

PROMISING PRACTICES



“Dream team” approach emphasizes volunteerism

Editor’s note: Founded in 1981, Life Skills Centers, Inc., initially provided sheltered workshops and day programs. As the organization began serving more high-need and medically fragile persons in recent years, it struggled with finding ways to close its institutional settings and integrate its diverse clientele into the community. This story illustrates how parents and guardians, consumers, and staff volunteered to work together to achieve a “dream team” success.

Frustrated with the traditional services offered to her foster son with a disability, a mother believed there must be better opportunities for the youth, who soon would transition out of school. He wanted to learn to cook and to experience his life in Michigan to the fullest.

The mother asked for help from a referral and placement corporation, which sent a request for proposals to service providers in the northern Macomb County, Michigan, area. When [Life Skills Centers](#) responded to the request, the organizational leadership felt that the proposal reflected the direction and philosophy that the organization had, until then, only dreamed about implementing.

Life Skills Centers was awarded the contract to develop a program for the young man, and the Choices program was born. At the onset, the organizational leadership, staff, consumers, parents and guardians, and professionals agreed that people can flourish when they have a voice and a share in ownership of their services.

“The more we listened to the persons served and others, the better services became. When consumers feel they will be

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About the ECS Promising Practices newsletter series

An organization receiving exemplary recognition in its CARF survey report stands out because of its professional and strategic response to a service or business need. CARF presents these ECS Promising Practices articles to encourage dialogue among service providers and to offer examples of creative solutions for improving service quality.

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heard, they readily share their ideas,” says Dale R. Wagner, executive director of Life Skills Centers.

Using what became known as the “dream team” approach to involving all of the stakeholders, Choices began offering a blend of practical, vocational, volunteer, and recreational community services for the persons served.

Choices, as the name suggests, is about giving the persons served options in their services. Consumers, who previously had no say in choosing their services, now plan their weekly and monthly schedules. Volunteerism remains a favored activity. Consumers often volunteer to clean churches, parks, and businesses. They also volunteer to prepare and deliver Meals on Wheels® and work on nonprofit farms.

Below: Family commitment was demonstrated when the brother of a person served donated a new, fully equipped van to Choices.



The success of Choices has prompted the formation of similar Life Skills Centers programs in the region:

- Starting Point—a parent group conceived and named the program, hired a director, formed a parent support group, and conducted numerous fundraising activities to buy equipment and furnishings and to provide funds for activities.

Consumer volunteerism is emphasized at Starting Point as a way for the persons served to learn vocational skills. The program also gives persons time to enjoy recreational activities and to develop community skills, such as dining out and shopping. All scheduled activities are planned by the consumers with parental input. On most days, consumers have several options for how they will spend their day.

The most recent [CARE](#) survey report noted, “Life Skills Centers responded to the needs expressed by parents of persons with disabilities in the development of its

Starting Point program. The organization was proactive in eliciting input from family members and putting their ideas into place for the formulation of this project. As a result, family members continue to be very involved with this program and are strongly supportive of it.”

- Bright Futures, Opportunities, and Blue Water Choices— These three programs closely mirror the original Choices program, yet all are unique because they are tailored to meet the specific needs of the individuals served in their respective communities.

All five programs have benefitted from using a “dream team” approach of engaging consumers, parents, guardians, and other stakeholders. In each program, consumers plan their activities, give themselves options, and learn new vocational skills by volunteering in their communities.

Consumer, parent/guardian, and agency/funder satisfaction rates have remained between 99 and 100 percent throughout the development of these programs. Testimonials confirm that Life Skills Centers’ consumers are happy, independent, and eager to participate in their programs.

“We at Life Skills Centers plan to move forward in developing new opportunities in volunteerism; community integration; and, most important, promoting the growth of the persons we serve,” Wagner promises.

Below: Starting Point volunteers cleaned Clothes Closet, a shop that provides gently used clothing and small household appliances for low-income persons in the Rochester, Michigan, area. The Clothes Closet director was so impressed with the volunteers’ superior work that Starting Point was awarded a cleaning contract. Now, Starting Point consumers receive a wage to clean the shop.



For more information about Life Skills Centers and its programs, contact Dale R. Wagner, executive director, at dale.wagner@sbcglobal.net or (586) 468-3682. The organization's website is at www.lifeskillscentersinc.org.

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