

Employment First FLORIDA



Employment First Success Stories: Employment Services

RESPECT of Florida: Supporting Self-Employment through Microenterprise Grants

The [Florida Association of Rehabilitation Facilities](#) (Florida ARF) is a statewide professional association that serves as a voice for rehabilitation service providers. Florida ARF represents community rehabilitation providers (CRPs) throughout Florida with different levels of engagement with community employment. The association has been a consistent partner in efforts to change public policy and expand community employment.

[RESPECT of Florida](#), the business arm of Florida ARF, creates job opportunities for more than 1,200 individuals each year through production of goods and services, produced by individuals with disabilities, that are purchased by governmental entities. While the program evolved from a sheltered-workshop model, today it creates real jobs that pay minimum wage or better where the majority of the work is performed in integrated settings.

In 2015, RESPECT of Florida created a program to encourage self-employment through microenterprise grants. Since 2015, grants of up to \$12,500 have been made available to individuals with any disability receiving services from the CRPs it represents.

RESPECT informs people with disabilities, families, rehabilitation counselors and other stakeholders of the availability of these grants, and people interested in starting or growing businesses apply through the CRPs from which they receive services. The applicants work with the CRPs' employment staff, their family members, business partners and others to develop business plans. The business plans are submitted to a panel of reviewers. The review process takes about one month before the winners are notified.

"All grant submissions have to come through and be supported by a RESPECT Employment Center," explains Florida ARF's president and CEO Suzanne Sewell. "The employment centers are community rehabilitation provider agencies. They have to be nonprofit, charitable entities approved by RESPECT of Florida." Respect asks that each CRP submit no more than one application per year. Respect gives 1 or 2 awards per year based on availability of funds. The applications are scored on their own merits and the program is open to applicants with any disability, so the awardees have had various types of disabilities.

A selection committee is put together and the applicant proposals are scored. According to Sewell, “staff look for creativity, sustainability and sound business plans when evaluating the proposals.” The applicant with the highest score is selected.

Lessons Learned:

RESPECT’s microenterprise grant program is beginning its fourth year. Awards have been given to individuals with a variety of businesses that are enriching their communities:

- Eddie Rodriguez, owner of [Ybor Eddie’s Hot Sauce](#),
- Thaddeus Wilkins, owner of [Oceanspray Photography](#)
- Moira Rossi, owner of [Moira’s Ventures](#), a motivational speaker who teaches self-advocacy and develops motivational training videos.
- Jeff Shell, owner of [Jeff’s Corner](#), a garden business located in a larger garden in Pensacola.

Most recently, Florida ARF has worked with Florida’s Department of Vocational Rehabilitation to increase opportunities for adults to participate in employment opportunities. This endeavor is modeled after programs such as Project Search, a work-based learning model that has been successful in Florida for transition-age youth.

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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.

Sponsored by United States Department of Health and Human Services, Administration on Developmental Disabilities and the Florida Developmental Disabilities Council, Inc.

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