



Employment First Florida Success Stories: Employment Services

The Rural Routes to Employment Project: Using Communities' Social Capital to Find Employment

The Employment First Florida Success Stories Series highlights examples of innovative employment services, creative state agency employment practices, and individual employment success stories in Florida. The series is a product of the EmployMe1st project, a joint project of the Florida Developmental Disabilities Council, the Institute for Community Inclusion at the University of Massachusetts Boston, and the National Association of State Directors of Developmental Disabilities Services.

Description of the practice:

The Florida Developmental Disabilities Council (FDDC) has been a key player over the last decade as Florida's state agencies have formed strong partnerships to expand employment opportunities for people with intellectual and developmental disabilities (IDD). The FDDC and other partners have noted the need for agencies at the local level to replicate state-level partnerships to bridge the persistent employment gap for people with IDD.

Local agencies in Florida, as with any other state, experience different employment opportunities and challenges depending on their location. The populations in rural areas, farther from service agencies and business communities, might appear to have many more barriers to becoming employed. However, the FDDC's support and development of the Rural Routes to Employment (RRTE) project, with the Griffin Hammis Associates Center for Social Capital (CSC), has helped people in rural parts of Florida to look for the assets and strengths in their communities and to generate employment opportunities.

In 2011, the FDDC funded the CSC to carry out this five-year initiative to expand employment opportunities for people with IDD in rural areas. First, the CSC and FDDC launched an application process for local-level entities and agencies. Next, the FDDC, the Florida Department of Education (DOE), the Department of Vocational Rehabilitation (DVR), and other partners sent out announcements about the application opportunity to communities in Florida's rural counties. After that, the CSC reviewed the applications and selected five rural communities in which to work.

Currently, the project is underway in communities across rural Florida, but the application and implementation processes are the same. Applicants have to be entities located in one of

Florida's rural counties. Additionally, they must commit to developing a Community Action Team (CAT) comprised of community members who attend regularly scheduled meetings and a series of trainings offered by the CSC. The trainings are approved by the Association of Community Rehabilitation Educators (ACRE), and cover the processes of discovery of personal genius (DPG) and customized employment (CE). Participants also attend additional trainings covering topics such as benefits planning and the formation of employment specialist teams.

CATs often come together through a focus group process initiated by the participating agency or organization, during which community members can learn about the project and about participating in the CAT. CATs usually include employers, employment specialists, agency/organization representatives, individuals with disabilities, and family members.

Although project administrators do not expect applicants to have commitments from all potential CAT members in place, they review applicants' responses. This helps administrators to gauge the strength of applicants' commitment to the project, and the likelihood that they can obtain the necessary resources and support from community organizations and from individuals interested in joining the CAT.

The CAT must commit to assisting a minimum of four job seekers with developmental disabilities to obtain customized employment. The CAT members are trained to use their social capital, or professional networks of community contacts, to help the job seekers obtain these customized-employment placements.

CAT members receive mentoring from experts on the job development strategies used in the project. Program administrators from the development sites also provide opportunities for employment specialists and other direct support professionals to receive job development training.

Lessons learned:

Through their partnership in the Rural Routes to Employment project, the CSC and the FDCC have taken important steps toward overcoming barriers to employment for people with IDD. Their strong relationships with the VR, DOE, and Association for Persons with Disabilities (APD) have helped them address persistent barriers such as the lack of services, staff, and funds in some rural areas.

Recently, the project supported a CRP to expand services into the Marianna area, which did not have services previously, and set up an internship with a local community college so that students could provide employment support to job seekers with IDD. These connections allow VR agency staff, transition specialists in schools, and professionals from community rehabilitation providers (CRPs) to receive thze ACRE training. These professionals also get

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training on more specialized topics such as benefits planning or the formation of employment specialist teams.

CRPs, community employers who have hired people with IDD or are interested in the RRTE's mission, and nonprofit agencies such as the United Way and Habitat for Humanity have also joined. This increased membership has expanded the need for training opportunities, and has helped the RRTE to address the support needs of job seekers holistically, for example, by adapting a job seeker's home to make it more physically accessible.

The RRTE keeps its partners in touch with one another through its [Facebook page](#). The page includes photos of training experiences and people at work, news about upcoming events, recognition of participants' efforts, and reminders of the usefulness of tools such as informational interviewing.

Participation in the RRTE project has led to shifts in the perceptions of employment consultants and CAT members about the capabilities of people with IDD, and the capacity of rural communities to support them to become employed. Training participants have reported that tools within the Discovery process, including identifying individuals' skills and interests, mapping employment opportunities in their communities, and negotiating with employers, have led to a more thoughtful search for better job matches.

The use of CAT members' social capital has been an additional powerful tool. Customized employment practices, including a heavy emphasis on informational interviewing to plan individuals' careers and discover employers' unmet needs, and an early focus on developing natural supports, have improved participants' engagement with potential employers and coworkers.

Job seekers and those assisting them find that the use of these practices opens up more employment possibilities. A job seeker whose employment team had been meeting with more than one employer was on the point of being hired when an employer backed out, but was able to secure a second promising job.

Resource ownership – employing a person who has purchased something that will add value to the business – has been used to increase employees' productivity, increase their earnings, and help them gain recognition for their contribution to their employers. Examples include a woman working in an office whose purchase of a copier with grant funds increased her income and productivity and the office's overall efficiency, and a man working at a kennel who purchased dog treadmills that attracted additional business from veterinarians rehabilitating dogs after surgery and people with aging dogs in need of light exercise.

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For other people, the use of the DPG process has led to self-employment opportunities, sometimes within existing businesses. Examples include a man owning a business making new glasses for customers in his father's optometry office, and a man with a woodworking business inside a cabinet maker's shop that added new products to the business.

The success of these efforts is maintained by close communication with state-level agencies/organizations and through Florida's commitment to the Employment First policy. The use of the Discovery and customized-employment processes in Florida's Rural Routes to Employment is detailed thoroughly in the replication manual that the FDDC and CSC have created. This manual has been made available to the Office of Disability Employment Policy and can also be found on the [Griffin Hammis blog](#).

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