



SERIES TITLE:

Employment First Florida Success Stories: Employment Services

Story Title:

The Successful Futures program at Helping People Succeed (HPS): Expanding Options for Volunteering and 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 EmployMe1st, 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:

Helping People Succeed (HPS) is a service provider headquartered in Jensen Beach, in Martin County. Since it was established over fifty years ago by parents wanting a better quality of life for their children with disabilities, HPS has evolved its programs and services to meet changing attitudes toward people with disabilities, and has grown to serve children and adults with disabilities and their families in four Florida counties.

Successful Futures, HPS's adult services program, includes two programs that assist people to enter directly into employment. Project Search, an internship program adopted by many service providers nationwide, is available for students transitioning from school. The Employment Options program supports adults through job development and job coaching services.

Through a third program, Community Connections, adults choose to participate in skill-building classes at HPS, leisure activities at HPS or in the community, or volunteer work in the community. Community Connections has included many participants and staff who had been in the program long-term, over 20 years in some cases. Staff's responsibilities in Community Connections have focused on on-site projects and behavior management. Participants and their families have not typically considered employment as a goal.

In 2014, Successful Futures staff began emphasizing that activities within Community Connections should be meaningful to the participants, and part of a longer-term goal for them to contribute to their communities as volunteers or by becoming employed. Changes to the Community Connections program were spurred on by budget cuts that reduced HPS's level of staffing.

Over the next year, the staff participated in training and discussion about the capacities of people with disabilities to work in the community. They also changed the program guidelines to require that every individual have a plan spelling out the goals he or she wanted to achieve in the Successful Futures program, and the activities he or she would be doing each day to reach those goals.

Through the lesson plan, even leisure activities pursued in the community can be linked back to individual goals. For example, a person attending a local sports event is there to have fun, but also working on the goal of becoming a better traveler in the community.

Last year, HPS began funding Community Connections staff to participate in the employment trainings offered by the Florida Agency for Persons with Disabilities (APD) <http://apd.myflorida.com/>. The trainings cover person-centered planning, work incentives, and best practices in supported employment. The material is presented over four days in classroom settings. HPS makes the training available to staff after they have been employed for 90 days, and funds two staff members to participate at a time.

Lessons learned:

The Community Connections program has changed over the last few years, but staff members who have seen the value of the changes have adjusted well.

France Mason, vice president of the Successful Futures program, says that the use of lesson plans was new for most staff, but it has added structure to the program and increased staff members' sense of accountability and professionalism. Staff refer to the lesson plans to tell the people they serve and their family members about their progress, and to explore their capacity to work.

Community Connections staff have also benefited in several ways from the APD employment training, including their use of job coaching techniques in community volunteer settings. Staff are getting better at noticing individuals' skills and interests that could be transferred into an employment situation. With this information, they can build a solid case for individuals' capacities, and communicate more confidently with families about the possibility of successful employment.

Training staff on employment practices has also encouraged people served by the Community Connections program to shift from having no interest in employment to considering at least a part-time job. For instance, a woman who volunteered through the program with Meals on Wheels was able to move into part-time employment, with support from program staff who identified her skills and interests during the volunteer experience.

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