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# KFI in Maine: Making Mission-Driven Choices About Funding and Service Innovation

## Background:

Katahdin Friends, Inc. (KFI), headquartered in the small rural community of Millinocket, Maine, has been a service provider in this community and surrounding regions for the last 54 years. After providing segregated services for its first 20 years, KFI became an early adopter of supported employment.

In the 1980s, staff members started attending conferences to learn about better, cheaper ways to serve their customers. They were profoundly influenced by the integration approach to community and employment support espoused by other innovative service providers across the country.

## Implementation:

As KFI staff learned more about supported employment, they started to put this approach into practice at their agency. This was the beginning of a cultural shift that transformed KFI. Staff were driven by questions like “Is there anyone anywhere doing anything better?” and “Why can’t we do that?”

KFI leadership expressed strong support for moving to a supported employment model. They encouraged staff to attend conferences, read journals, and join national organizations focused on integrated employment.

Part of KFI’s culture shift involved abandoning outdated concepts and services. Between 1985 and 1996 (when their center-based services were closed to provide 100% community-based supports), everything about KFI underwent transition. This included its infrastructure of center-based services, its training curricula, and its strategies for funding supports and services. These changes were driven by the agency-wide recognition that each individual was ready to work in the community.

Today, KFI maintains this stand for fully integrated employment for all job seekers. KFI leadership encourages its staff and the surrounding community to see the full range of possibilities for each customer. Staff develop community relationships and join local organizations. These ties within the community have helped them to find many employment opportunities for the job seekers they serve.

Innovations at KFI have also been driven by economic and geographic conditions. Millinocket is an economically struggling town, and the other communities served by KFI

are spread far apart. Staffers work from centrally located offices, but otherwise have few resources to maintain such as agency vehicles or other assets. This is not only a cheaper way to work, but it is aligned with KFI's focus on working with people in the community over investment in branded items or a building.

KFI provides training to all entry-level staff and refresher courses to longer-term staff on finding the socially valued roles people can play and on normalizing their home, work, and community lives. This training is reinforced through KFI's process of matching new hires with senior mentors to ensure that everyone understands the philosophy and practicalities of coordinating various services.

Supports are provided in the context of individuals' whole lives. Vocational and non-vocational services are frequently combined, with staff who support individuals at home and in the community certified to also assist them with finding and keeping a job, or starting and maintaining a business. These support staff can help identify individuals' skills, interests, likes and dislikes, energy levels, and other qualities useful for creating good job matches.

## **Impact:**

KFI's innovative culture and engagement with the community have resulted in many creative employment opportunities. Employment teams made up of KFI support staff, vocational rehabilitation counselors, and family members have supported people with significant disabilities to turn activities they enjoy into jobs and even businesses.

As KFI staff see it, the objective is for the people they support to fit into their community, be visible, and perform a valuable service. "We know that there are other struggling areas in our country where people have [already]...figured this out," explains CEO Gail Fanjoy. "We place high demands on ourselves, we own when we can't figure it out, and we really try not to put it on the person."

KFI staff still ask themselves whether other community rehabilitation providers have found better ways to deliver services and whether KFI can replicate these methods. However, the main employment question KFI staff ask today is, "How can people with significant disabilities do what they love and earn money at the same time?"

## **Suggestions for Replication:**

KFI's leadership created a culture of innovation. Through their investigation of newer employment practices, they drove home the sense of innovation as the priority, and encouraged staff to find new possibilities and solutions.

The concept of being job-ready was reframed. KFI leadership and staff came to the conclusion that individuals with significant disabilities may be as ready as anyone else for community employment. However, they are only likely to live and work successfully in the community through complete integration, rather than being kept in segregated settings.

New and long-term staffers are presented with training that emphasizes agency values. All new staff are matched with senior mentors as an orientation method. Building social capital is key. Employment is a more likely outcome when individuals with disabilities are seen as contributing to their community, and are considered part of its fabric. Encouraging support

staff in local organizations also familiarizes them with employers and job opportunities. KFI hires staff who live locally, and embeds employment services into the provision of other supports. Fifty-three of KFI's 100 staff members are certified to provide employment support services along with the other work they do.

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