



SERIES TITLE

Employment First Florida Success Stories: Employment Services

STORY TITLE

Creating a Support Network to Achieve Independent Travel to Work

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:

One of the most challenging barriers faced by Floridians with disabilities. To help overcome this obstacle, administrators in the Nassau County public schools are supporting students with significant disabilities to learn the skills they need to travel to their jobs. Collaborative discussions and planning with the local Council on Aging (COA) allowed the administrators to understand the issues, and to put supports in place to help students achieve maximum self-sufficiency in traveling.

The school district began by seeking out resources that could provide transportation to their students, and found that a good option might be the Council on Aging's (COA) transportation program. This program serves senior citizens, people with disabilities, and those without other means of transportation (identified by COA as "transportation-disadvantaged").

The schools invited Mike Hays, the COA's transit operations manager, to discuss the nature of the program, learn about the application process, and to share information with the COA about the support needs of students with disabilities. This discussion smoothed the way for students who had found employment and needed transportation to begin applying to the COA program.

The students filled out applications and returned them to the COA, with supports the school's job coaches. Once the COA notified them that they were eligible, the students who needed extra support took time to learn how to access the transportation system before they began using it to travel to and from work. With help from their job coaches and cooperation from the COA, the students learned to schedule rides, find out when the rides would be picking them up, and take rides on their own.

At first, it was critical for students to have a number of supports as they learned to use the transportation. Job coaches created pictures to guide students through the process of scheduling a ride, or recognizing the vehicle sent to pick them up.

Job coaches and COA staff also coordinated practice sessions, when students would call the COA to schedule rides. This helped the COA staff to recognize students' speech patterns, and the students could practice communicating with COA staff about their intended trips or the status of their rides. Job

coaches also forwarded the students' accommodation requests directly to drivers so they would be able to support the students if needed.

Lessons learned:

Educate family members. The success of Nassau County students in accessing community transportation was due in large part to the education of their family members. As job coaches phased out and were replaced by natural supports such as family members, they ensured that family members were oriented to the process of accessing COA services. Family members who understood the transportation process were able to assist students in scheduling transportation to and from work.

Take advantage of technology as an assistive device. Students learned to take pictures of their work schedules to help them request rides from the COA. They also learned to set timers and alarms on their phones to know when to call back to check on arrival times for rides. Students programmed the COA's number into their phones. Photos of COA vehicles also were saved to students' phones so they could pull them up to identify their rides.

Provide additional support up front. One student with significant speech deficits was assisted by his school speech therapist in role-playing the phone calls to become familiar with how to schedule rides. The student was given key words and phrases that COA staff knew to listen for to identify him and understand his transportation requests.

Join forces with the community. It truly takes a number of players coming together to create interdependence, where each agency or individual has a role to play in supporting students to reach their maximum potential for success.

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