



Employment First Success Stories: Employment Services

Division of Blind Services: Employment Placement Specialists and Counselors Meeting Regularly to Improve Employment Services

Each person served by Florida's Division of Blind Services (DBS) works with a counselor to determine how much assistance they need and what supports and services are best for their life. Counselors have helped many DBS clients adapt to living with blindness or visual impairment and regain confidence in their abilities.

Until a couple of years ago, the counselors did not work closely with the employment placement specialists (EPSs), also employed by DBS, to whom they would refer job seekers. The EPSs would then take on the responsibility of helping the job seekers find employment. In many instances, counselors would be brought into job situations to help people maintain employment by helping them become oriented to workplaces and obtain any needed accommodations and natural supports.

Counselors and EPSs would have one-on-one meetings from time to time to discuss job seekers' progress and brainstorm work opportunities. However, as much as they wanted to help the job seekers succeed in employment, the counselors had more training and experience working to prepare job seekers for employment than understanding their local labor market.

In 2016, in line with its strategic plan's focus on assisting clients to find employment, DBS made it easier for counselors and EPSs to work together. Under the direction of Stacy Smith, DBS an employee who is the statewide business consultant for employment services, DBS offices throughout Florida were supported to begin holding weekly EPS business meetings attended by the EPSs, counselors, and supervisors.

Ms. Smith visited each DBS district office and introduced the EPSs and counselors to a blueprint of the new meeting format. She shared with these teams that the EPSs would lead the meetings by presenting the latest local labor market information and reviewing the list of job seekers referred to them by the counselors. From there, the teams would be better able to discuss employer contacts, work experiences, and on-the-job training opportunities.

Lessons Learned:

Weekly meetings between EPSs and counselors have improved employment services. The regularity of the meetings has built a sense of teamwork between counselors and EPSs. The new meeting format allows people to talk together about what the job seekers were doing or about other work opportunities. The meetings also saved time for EPSs, who no longer needed to explain labor market information and employer demands to each counselor one-on-one.

DBS has established standards and procedures for all DBS offices to use when conducting the meetings. Ms. Smith is able to facilitate and model the meeting structure in district offices that have requested additional support. Strategies, such as holding the meetings at the same time each week, reinforce the importance of the meetings and make meeting attendance a habit for all staff.

In some DBS offices, the weekly meetings have had such a positive effect on teamwork that EPSs and counselors have started working together in a number of situations. EPS John Mosley explained that while he and the counselors have their weekly meetings, they also work as a team between meetings to connect people to employers. He has brought employers to DBS to educate them about how the counselors help people develop workplace skills.

Counselor Nancy Bateh explained that she will often go with Mr. Mosley to meet a new potential employer to develop work experience opportunities or talk about how DBS supports the employment process, whether or not they know of someone who would be a good fit for that employer. In a few cases, DBS clients who themselves are business owners or hiring managers and have sought out DBS for sight restoration services have told Mr. Mosley and Ms. Bateh that they would certainly consider other DBS job seekers for employment opportunities.

The stronger sense of teamwork has made it possible for EPSs and counselors to go to job fairs together or with job seekers, and the counselors have grown more skilled at job development. EPSs and counselors have also worked together with job seekers using resources at other agencies, such as CareerSource.

The work of the EPSs and their regular interaction with counselors may explain the better employment outcomes and wages in Florida for DBS clients in the last two years. DBS's goal is to have 755 people employed per year; 852 were employed in 2018 and 855 in 2017. The average wage was \$12.89 per hour in 2017, and is \$14.00 per hour in 2018.

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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.

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