

State Agency Promising Practice

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TOPIC:
Training and
Technical Assistance

Community Employment Training by and for Individuals With Intellectual and Developmental Disabilities in Tennessee

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Background

Project Income was a joint venture between the Tennessee Microboards Association (statewide organization that supports individual microboards, which procure and oversee supports and services) and People First of Tennessee (a statewide self-advocacy organization for people with intellectual and developmental disabilities). The focus of the project was to educate people with intellectual and developmental disabilities (ID/DD) and their families about the benefits of and opportunities for community employment.

Implementation

In the late 1990s Tennessee began a targeted effort to increase the number of people served by the Department of Mental Retardation Services (DMRS) who live and work in the community. In June 2001 DMRS partnered with the Tennessee Employment Consortium (TEC, a statewide organization focused on increasing the number of Tennesseans in integrated employment) to coordinate efforts across the state to increase employment outcomes for people with ID/DD. Project Income received grant funding from TEC in 2005 to develop and implement a course to educate people and their families about community employment.

What made Project Income innovative was that the curriculum was designed and implemented by individuals with ID/DD and their families. The intent of hiring trainers with ID/DD and their families was to provide a forum to share personal successes and frustrations with being employed in the community

and ultimately to reduce the fears that inhibit many people from choosing community work. The qualifications for trainers with disabilities were that they received supports from DMRS, they were working in the community, and they were willing to give a presentation. Family trainers were required to have a family member that meets the individual trainer criteria. Project Income had two training curriculums: one for people with ID/DD and one for families.

To ensure that the authentic voice of people with disabilities was heard throughout Project Income, a weekend conference was held to develop the curriculum. The project's administrative staff from the Tennessee Microboards Association and People First of Tennessee conducted extensive pre-conference planning to ensure that individuals had the supports and services they needed to actively participate in the planning meetings. Additionally, to make certain that the experiences of people with ID/DD were accurately captured, college students who had no knowledge of employment supports or people with disabilities were hired to run the planning sessions and document the meetings. The weekend conference resulted in a curriculum that presented the benefits and challenges of working in the community from the point of view of an employee with ID/DD. Topics addressed in the program included the impact of work on benefits, the skills needed to obtain and maintain a job in the community, and what to do if you do not like your job.

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Impact

The first round of Project Income trainings was conducted during the spring of 2006. Potential attendees were informed of the initial training sessions by mail, although later efforts included disseminating information online, in statewide newsletters, and through individual case managers. All trainings were free of charge and offered in the early evening. There was no pre-registration requirement. Training sessions were held across the state of Tennessee at a variety of locations, including a career center, a library, the United Way, and a Chamber of Commerce. At the end of each training session, attendees had the opportunity to speak with an on-site Social Security Benefits Planning Specialist. Additionally, one family member who facilitated a training session was identified to answer any follow-up questions that may have arisen.

On average about ten people attended each of the initial training sessions. After each session, attendees were asked to provide feedback on the information presented. The most frequent comment from family members was that more people need to be made aware of both the training and overall the opportunities for community employment in Tennessee. Additional feedback from sessions included an interest in learning more about applying for vocational rehabilitation services, providers that offer community employment, and the job development process.

In July 2006, however, funding for the project was redirected toward other initiatives to increase employment outcomes in Tennessee. Although the Project Income training is no longer being offered, it was a promising effort to support people with ID/DD to educate others about the benefits of community employment.

Suggestions for Replication

- » Encourage individuals with disabilities and their families to tell stories about their experiences with community employment.
- » Structure the curriculum to address the factors that inhibit people with ID/DD from choosing employment.
- » Provide attendees with resources that will allow them to pursue community employment.
- » Ensure that the voices of individuals with disabilities are heard by facilitating their involvement in curricula planning and development.

**For more information on this practice
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