



SERIES TITLE

Employment First Florida Success Stories: Employment Services

STORY TITLE

Nassau County School District becomes VR vendor to better serve transition-age students

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:

In 2016, the Nassau County School District [[link to https://www.nassau.k12.fl.us/](https://www.nassau.k12.fl.us/)] became an official Florida Division of Vocational Rehabilitation (VR) vendor. Administrators decided to have the school district become a vendor so it could better support its students with disabilities, ages 15 to 22, in paid and unpaid community-based work experiences before graduation and employment.

The school district's decision to become a VR vendor was the natural next step in its history of collaborating with agencies to support employment. Over the past several years multiple organizations in the county have worked to improve employment services:

- The Nassau County School District and The Arc Nassau [[link to https://thearcnassau.org/](https://thearcnassau.org/)] collaborate to provide employment services to transition-age students through a grant from the Able Trust. [[link to http://www.abletrust.org/](http://www.abletrust.org/)]
- The school district and the Florida Council on Aging [[link to fcoa.org/](http://www.fcoa.org/)] collaborate to help students get to and from work.
- The Florida Division of Vocational Rehabilitation [[link to http://www.rehabworks.org/](http://www.rehabworks.org/)] collaborates with the Florida Developmental Disabilities Council [[link to https://www.fddc.org/](https://www.fddc.org/)] and the Center for Social Capital [[link to http://www.griffinhammis.com/social_capital/](http://www.griffinhammis.com/social_capital/)] to train employment staff to conduct the Discovery process through the Rural Routes to Employment project. [[link to http://griffinhammis.typepad.com/florida_rural_routes_to_e/](http://griffinhammis.typepad.com/florida_rural_routes_to_e/)]
- Nassau County is also developing a Project Search [[link to http://www.projectsearch.us/](http://www.projectsearch.us/)] site as part of a grant awarded by the Developmental Disabilities Council [[link to](#)

<https://www.fddc.org/>] in partnership with VR [link to <http://www.rehabworks.org/>] and the Agency for Persons with Disabilities. [link to <http://apd.myflorida.com/>]

- Nassau County is one of several local level interagency collaborative sites working to bring Employment First practices to the local level. The county receives ongoing consultation through the EmployMe1st project, a joint project of the Florida Developmental Disabilities Council, the Institute for Community Inclusion at the University of Massachusetts Boston [link to <http://www.thinkwork.org/>], and the National Association of State Directors of Developmental Disabilities Services [<https://www.nasdds.org/>].

Lastly, school administrators knew that Nassau County would stand out as the first county in Florida to have its school district become a VR vendor. As a VR vendor, the school district would gain access to the newest services and opportunities to tap into VR's employer networks. Becoming a VR vendor would also make it easier for the district's transition specialists to plan for employment with students and families.

Nassau County school administrators used the VR application process to look more closely at their service definitions and policies, use of funds, and outcome data. The school district's first step was to contact the state VR office to establish a connection with them, sign up at the MyFlorida Marketplace's website, and submit the electronic W-9 form to the Department of Financial Services for tax identification.

Next, the school district needed to meet VR standards regarding staff qualifications and service provision. All staff providing supported employment services needed state or national certification. The school district needed to provide a certificate of liability insurance. It also had to supply the resumes and diplomas of all staff and school administrators who would have face-to-face contact with VR customers.

District staff submitted a pre-placement training curriculum to illustrate the quality of the services they planned to provide as a vendor. They also obtained two references from businesses and two references from individuals they had worked with, and a list of employers with whom students had a successful job placement or community-based work experience.

Once the school district was accepted as a VR vendor, it entered into a noncompetitive rate contract with the VR agency to provide pre-placement training, employment services, supported employment, and on-the-job training. Provision of all VR funded services is billable to the school district, and employment placement is reimbursable from VR only after a student exits the school system. The school district's agreement with VR to provide services requires the school district to report monthly progress and outcome data to the state VR agency for students in employment and community-based work services.

Lessons learned:

As a VR vendor, the Nassau County School District gained access to a contract manager from VR who provided an orientation and tip sheets for the services the school district can now deliver.

VR vendor status allows the school district to access VR's registry of individuals and businesses from whom its vendors purchase services. This helps Nassau County to better refer graduating students to adult employment services.

Nassau County is limited to serving students while they are still in the school system. The district has two employment specialists this year and can qualify for up to ten employment specialists if the district identifies additional students who need VR services throughout the school year.

Becoming a VR vendor provided additional opportunities for school district staff to support students to gain new skills. During the summer of 2017, a three-day, 20-hour pre-placement training to assist students in gaining employability skills was held. In addition, the district provided students with on-the-job training opportunities.

For more information, contact the Exceptional Student Education Department of the Nassau County School District at (904) 491-9881.

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