

PROMISING PRACTICES

Innovation in Human Services

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CARF’s Employment and Community Services (ECS) customer service unit is pleased to present these brief articles on a variety of promising practices.

The purpose of these articles is to encourage community providers and their partners to explore thoughtful person-centered designs and efficient business practices. What makes a community provider’s approach to be recognized by CARF as a promising practice is its professional and strategic response to an observed service or business need. These promising practices are always designed with input from the provider’s stakeholders and based on those individuals’ quality expectations. These articles are snapshots in time capturing the organizations’ successes. All organizations are evolving and remain flexible as their resources and needs change.

These articles—and many more—are posted online in the ECS Promising Practices newsletter. We encourage you to read current and past articles at www.carf.org/ECSPromisingPractices. From this webpage, you can also sign up for a free subscription to receive future issues of the newsletter by e-mail or an RSS feed.

Consumers can guide human resource decisions better than anybody else

An Ohio-based supported living organization creates harmonious housing situations using consumer input

It’s the 21st century, when consumers who live in some type of supported living situation want and deserve the right to choose who will provide support for them. It’s one of the most basic choices individuals exercise daily without any conscious thought, much as they decide on roommates or whom to dine with every night. However, nearly every service provider can affirm that just because it’s important,

doesn't mean it's easy to implement on behalf of consumers. So, how can consumers' rights to exercise legitimate choice about who works and lives with them be balanced with an organization's need to attract, train, and retain quality staff?

Supported Community Living (SCL), an organization providing supported living services to 55 consumers in 29 locations in the central Ohio area, decided these goals were not mutually exclusive. It developed a system that gives consumers a say in the initial selection of staff, as well as a say in who will serve as substitute staff.

Including consumers from multiple locations in the interview process proved unworkable on a timely and consistent basis. As a next-best practice, applicants are interviewed and selected by human resources and assigned to work with specific individuals on a probationary status. Early in the new employee's on-the-job training, each consumer (and/or guardian) in a shared location is given the opportunity to voice his/her opinion on the new employee's performance. Consumers are asked specific questions regarding their satisfaction and if they are in agreement with having the new employee continue to provide their regular services. They sign a consent form that records their agreement or disagreement with the assignment. The reason for any disagreement is



Consumers input is of the utmost priority in deciding direct care staff members.

asked for, but not required. All consumers at the location must be in agreement for the employee to continue the assignment in that location. If one of the individuals disagrees, the assigned program specialist will meet with the resident to

determine if retraining of the employee can be worked out or a continued trial be arranged. If the consumer is not agreeable to either of these, the employee is reassigned to another location.



This system would work perfectly if every regular staff member never got sick or took vacation time. Of course this never happens, so SCL had to create a mechanism for assigning substitute staff. To do this, the organization maintains a list of the staff members preferred by each consumer. New employees are photographed during their orientation and included on the employee master photo list. On an annual basis, each consumer is interviewed privately by the assigned lead staff member and asked to identify by picture which staff members he/she would like to have included on his/her preferred staff list. A satisfactory preferred staff list doesn't come without some work on the staff's part! Staff members preferred by all consumers are added to the list, but this process doesn't always yield the desired number of alternate staff members. When the alternate staff list is too short, the program lead may go back through the list with all of the residents as a group to ask if there are any compromises possible to increase the list to at least fifteen.

The process is strictly voluntary for the consumers and is intended simply to increase the likelihood of a preferred substitute being available

for a vacancy. When a consumer is unable to participate in the selection process, or if there is insufficient agreement between housemates, the assigned program specialist will then designate the selections as “first” and “second” priority, based on the level of agreement among consumers who live in the same location.

Ultimately, when it comes to staff substitutes, consumers understand that there is no guarantee that a preferred staff member will be available for each vacancy. What SLC has worked to guarantee is that consumer input is of the utmost priority in deciding direct care staff members. Over a two-year period, approximately 72 percent of the initial assignments were approved by consumers within the first 30 to 60 days. Those staff members who were not approved have been reassigned. Although specific data are not available, the extra efforts at implementing this procedure are believed to have paid off in fewer incidents of misunderstanding and conflict, reduced consumer grievances, fewer service errors, and generally improved satisfaction for all when consumers and staff members who enjoy one another are matched together.

For more information about Supported Community Living contact Craig Gladwell at craig.gladwell@scl-col.org.

Sometimes life does come with a manual

Life skills manual breaks learning down into manageable and attainable goals

Prior to being accredited by CARF in 2004, North Shore Disability Resource Centre’s (NSDRC) one-to-one life skills staff members were responsible for implementing individualized service goals primarily through their own resourcefulness. Staff member creativity and the individual needs of persons served determined the direction and method of lessons, resulting in a wide spectrum of approaches toward teaching life skills across the organization. From a performance improvement perspective, the variety of teaching practices made it difficult to assess and ensure that true learning and progress were taking place. Furthermore, pluck and go get ‘em aside, most staff members really wanted a more structured approach to teaching specific skills.



In response to life skills staff members’ requests, NSDRC produced a Life Skills Training Manual. The overall goal of the manual was to provide foundation skills for individuals seeking to increase their self-confidence and independence. NSDRC consulted many excellent resources during the development of the manual, but discovered that most preexisting resources focused on only one or two life skills

areas instead of a comprehensive curriculum that included the full range of skills needed by the persons served.

Development of the manual was funded by grants, enabling NSDRC to customize it to meet the needs of the diverse population of individuals served, the varying skill levels of staff members, and the huge array of possible life skills. After reviewing the different contract goals of the persons served and soliciting input from staff, a list of skill sets was finalized. Topics included:

- Anger management
- Communication and social skills
- Conflict resolution
- Decision making
- Home environment skills
- Money skills
- Personal and self-help skills
- Relationships
- Self-esteem
- Time management
- Transportation skill



Staff members appreciate the structure, user-friendliness, and thoroughness of the manual. Management loves it because staff members maintain a high level of teaching practice.

NSDRC started by building a series of lesson plans that broke down skill learning into manageable and achievable goals. The plans are user-friendly, clear, and adaptable to individual learning styles

and are divided into objectives, handouts, action steps, and signs of generalization sections.

The objectives section is used to identify the goals of the lesson. Handouts, when included, provide supplemental information or worksheets to accompany the action steps, which are a logical sequence of activities to follow in order to reach the objectives. They involve a variety of teaching methods, including instruction, discussion, modeling, role playing, and doing. The signs of generalization section lists signs for staff members to look for in order to determine if the person served has understood the objectives of the lesson, has incorporated this knowledge, and is ready to move on. Teaching tips are included to provide suggestions and strategies for teaching particular skills.

Published in March 2005, the manual is now used as a supplemental resource to help with the teaching of specific skills in a person's individualized plan. Currently, fifteen persons served use this manual, and the intent is to dramatically increase this number upon completion of the review and revision. NSDRC uses this manual, in combination with its self-sufficiency scale planning tool and person-focused plan, to ensure that a comprehensive individual plan is created with tangible and measurable outcomes. Staff members appreciate the structure, user friendliness, and thoroughness of the manual and enjoy the sense of achievement they and the persons served experience when using the lesson plans. Management loves it because staff members are maintaining a high level of teaching practice, and everyone is benefiting from a standard learning approach.

For more information about North Shore Disability Resource Centre's Life Skills Training Manual contact Steve Hall, director of community based services, at (604) 904-4090.

It takes a village to provide employment support

Ohio organization coordinates with its local One-Stop Career Center to provide additional supports for persons with severe mental illness

So often what you do is often who you are. Jobs are an important way to participate in society, to become independent, and to find self-worth and meaning. However, the reality is that the majority of individuals with disabilities are not working—for individuals with severe mental illness the unemployment rate is 85 to 90 percent.

This is a complex social problem without an easy fix. Debbie Dutton-Lambert, Chief Vocational Officer of Greater Cincinnati Behavioral Health Services (GCBHS), recognized the value of work in the recovery process for individuals with mental illness and the alarming trend toward revenue compression from all traditional funding sources for vocational rehabilitation. Given these realities, she hypothesized that using services from the Hamilton County One-Stop Career Center, Southwest Ohio Career Resource Center, would leverage the vocational services available to persons served by GCBHS and potentially provide better vocational outcomes.

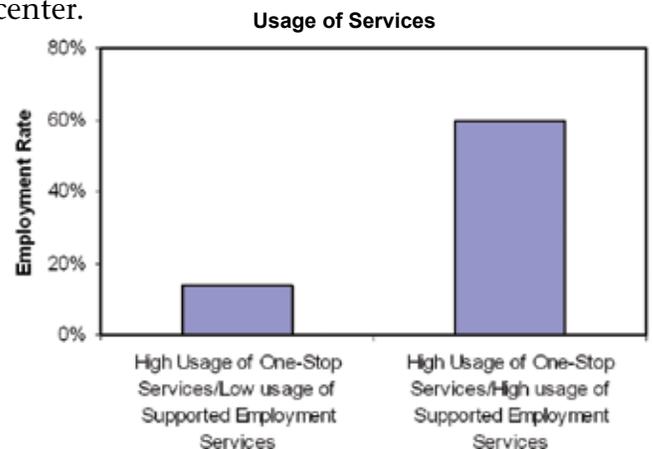
This hypothesis was crafted into a research design with assistance from a consultant and presented to The Health Foundation of Greater Cincinnati for funding. The overall intent of this study was to establish a new best practice for psychiatric rehabilitation that leverages untapped resources and facilitates employment for individuals with severe mental illness.

There were challenges to the integration of Touchstone Employment Network (TEN), GCBHS's supported employment program, into the One-Stop, which was grappling with its own challenges of constant policy changes and staff

turnover. Despite training through a Department of Labor Work Incentive Grant, many One-Stop staff members didn't yet have the experience to serve individuals with disabilities. Persons served were encouraged by TEN staff to utilize the One-Stop independently for such activities as job readiness workshops and computer use in the resource area; however, long waiting periods and lack of individualized attention discouraged independent use.

Even with these barriers, there were many factors to this collaboration that promoted employment, namely benefits counseling and financial planning. Benefits and entitlements counseling is an essential service for individuals who are returning to work, as many depend on Social Security Administration (SSA) benefits such as Supplemental Security Income or Social Security Disability Insurance to meet healthcare needs. The One-Stop provided this consultation service to individuals free of charge through the Legal Aid Society of Greater Cincinnati.

Furthermore, One-Stop staff members also helped many persons develop résumés. The One-Stop made accommodations, including job interview workshops scheduled in the afternoon to compensate for medication effects typically experienced in the early morning. TEN staff was trained to complete the Workforce Investment Act registration paperwork prior to escorting persons to the One-Stop, which helped to minimize anxiety and frustration while waiting in the busy center.



Overall, persons expressed positive feelings and enthusiasm about being part of a mainstreamed employment service. However, this study showed that a combination of a One-Stop and supported employment is the most effective way to provide employment services. It also helps individuals with severe mental illness navigate through the One-Stop system, providing maximum benefit.

Since the conclusion of this research study, the One-Stop is under new management, and despite hopes for future partnerships, there hasn't yet been the same level of cooperation. Regardless, the One-Stop still offers a wealth of resources to a financially strapped public mental health system, so Dutton-Lambert shifted her focus to a more systemic approach statewide. To promote the use of One-Stops by behavioral health providers, she collaborated with her peers across the state of Ohio to form an alliance of providers called the Employment Leadership Alliance (ELA) of Ohio to serve as a clearinghouse to connect trained mental health and vocational rehabilitation services practitioners with those seeking information. The ELA seeks to educate funding sources, providers, persons with mental illness, and the community at large about the value of employment as integral to recovery. The ELA has been very successful in educating Ohio's mental health system on how to access One-Stops for employment needs and resources as well as how to participate on the local workforce boards to represent the interests of the mental health system in community workforce development.

For information visit: www.healthfoundation.org/data_publications/publications_other.html to obtain a copy of the full research report, titled "Efficacy of a Collaboration Between a Mental Health Supported Employment Program and a One-Stop Center in Assisting Individuals with Severe Mental Illness Obtain and Maintain Employment."

Blue Shoe Arts answers the call for imagination

Gallery and studio encourage adults to communicate creatively

Marie Sowers burst through the art studio door one morning, eyes aglow, and announced that she knew exactly what she wanted to do that day. "I had an interesting dream last night, and I want to paint it on canvas," she exclaimed.

Marie's passion to create visual art is shared by the other artists who work alongside her at Blue Shoe Arts in Lancaster, Ohio. Their art is as diverse as the artists themselves. Paintings of people, places, and things; sculptures of animals and computer robots made with found objects; and dolls with clay heads and funky cloth bodies bring delight to viewers. Besides being displayed in the Blue Shoe Arts gallery, Blue Shoe Arts artists' pieces are featured in several other galleries and compete in juried art shows throughout the year.

In 2003, Fairfield County Board of Developmental Disabilities staff members envisioned ways to offer creative employment opportunities for adults with disabilities. Blue Shoe Arts was launched the following year with a mission to:

- Discover individuals with talent in and passion for the visual arts.
- Help individuals develop by providing studio space, materials, instruction, and encouragement.
- Offer the opportunity to market the works to help the artists gain financial independence and grow self-esteem.

Each participating artist works independently in his or her preferred medium in the gallery's studio one or two days a week. The artists receive 100 percent of the artworks' sale price minus supply costs.



Above: "Flying South" by Marie Sowers, 2' x 4' acrylic on canvas.

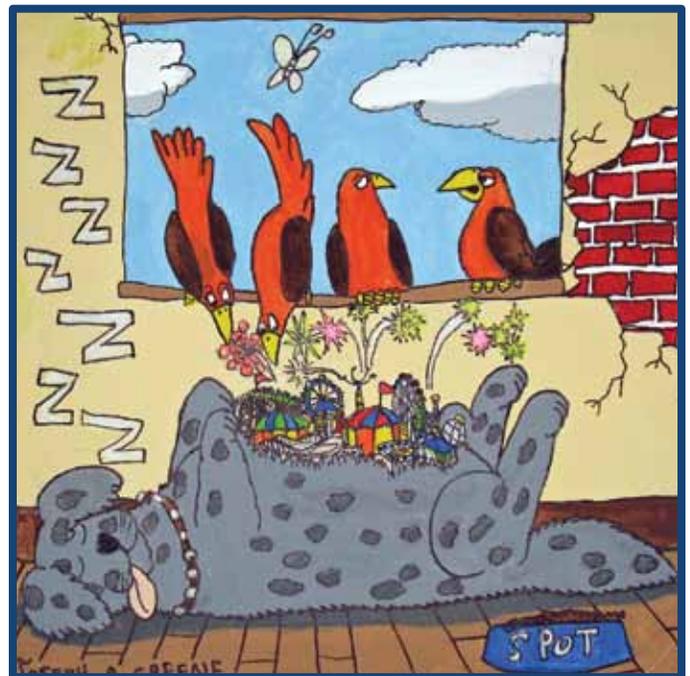
Blue Shoe Arts artists also collaborate on collective art such as sculptures, butterflies, ornaments, and jewelry made of recycled materials. The artists' images are also applied on note cards, t-shirts, and jewelry produced off-site. Profits from these sales support the program, and Blue Shoe Arts has earned a profit for the past three years.

First to join Blue Shoe Arts was Joseph A. Greene, a self-taught cartoon painter who had created his own line of preteen characters by age 4. Now 51 and in his sixth year at Blue Shoe Arts, Joseph has sold more than 600 pieces of artwork, and many collectors prize his work. Unable to hear or speak, Joseph relies on his other senses and has become an adept communicator through his whimsical acrylic paintings. His art has won awards, and he was a cartoonist for the Lancaster Eagle-Gazette. Most important, Joseph has achieved his goals of earning an income as a professional artist and bringing smiles to people's faces with his unique art.

Being involved and competing in visual arts has helped level the playing field for adults with disabilities and connects them to the community. Jen England, writing in the spring 2009 issue of *Southeast Ohio Magazine*, noted that Blue Shoe Arts "has put a face on the adults, who often find themselves overlooked by the public."

Blue Shoe Arts continues to thrive in the community. Recently, the gallery and studio moved into larger quarters after the Fairfield County Board of Developmental Disabilities acquired Art & Clay on Main in downtown Lancaster. The combined businesses have become an inclusive arts center offering art and ceramic classes for the public and displaying works of regional and Blue Shoe artists alike.

Blue Shoe Arts Director Cheryl Fey observes, "Building social circles, increasing self-esteem, earning an income, and working at what people love to do — this is what Blue Shoe Arts is all about."



Above: "Flea Circus" by Joseph A. Greene, 12" x 12" acrylic on canvas.

For more information about Blue Shoe Arts, including images of the featured artwork and profiles of the participating artists, visit www.blueshoearts.org or call Blue Shoe Arts Director Cheryl Fey at (740) 653-1755. The Art & Clay on Main website is at www.artandclayonmain.com.

California makes a STAR program

Collaborative effort between the county and job resources turn a community concern into a community solution

Countless communities across the nation can claim familiarity with this vicious cycle: individuals who are mentally ill receive insufficient supplemental security income and end up homeless, chemically dependent, and often involved with the law. Usually their transgressions are “survival crimes,” such as petty theft or trespassing, in addition to a few more serious felony DUIs and burglaries. No matter how petty the crime, these communities find themselves confronting a big issue: how do we change this?



The program team meets weekly to discuss housing, employment, medication management, and how well the consumer is progressing towards his or her goals.

The County of Marin court system and Community Mental Health of California decided change was done best through collaborative efforts and formed the Support and Treatment After Release (STAR) program in 2003. Adhering to a multidisciplinary approach, the STAR program team includes case managers, peer providers, a psychiatrist, a psychiatric nurse, a therapist, a county probation officer, a police officer, and a vocational consultant. The team meets weekly to discuss housing, employment, medication management, and exactly how well the consumer is progressing toward his or her goals. In addition to providing housing options, employment training, and mental health support, the system

provides the means for offenders to reduce or eliminate their criminal records. Supported by team members, the consumer appears weekly before a mental health court judge to report on his or her weekly achievements, demonstrating successful independence.

Integrated Community Services (ICS) is the employment point of the STAR program. A \$25,000 contract allows ICS to provide direct job placement/job coaching while assisting consumers with their application to the Department of Rehabilitation for later vocational support (continued job search, job coaching, follow-up, clothing, transportation needs, union dues, etc.). Wearing essentially two hats, ICS not only provides services, but also assesses the vocational needs of the consumer.

Continuing in the spirit of the STAR collaborative, ICS collaborates with other agencies when appropriate. Recently, ICS provided supplemental independent living skills training to a consumer who was having difficulty organizing himself to be successful on the job. In another instance, a consumer was determined to get work adjustment and work experience before direct placement. Because ICS doesn't have such a program, services were coordinated with another county agency. This agency had previously rejected this consumer, but with advocacy and a “never-say-quit” policy, the consumer has been working successfully in this program.

Of the 50 enrollees, 21 have been referred for vocational services, and 5 have either dropped out or are on hold. Of those remaining, ten have found employment. Every year, the progress of the STAR program is reviewed for funding, and the hope and vision is that it will continue to provide comprehensive and holistic services to community individuals in needs.

For information about Integrated Community Services, contact Donna@connectics.org.

“Amazing. Every. One.”

Organization’s public awareness campaign promotes the full lives of people with disabilities

When the Americans with Disabilities Act was passed in 1990, it marked a movement toward greater degrees of accessibility for people with disabilities. Doors were widened, curbs were cut, and mobility became a little easier for nearly everybody. Unfortunately, legislation doesn’t affect attitude. Changing attitudes is a lot more difficult and requires more time and patience. The Stark County Board of Mental Retardation and Developmental Disabilities (Stark MRDD), located in Canton, Ohio, takes the challenge of changing attitudes very seriously.

Stark MRDD launched a full-scale awareness campaign. Previous years had garnered Stark MRDD media awards for their work; Stark MRDD learned that you get more bang for your buck if you invest in event marketing instead of general marketing. Consequently, Stark MRDD and the workshops have created partnerships with area media and businesses that have greatly benefited individuals with developmental disabilities.



Mark Baker, Stark MRDD Superintendent/CEO H. Michael Miller, and Mike Miller pose in front of the “Flower Power” van at a recent art exhibit at Anderson’s Creative Studio in Canton.

The goal has been to make community friends. For example, Stark MRDD and The Workshops served as major sponsors for the Stark County BIA Home and Garden Show and Lifestyle Expo, promoting the idea that people with disabilities enjoy gardening, cooking, and other general lifestyle activities. Stark MRDD’s persons served actively participated in these events alongside their typical peers. Stark MRDD also co-sponsored with The Repository, the local newspaper, an American eagle balloon for the Pro Football Hall of Fame Festival Grand Parade 2007. Fifteen of Stark County’s Special Olympians proudly marched in the nationally televised parade.

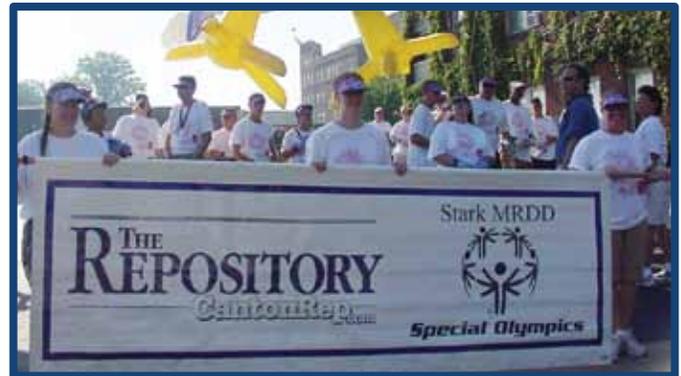
Not content to just do sponsorship, Stark MRDD does its share of creating, hosting, and promoting events. Stark MRDD served as host and co-sponsor of Gifts Galore, an event presented by The Arc of Stark County, Inc., which draws several thousand citizens every November. Stark MRDD and The Workshops host the Great Pumpkin Race in October. Plain Township Rotary is the title sponsor, but Pepsi®, Subway®, Chick-fil-A®, Shearer’s®, and other local businesses also sponsor the event. In addition to bringing in hundreds of racing enthusiasts for the 4K and one-mile events, the Great Pumpkin Race again allows individuals to participate as any other athlete would in a race or a walk. This event serves as a fundraiser for the Special Olympics and raises awareness for the organization.

Stark MRDD also sees great value in serving as leadership in the community. Many staff members hold leadership roles in service clubs and organizations such as Rotary Club, Kiwanis, Pilot Club, Jaycees, and Leadership Stark County. Working with these professional organizations gives the organization many opportunities to present individuals as strong, capable workers and highlights the amazing jobs they perform on a daily basis in many different work settings.

To top off all the local events, Stark MRDD and The Workshops also use traditional media to convey their nontraditional message. Public service announcements, featuring the accomplishments of individuals served, run on cable television. These announcements were so well done that they earned the Ohio Public Images Award of Excellence. In addition, each year the organization produces not only a printed community report, but also a video community report for community presentations. The video community report gives the organization the opportunity to “bring people inside our walls” at least via video if not for actual tours. This report is produced in five formats for ease of accessibility: print, audio interpretation, DVD, CD, and VHS. Recently, the organization produced a 30-minute cable television show featuring individuals in various work settings describing the types of work they were performing. This video is a prototype for what is hoped to become a weekly cable television series sponsored by local businesses.

All of this multimedia savvy means that Stark MRDD has to maintain a fresh brand that reflects its true vision. Its new logo, which replaces the one it had used for 39 years, features four different-colored icons, representing diversity, with arms spread to form a circle. Each person is an individual who also belongs to a larger network and community. The tag line, “Amazing. Every. One.” completed the branding. It just comes right out and says what Stark MRDD believes; that every person is amazing and comes with talents, abilities, gifts, and a spirit that can be recognized and honored by community providers, families, and the world.

With a solid image to reflect its passion, Stark MRDD redesigned its website. The new website contains all the public service announcements and other video media developed by Stark MRDD. There is a video presentation of the rights of Ohioans along with a sign language version. Visitors can find a blog and a variety of downloads.



Stark MRDD Special Olympians and staff members marched in the Professional Football Hall of Fame Festival in partnership with the local daily paper.

Stark MRDD achieves all this sponsorship, media, and press with two full-time staff members and many volunteers. With anywhere from 50 to 60 volunteers for a big event to just one regular volunteer working one day a week, support for the programs is incredible. Staff members work hard to recruit and train volunteers, in addition to working toward getting donations of radio time and print space.

The professionals at Stark MRDD recognize that marketing and public awareness are day-to-day challenges and at the completion of each event, a post-mortem is held to see how the event or activity can be improved. The organization has been honored many times with awards for its public awareness efforts, but every staff member and volunteer involved recognizes that there is still much to do to overcome the attitudinal barriers that still exist in our communities. The organization is continually looking for new and exciting ways to present individuals who are “Amazing. Every. One.”

For more information, contact Lisa Parramore, director of public information, community education, and volunteer resources, at (330) 479-3934. View the PSA at www.starkdd.org.

Opportunity Partners: Building entrepreneurial spirit through self employment

Four years ago, Julie was busy with her job and enjoying life, especially her favorite hobbies such as reading and spending time with her grandchildren. A hard worker her entire life, Julie had held a variety of jobs—as a caterer, a home cleaner, and a senior caregiver.

But after a bout with inner ear disorder Meniere’s Disease resulted in permanent and profound hearing loss, Julie felt confused and lost, unsure what career path she could take next.

For Julie, losing her hearing was both devastating and debilitating. She had changed, yet she was still the same hard-working person she had always been. “For a long time, with the hearing loss, I thought, it’s over,” she said. “But I’m still here; it’s still me inside.”

The difficult part was convincing others to give her a chance. Now, with the help of a CARF-accredited Opportunity Partners program that fosters supported self-employment for persons with disabilities, Julie is on her way to becoming a business owner. She’s gaining experience and knowledge to launch her own business providing in-home care for seniors.

Founded in 1953 by a group of visionary parents who knew their teenage children with disabilities could be contributing members of the community if given a chance, Opportunity Partners has always focused on the abilities of people.

Today, Opportunity Partners is redefining “disability” through advanced learning, deep community support and meaningful work — proving that everyone, when given the opportunity, adds value to our world.

Based in the Minneapolis area, Opportunity Partners is a nonprofit organization serving 1,500 persons with disabilities each year through a wide variety of employment, training, and residential programs. Opportunity Partners earned recognition from CARF for its vision and design of services relating to employment opportunities. Through the Supported Self-Employment program, which is believed to be the only program of its kind in Minnesota, Opportunity Partners is currently working with individuals with disabilities who are pursuing the following careers:

- Nature-friendly cleaning services
- Carpenter/contractor
- Artist
- Personal chef/caterer
- Yoga instructor for persons with disabilities

“We’re working every day to redefine disability through our innovative programs that help people with disabilities achieve greater independence,” said Justina Cloutier, vocational services manager at Opportunity Partners. “I am very excited to think about the possibilities for individuals starting their own business. It’s just one more way for people to have meaningful work and become self-sufficient.”

Supported Self-Employment Background

In 2007, a task force of Opportunity Partners’ board members and senior management was formed to look at self-employment options. After researching self-employment programs throughout the country, the task force chose a Supported Self-Employment model that assists individuals with disabilities through the entire process of starting a business—personal assessment, feasibility, business planning, marketing, technical assistance, and mentoring. The Supported Self-Employment program launched in May 2008.

Opportunity Partners was awarded a \$10,000 grant from The CCP Foundation to develop the curriculum for the self-employment exploration class for persons with disabilities. Through the exploration class, participants uncover interests and passions for self-employment, learn business planning basics, test business ideas, and tour small businesses.



A Supported Self-Employment model assists individuals with disabilities start a business—personal assessment, feasibility, business planning, marketing, technical assistance, and mentoring.

Upon completion of the class, participants work one-on-one with the program coordinator, Philip Koffel, to define strengths and weaknesses, develop a business idea, identify barriers, and craft a business plan. After the business plan is developed and start-up capital is secured, Opportunity Partners continues to assist with technical assistance and problem solving, as needed. In addition to Supported Self-Employment, Opportunity Partners also offers more traditional employment programs.

Center-based Employment— Opportunity Partners has partnered with businesses for more than 50 years in providing contract packaging and assembly, and it has recently ventured into new industries such as dry foods packaging and medical company kitting.

Competitive Job Placement—Opportunity Partners' experience in job development and relationships with hundreds of employers allow the organization to provide access to jobs representing nearly every interest and skill level.

Job Coaching—To help ensure long-term employment success, Opportunity Partners' support continues well after a job has been attained, providing support services tailored to meet each employee's individual needs.

Supported Employment Teams—Currently Opportunity Partners has more than 40 teams, employing nearly 400 people with disabilities working throughout the Minneapolis area.

Vocational Evaluation—Opportunity Partners has a waiting list for its highly popular vocational evaluations, which are conducted at companies throughout the community. Detailed assessments of vocational assets and challenges are provided and include valuable feedback from employers and recommendations for achieving an individual's employment goals. Employers provide valuable feedback regarding work habits, work skills, and physical capabilities.

For more information on Opportunity Partners, visit www.opportunities.org.



Business partner council opens employment doors

From three service locations in the Twin Cities to offices in central Minnesota (St. Cloud) and northeast Minnesota (Duluth), the Minnesota Resource Center (MRC) has learned that its success depends on the strength of its business partner council. Every aspect of each service centers on these relationships, from the development of new skills training courses for individuals with disabilities to the hiring of program participants.

This is especially true for its CARF-accredited and licensed skills training courses for adult learners, where more than 70 business partners statewide work together with MRC staff to develop, enhance, and redesign the training courses to fit the hiring needs of Minnesota businesses. The focus on training is twofold, with equal emphasis on technical skill building and interpersonal/workplace skill development and enhancement, because without strong communication skills, individuals with and without barriers often find it difficult to remain employed.

The strong tie to business partnerships began for MRC back in the early 1970s with its first Department of Education Projects With Industry Grant. It was strengthened further in 1985 when MRC was offered the opportunity with funding from IBM® to train individuals with disabilities for high-tech computer careers. The model brought together business and rehabilitation and opened the employment door for many individuals with disabilities.

MRC staff continues to enhance its relationships with business through a structured process of building and then maintaining relationships. The process first introduces new business partners to the goals, expectations, and benefits of becoming a business partner during an hour-long orientation. Once on board, business partners

are asked to share their expertise by facilitating work-readiness training sessions, conducting mock interviews, or serving on one of many sub-committees. It is the consistent communication that keeps business partners involved, and they also understand the importance of their volunteerism by hearing success stories at quarterly meetings or reading articles published by MRC.



The company philosophy is an open door for hiring based on skills first and barriers second.

MRC business partner council member Smith Micro Technologies received the Business Partner of the Year Award at the Association of Rehabilitation Programs in Computer Technology (ARPCT) Conference two years ago. An excerpt from the nomination clearly shows how active business council members are: Smith Micro Technologies, a technical support outsourcing company located in St. Paul, has been a member of the MRC Information Technology Business Advisory Council since 1999. In that time period, it has been extremely active in developing job shadows for the students graduating from the MRC Computer Technician Training course, as well as looking for permanent employment in the technology field for those same students. Nancy Zylla has also taken an active role as an MRC business advisory council member, facilitating training sessions in the areas of customer service and employer expectations.

It is through long- and short-term assignments that the graduates have had the opportunity to work at companies such as Best Buy® and 3M. Not only do they believe in hiring those graduates who demonstrate high technical and workplace

skills, but they also work extremely hard to secure assignments for graduates whose disabilities may hinder them from finding employment. From the company president and owner down the ranks, the company philosophy is an open door for hiring based on skills first and barriers second!

Marcus is one of those individuals. He came to MRC and enrolled in the MRC Computer Technician Training course in 2004. Marcus is extremely bright and took to the training immediately. Marcus lives with Asperger's Syndrome and Tourette syndrome with very evident symptoms, including ticks and inappropriate speech. The positive attitude that Marcus brought to class each day was infectious though, and staff became very comfortable with the symptoms and focused on the building of his skills instead.



**It takes work and
commitment to make
the business council
strong and vibrant.**

Marcus graduated with ease, and placement services began. Marcus lives in a group home, so the job search had to be limited to locations that had public transportation available. It was also difficult for MRC placement staff to explain the disabilities Marcus lives with and the symptoms that would be seen in the workplace so employers would understand and look beyond the barriers to see the technical wizard before them. After several months of negative experiences, MRC approached Smith with a request. Would they help find a job for Marcus?

The wheels began to turn, and, before long, Marcus was employed through Smith Micro Technologies assigned to a job as a computer

technician at 3M. His responsibilities include personal computer software and hardware configuration and troubleshooting. There he worked in a team environment with other Smith Micro Technologies and 3M employees, where his co-workers found his positive attitude and smile something they looked forward to each day!

Smith Micro Technologies is a true partner in finding employment for individuals with disabilities and, in doing so, also finds the gifts those individuals bring to the job!

It takes work and commitment by MRC staff to make the business council strong and vibrant, but it is well worth the effort with end products that include quality programs and services and competitive employment for individuals with disabilities.

For more information on Minnesota Resource Center and its programs, please call Kim Feller at (612) 752-8102.



University of Wisconsin–Stout, Wisconsin’s Polytechnic University, Stout Vocational Rehabilitation Institute achieves the first CARF Accreditation Award in Comprehensive Benefits Planning

Persons living with significant disabilities often consider their benefits vital to their well-being and that of their family. Dynamic and visionary professional service providers recognize the need for individualized and long-term benefits, as well as financial planning, to help prevent premature loss of benefits and create a successful foundation of income and health benefits.

An organization that provides comprehensive benefits planning creates and continuously enhances services, and staff competencies can improve the economic standing and self-sufficiency of persons served. Through trained and professional benefits specialists, the service enhances lives, helps individuals learn how to advocate for benefits, and provides support in learning how to utilize existing work incentives.

The University of Wisconsin–Stout, Stout Vocational Rehabilitation Institute (SVRI) became the first organization to achieve CARF accreditation in Comprehensive Benefits Planning. It began this innovative service in 2004. To achieve SVRI’s mission of creating innovative and responsive services for Wisconsin citizens, it considered a variety of important quality elements in its service design. Among them were access needs of the populations targeted to be served, including

using effective communication designs that accommodate the various populations served, service locations for convenience, and learning styles. Other design considerations encompassed the outcomes they wish to achieve, including the achievement of economic self-sufficiency for the persons served, enhanced economic well-being of the persons served as they progress in education and employment, and operation of the program to minimize the time from referral to the accomplishment of the benefits plan.

Benefits planning and analysis is an individualized, person-centered service. Although many organizations may briefly record upon intake or consider that the person served is on benefits, it has become apparent to many community service organizations that an individualized benefits planning goal is vital to successful long-term living and employment outcomes. So often the fear of losing benefits can be a road block to pursuing and fulfilling success and self-sufficiency goals in the individual plan if the fear of economic loss is not addressed by ethical and competent individuals and community organizations.



An individualized benefits planning goal is vital to successful long-term employment outcomes.

Comprehensive benefits planning is a collaborative and dynamic service. For SVRI, initial referral information is received from various sources, including the Division of Vocational Rehabilitation (DVR), placement specialists, human services agencies, managed care organizations, school districts, health services, local service organizations, self-referrals, and others.

Following its program design based on consumer input, SVRI's outcomes system requires an initial contact with the person served to be made within two business days following receipt of referral information. The intake meeting is scheduled and conducted in person or via the telephone, depending on the choice of the person served, and includes discussion of the questions to be answered by the analysis/report and a work/earnings scenario on which to build the analysis.

Striving for Professionalism and High Quality Service

Pursuing CARF accreditation in the new area of benefits planning provides SVRI with a unique opportunity to further enhance and monitor quality outcomes and credibility. As part of its mission for education and research, SVRI, in collaboration with numerous state and local agencies, is developing a quality assurance process for benefits specialists in Wisconsin. Among the objectives is requiring "qualified" or "certified" benefits specialists in future contracts after the process is developed and implemented.

A registry with an accompanying code of conduct, as well as a random selection process for auditing completed benefits summaries, is currently in place. A credentialing and continuing education process is in development.

National Association of Disability Benefits Specialists

The National Association of Disability Benefits Specialists (NADBS), a division within the National Rehabilitation Association, offers an opportunity for benefits specialists to identify themselves in this capacity as individual professionals. NADBS is dedicated to enhancing the knowledge and skills of current benefits

specialists, as well as providing a professional network of support for those working in the field. For more information on NADBS, please visit www.nationalrehab.org.

For more information on the comprehensive work incentives benefits program of SVRI and information on getting started, please contact Cheryl Fine at (715) 232-1794 or finec@uwstout.edu.

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