support trainers provide accurate information, encouragement, and powerful motivation during a time of change by drawing from their own experiences.
- » Allow collaborative partners to capitalize on the sheltered workshop as a forum for discussion and education about community employment.

## Resources

A detailed report and more thorough description of this program can be found at:  
<http://webapp.usm.maine.edu/MuskieWebDBfrontend/publicationView.action?publicationId=6869>.

**For more information on this practice  
contact [thinkwork@umb.edu](mailto:thinkwork@umb.edu)**



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