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Wisconsin's Job Development Mentors Project

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Sponsored by Wisconsin's Department of Health and Family Services (DHFS) through the use of Medicaid Infrastructure Grant (MIG) funds, Wisconsin's Job Development Mentors Project (JDMP) pairs three seasoned job developers with four community-based employment support providers that cover 12 counties throughout the state. JDMP is designed to create a state-wide infrastructure for professionals who are responsible for developing jobs for individuals in supported employment while at the same time, working towards increasing the pool of well-trained job developers around the state of Wisconsin.

Implementation

Job development mentors were identified by the DHFS contact (listed below), who had a longstanding history working with them. Together the four created the project, which evolved out of a brainstorming session and a united recognition that job developers need hands-on, intensive training and support to achieve success. The three mentors are considered top job developers in the state and all either are or have been provider program managers or directors. Implementation began with each job development mentor assessing the needs of each provider they were going to support as well as local labor market trends. Each mentor developed an individualized plan for his or her agency based on its unique needs.

The role of the mentor is to assist the job developers in using a person-centered approach to create innovative employment opportunities. The mentor/job developer pair works side by side to incorporate new approaches to job development in businesses and industries that have previously been unattainable for supported employment. In addition to working side by side, mentors have supported the provider-based job developers through shadowing and providing feedback, or by modeling the job development process entirely. Ongoing training and feedback is a critical component in the mentor relationship. As one job developer involved in the project noted, the mentor gave hands-on training and guidance, and helped him tackle hurdles that have historically prevented individuals he has supported from community employment.

While long term funding for the initiative is unclear, all project participants are planning to come together as a group three times over the upcoming year. These three statewide gatherings will focus specifically on job development, and group attendees will participate in discussions about barriers to the job development process and generate tips from those who have shared similar experiences. Furthermore, it is expected that increased opportunities for

networking will occur at each day and one half training.

Impact

JDMP is an opportunity to breathe new life into the job development process and to recognize the importance of community-based employment as a critical component to community inclusion. The task of developing employment in the community is frequently a lonely job, requiring that the job developer have an expertise in human services and the business world. The job developer needs to have the ability to generate a professional and social network with members of the community. It can take many years of persistence, patience, and creativity before a person becomes seasoned. JDMP's creators believe that the key to its success lies in the individualized nature of the mentoring, which is all based on local demographics and agency-identified and agency-specified needs.

One of the most valuable components of the JDMP is the relationship between the mentor and job developer. In one example, a mentor was asked to support a job developer who needed to create work experience for a transition-aged student interested in childcare. The mentor shared past experiences of tasks completed by people with disabilities in day care settings. From there, the mentor and job developer began generating a list of high-quality day care programs by talking to people in the community. Based on that information, the job developer and mentor established contact with a kindergarten teacher in the local school district. This teacher not only agreed to hire the student, but she also agreed to mentor and train the student to work towards child-care certification. Together the job developer and mentor engaged in collaborative and creative job development while building a long-term relationship with the kindergarten teacher.

Suggestions for Replication

- Use long-term professional relationships as a platform upon which to brainstorm innovative and creative ideas.
- Hands-on support and role modeling is a critical part of an effective training strategy for job developers.
- Understand the expertise of each collaborating partner and use that talent strategically.
- Understand the needs of those you wish to assist and tailor training and support initiatives accordingly.

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