

## **Promising Practices in Community Life Engagement, Guidepost #1: Individualize Supports for Each Person**

**TransCen's WorkLink program: Helping individuals gain work skills through targeted volunteering and other community life engagement activities**

**By Heike Boeltzig-Brown**

### **Background**

WorkLink is a program that enables individuals with intellectual and developmental disabilities (IDD) to work while receiving wrap-around day services. Having access to both types of supports -- community employment and Community Life Engagement (CLE) -- is particularly important for individuals with significant IDD, who often work fewer hours and need additional support to lead active and meaningful lives. The program was started in 1996 by TransCen, Inc., and is based in San Francisco, California.

Day services not only help individuals establish and maintain meaningful community relationships, but also let them build important skills as they explore vocational goals and job

options. To this end, WorkLink partners with numerous community organizations to create opportunities for engaging individuals in targeted volunteering and other skill-building activities.

As of January 2014, WorkLink supported 60 people with disabilities, including 39 individuals with IDD. Of those 39, 24 received both employment and day services, and 15 individuals only received supported employment.

## **Implementation**

### ***Engaging individuals in volunteering for skill building***

Individuals can decide what their goals are and the supports they need. WorkLink's services are 100% community-based. The agency uses "community day learning services" for vocational discovery and teaching employability skills, maintaining social connections, and supporting other non-work needs.

Day services encourage individuals to build self-confidence and be independent, that is, to see that they can do many things by themselves (such as visiting a friend's house), and that they can have regular lives. CLE helps with this by engaging individuals in community activities,

including targeted volunteer activities in the community.

Through CLE, people explore new possibilities, learn and refine skills, and become more independent. Over time, these services are intended to fade, and are only used for those that need them most.

“Our services are not about field trips or ‘visiting places’ -- they are about skill building. We go to community sites routinely, multiple times, so we can use these as teaching environments, not just outings. We focus our service hours on helping people to not only connect with others, but to play a valued role in their communities (through volunteer work). We want them to build social and professional networks. We’re looking to encourage inclusion and friendships -- not just be in the community. This does not happen by visiting a place once or just buying a cup of coffee.”

- Sara Murphy, director of WorkLink

CLE helps individuals become more involved in their communities through volunteering and community classes. These activities help them understand what it means to participate and contribute to their communities. At the same

time, other community members without IDD start seeing these individuals as value-adding citizens, not just recipients of services.

WorkLink's CLE programming benefits from the organization's location near multiple centers of community activity. WorkLink uses these resources for skill building, and partners with community organizations to develop volunteering or training sites. For example, individuals can learn clerical and computer skills at AIDS Walk San Francisco, cooking and food service skills at Project Open Hand, and sorting and assembly skills at the San Francisco Food Bank.

These volunteer experiences offer a real-world opportunity to practice social skills with people who are not program staff or teachers. For example, Project Open Hand provides nutritious meals to seniors and critically ill people. This organization uses 1,400 volunteers every year from all over the region, so regular volunteers from WorkLink are always working alongside new volunteers, in addition to the people they see every week.

***Using small groups to support shared interests***

Due to funding limitations, the majority of WorkLink's CLE supports are done in small groups. WorkLink assigns community instructors to groups of 3-4 individuals based on type of CLE activity, while keeping the group focused on what the individuals want to learn.

Once individuals with a shared interest have been identified, WorkLink staff brings those individuals together and works with them to develop activities. Only after an initial plan has been established does WorkLink bring in a community instructor to facilitate the planned activities and manage the group's schedule.

Activities are developed with and around individuals, instead of leaving everything to the instructors. WorkLink staff believe that group models can encourage socialization and friendships among individuals in a natural way. Individuals see each other socially after work, and a few even date and have romantic relationships.

Opportunities for individuals at WorkLink often arise out of other people's interests. For instance, if an individual wants to learn how to knit, a staff member will seek out a community class or store that offers lessons, and then post

that opportunity, along with an invitation for other individuals to join the activity, at WorkLink's notice board. These communal opportunities allow individuals to develop hobbies, and to work on job skills and their personal goals alongside friends and community members.

### ***Providing travel training to ensure independence***

WorkLink's office, which serves primarily as a meeting hub for individuals and staff to check in before they head off to their activities, is in the heart of San Francisco. It is accessible by multiple train and bus lines. If individuals need it, they get travel training through WorkLink's "Let's Get Lost" program (see WorkLink's "Independent Travel Policies and Procedures").

The goal of "Let's Get Lost" is to train individuals to travel independently and safely in the community. At intake, the individual and family complete a community skills inventory that includes community safety skills. If they are completely independent, they sign an independent travel affidavit and do not receive travel training except on new routes.

For individuals who need it, travel training is provided by community instructors and job

coaches. Individuals enroll in a “Let’s Get Lost” group. Community instructors check skills in 7 competency areas, and use the results to create “Community and Safety Goals” that are incorporated into the individual’s service plan.

The 7 areas are: 1) managing belongings, including carrying ID and emergency contact card, 2) crossing streets, 3) being aware of “stranger danger,” 4) navigating on specific routes or city-wide, 5) contacting WorkLink and family members using a cell phone, 6) asking for assistance when needed, and 7) following emergency procedures and planning for disasters.

Progress is tracked using data sheets, and supports fade over time. Periodic meetings are held with the program manager, the individual, and their family to review progress and fading of travel services.

## **Impact**

WorkLink re-conceptualized day services and CLE in a way that ties these services more closely to employment. This encourages individuals with IDD to consider work, aiding them with vocational discovery and skill building, and providing support that wraps around their

work schedules. For example, one individual learned how to use a heat sealer at Project Open Hand and is now employed at a gourmet grocery store packaging produce. Access to comprehensive wrap-around services also enables them to lead active, meaningful lives that include community integrated employment.

## **Suggestions for Replication**

- ***Use community resources as a teaching environment for skill building.*** WorkLink uses community resources to engage individuals with IDD in focused, strategic activities (including volunteer opportunities) to build the skills needed to work and be successful. The primary goal of these services is working towards individuals' independence, so they can pursue community employment and life engagement.
- ***Provide travel assessment and travel training as a core support (as part of each individual support plan).*** Providing travel services and supports is critical to individuals' independence and their ability to pursue community employment and life engagement. To this end, WorkLink

established clear policies and procedures and translated those into worksheets that guide staff in implementing these policies and procedures on an individual basis.

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*WorkLink Independent Travel Policies and Procedures*, internal document available upon request from Sara Murphy, Director, WorkLink: [smurphy@transcen.org](mailto:smurphy@transcen.org)