



Employment First Florida Success Stories: Employment Services

Supporting a local level network of service organizations and state agencies

Introduction

The Employment First Florida Success Stories Series highlights examples of innovative employment services, innovative state agency employment practices, and individual employment success stories in Florida.

Description of the practice

The Association of Agencies (AOA) of South Florida began in 2000. The AOA provides a venue for sharing information across local organizations that directly or indirectly support people with disabilities. AOA creates links between its member organizations and identified ways that they can work together to better serve their clients. Over 80 agencies from Dade, Monroe, and Broward counties engage in the AOA of South Florida.

Representatives from nonprofit organizations, educational entities, government agencies, and businesses attend meetings to share information and professional knowledge, identify needs of vulnerable populations in the community, and help to develop innovative approaches to those needs. Over 200 participants receive monthly updates on activities and events related to individuals with disabilities and other vulnerable entities through the AOA distribution list.

The AOA organizes actions based on four primary issues: living, learning, earning, and serving. The organization's work almost always includes a focus in concern for employment-related issues but included many other areas of interest within silos of living, learning, earning and serving. Participating agencies recognize that they may only operate within certain parameters of their agency's commission or mission; however, the needs of the individuals with disabilities who they serve are typically more complex. Since the AOA is interested in all aspects of living (i.e. housing, health, etc.), learning (i.e. education, training, auxiliary aids and services, etc.), earning (i.e. employment, entrepreneurship, accommodations, etc.), and serving (i.e. volunteering, helping a neighbor, demonstrating potential, etc.), the AOA provides a venue for agencies to partner together address the intersection of these issues.

Over the years, employment for people with disabilities has emerged as a priority issue because it is viewed by many members as a crucial component of supporting each of the AOA's action areas. Some employment related issues that the AOA has acted on over the years include increasing awareness of the employment potential of individuals with disabilities through the *Identifying Human Potential Campaign*, and their ongoing work to develop and implement a

comprehensive employment initiative to engage the community in supporting employment opportunities for people with disabilities.

The AOA has no dedicated funding source, no hierarchy, and no obligation or expectation of commitment of its members. The sustainability of the AOA comes from the collaborative networks that it has facilitated. The AOA is constantly evolving depending on the needs and interests of those participating. Long term participation in the group is a function of the way in which the organization remains relevant for each member agency by supporting the implementation of cooperative initiatives that fulfill a common purpose. As an organization, they have voluntarily established a culture that set the stage for their work, these include:

- There is a small group of members who have volunteered to address the logistical aspects of contacting members, scheduling and facilitating meetings, and updating members.
- A significant portion of each meeting is focused on learning about one another and listening to each other, which allows the AOA to work collegially and professionally always.
- There are no legal, advocacy, or political issues discussed. This creates an environment where members can quickly identify common areas of concern and interest.
- There is a sense that collaboration requires “a space for struggle.” AOA initiatives are focused on the identification of workable plans that can be supported by the entire membership. This means that even if some ideas have a lot of promise, an important step is for the group to make sure that the viewpoints of all members are reflected.

Lessons learned

- Professional networks are an important outlet. The AOA was never intended to be anything more than an unofficial professional network of people who see the need to communicate and share. The dynamic created through the AOA often leads to some important ideas and initiatives, but these are never intended to interfere with, replace, or in any way take away from the responsibilities and the work of members’ official organizations or agencies.
- Listening to others and creating a safe space to share ideas and opinions is a basic component of collaboration. The meetings are structured to facilitate dialogue among the members; sometimes solve problems, but more often they listen to each other and the answer emerges later. The focus on dialogue and sharing also allows for information to be shared about the vast number of services and resources available in the community. This also helps to ensure that initiatives that are developed both within the AOA and through individual agencies is not duplicative.

Sponsored by United States Department of Health and Human Services, Administration on Developmental Disabilities and the Florida Developmental Disabilities Council, Inc.

The EmployMe1st project is a joint project of the Florida Developmental Disabilities Council, the Institute for Community Inclusion at the University of Massachusetts Boston, and National Association of State Directors of Developmental Disabilities Services.

- Voluntary participation in the group and leadership within the group helps the group to thrive. Part of the AOA's success is that members choose to participate, and part of this means identifying the right people from the right agencies who have the time and opportunity to add to the direction of the AOA. When considering leadership roles members' desire and availability to take on a facilitation responsibilities are addressed.

For more information:

The AOA has for many years operated its own website (<http://aoasf.org>) that explains its activities and posts its resources for the community.

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