

Service Provider Promising Practice

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TOPIC:
Community Life
Engagement

Work Inc.: Developing A Community Liaison Program to Address Holistic Needs

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Background

Leadership at Work Inc., a provider in the Boston area, thought about the holistic approach to providing individual supports even before their agency's transformation began. Work Inc. designed its community liaisons program to have three components: volunteerism, with the intention of identifying employment opportunities and contributing to the community; recreation, "because everyone wants to have fun"; and instruction, with a focus on skill-building and identifying interests and talents. In designing and implementing the program, Work Inc. staff considered each person's interests, and turned former workshop staff into "community liaisons."

Implementation

The core element of the initiative was exploration. Work Inc. started by convening small groups of individuals and surveying them about their interests. Some examples were crocheting, knitting, crafts, and spending time at the fire station. For those who were not sure, Work Inc. provided opportunities to try out different activities. This was a way to broaden ideas about what was available in the community, and to refine those options to the ones each individual enjoyed most.

Work Inc. also convened 4 separate family meetings to further identify and solidify individual interests. The agency designed its community engagement program and explored opportunities based on identified individual interests.

Work Inc. then used these non-work community exploration opportunities for job finding and as a way to help people build skills, explore interests, and develop a clear plan for employment. They made a concerted effort to engage in volunteer opportunities that build both hard and soft skills, and to find recreational activities that build community access skills.

Although the activities started with only a few individuals, the initiative spread. As more individuals became involved, more community options were discovered. Individuals would also interest their peers in the activities they participated in. Work Inc. took advantage of the MBTA, Boston's public transportation agency, for opportunities around the city, further building individual transportation skills (i.e. his/her human capital).

Work Inc. reengineered their former "work coach" positions from their sheltered workshop into new "community liaison" positions, whose job it was to link individuals with opportunities within the community. Proving to be a valuable resource, community liaisons went out into the community doing outreach and introducing Work Inc. and each individual to a range of resources and people in their community.

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Community liaisons also used their relationships and networks to make connections in the community for the individuals they were supporting or acted as job coaches as individuals gained competitive integrated employment placements.

Impact

Work Inc.'s plan involved three crucial components of holistic supports: volunteerism to open employment opportunities, recreation, and instruction to build human capital. Work Inc. was considering the whole person, with wrap-around life supports as necessary, to create a full life with employment included.

Work Inc. used the community liaison initiative to enhance the career planning process with a broader set of resources and perspectives, as well as a deeper, more well-rounded understanding of each individual. This enabled the blending of employment and community life from the beginning.

This type of approach lets staffers make the most of each other's resources and specialties. For example, an employment specialist might use day habilitation supports for skill building and career exploration, while also helping clients search for integrated employment.

For more information on this practice contact thinkwork@umb.edu



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