



Employment First Success Stories: Employment Services

The Florida Unique Abilities Partner Program

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

Florida's efforts to expand community employment opportunities for people with disabilities have targeted all stakeholders, including employers. Resources such as the Abilities Work Help Desk and Web Portal were developed in the last few years to help people with disabilities and employers find a good employment fit. The Florida Unique Abilities Partner program recognizes these employers, supports their efforts, and encourages more employers to make similar commitments. The Florida Unique Abilities Partner program is a collaboration of the Florida Department of Economic Opportunity (DEO), the Florida Department of Education's Bureau of Vocational Rehabilitation and Blind Services, the Florida Agency for Persons with Disabilities, and Career Source Florida.

This program came into being through legislation in 2016. Andy Gardiner, a champion of individuals with disabilities and the president of the Florida Senate at the time, supported the legislation. The program was established as a way to recognize businesses and organizations that demonstrate a commitment to helping Floridians who have disabilities through employment or by providing support to organizations that assist them.

Participating businesses and organizations demonstrate their dedication to strengthening communities and the economy by helping these Floridians with untapped talents become more independent. The program also helps to reduce unemployment, and provides opportunities for like-minded businesses to connect with and support each other.

Program information and guidelines are available at www.FloridaUniqueAbilities.org. Employers can [apply](#) to be designated as a Florida Unique Abilities Partner, or may be nominated by others, including customers who believe they deserve this recognition.

Employers are accepted if they meet one or more of these guidelines:

1. Employed at least one Florida resident with a disability for at least nine months before their application to the program.
2. Contributed financially or in kind to local or national disability organizations, or made financial or in-kind contributions in support of individuals who have a disability.
3. Established or contributed financially or in kind to the establishment of a program that advances the independence of individuals who have a disability.

Employers who are accepted as Florida Unique Abilities partners are listed on the Florida Unique Abilities Partner website, receive a special designation in Employ Florida if the business is currently listed, and have their name provided to Visit Florida for consideration in the development of marketing campaigns. Employers also receive a window cling with the Florida Unique Abilities logo they can display in their windows, and a logo template to use on corporate materials including letterhead and marketing.

Lessons Learned

The program was launched in late October 2016. Although marketing and outreach initiatives have been successful, getting the word out to employers throughout the state has been challenging. Program administrators are confident that as more employers become partners, word will spread about the significance and value of the program, and business and organization participation will continue to increase.

Nemours Children Health System had this to say about the program: “Being part of the Florida Unique Abilities Partner Program reinforces our commitment to the children we serve through the Special Olympics Young Athletes Program. By building awareness in our community, it is our hope that one day the same children who participate in Special Olympics will have a wide variety of professional opportunities through a company or organization that values inclusive employment.”

Other testimonials can be found on the [News and Events](#) tab of the program website.

[Watch a great video](#) highlighting the importance of the program. You can also follow the program on [Facebook](#) and [Twitter](#) (primary hashtag: #UniqueAbilities)

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