



Rhodes to Independence
empowers people with
disabilities to clear the path to
competitive employment and
locate the tools they need to get
there

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MESSAGE FROM THE PROJECT DIRECTOR

Rhodes to Independence (RTI) is pleased to submit its 2007 Annual Report. This report summarizes our achievements – and challenges – as we continue our work toward assisting people with disabilities and senior citizens to live independently in the community.

Since its inception in 2000, the Rhodes project has worked toward our goal to make system changes that will reduce barriers to independence. RTI operates under the aegis of the University of Rhode Island's College of Pharmacy. In our seventh year of operation, there have been a myriad of external and internal transitions, which will be detailed in this report. The RTI mission and related activities continue toward the goal of making systems changes to facilitate the competitive employment of people with disabilities by removing employment barriers. RTI continues to bring together state agencies, employers, advocacy groups, workforce leadership, educational institutions, legislators, and other key stakeholders in a unique collaboration that shares a common goal of supporting people with disabilities in attaining and retaining competitive employment.

2007 was a transitional year for Rhodes. The Steering Committee was originally formed as a collaborative oversight committee in 2000 when RI received four federal grants — one of which was the Medicaid Infrastructure Grant that funds Rhodes to Independence - to facilitate the competitive employment of people with disabilities. The Steering Committee structure and composition fulfilled a term and condition of one of the other grants which has ended. Early in the year, the Steering Committee was restructured into an Advisory Board. It provided an opportunity to bring in new people and reinvigorate the RTI initiative. As a more flexible and broadly inclusive structure, the RTI Advisory Board is positioned to take on additional challenges and be more responsive to what is going on in the state and nation regarding concerns, issues, and initiatives. In place of the topical workgroups in past years, which were part of the formative process in Rhodes' early years, ad hoc subcommittees are formed to address current relevant areas and issues that impact people with disabilities from becoming self-sufficient.

During the past year, there have been significant accomplishments including:

- The first RI Social Security Summit and initiation of the Raytheon Six Sigma process
- Kicking off a self-employment and entrepreneurship initiative, identifying barriers and opportunities to self-employment for Rhode Islanders with disabilities

- Completion and printing of research products including *The Profile of the Dual Eligible Beneficiaries in Rhode Island: 1995-2001 Chart Book*
- Planning and implementation of the Rhode Island Job Fair, attracting 230 jobseekers
- Key financial partner in bringing a Housing Registry to Rhode Island
- Researched and identified the need for a composite consumer guide on home modifications

Along with these accomplishments, are the unique collaborations and partnerships, which are the hallmark of RTI, have continued – notably with the Office of Rehabilitative Services and the Department of Human Services. Highlights of all RTI initiatives and accomplishments are the focus of this report.

An external environmental challenge arose in 2007, in large part due to a looming budget deficit. Downsizing through retirements and other attrition in many state agencies has seen key personnel RTI has relied upon to move forward with our activities and initiatives, leave their positions. Though RTI continued cooperative initiatives such as the Raytheon Six Sigma process, progress was hampered by the effects of the state budget crisis and personnel changes.

We are nonetheless proud of our 2007 accomplishments and welcome this opportunity to share them with you. If you have any questions about this report or Rhodes to Independence, please do not hesitate to contact my office at 462-6163. Thank you.

Elaina Goldstein Project Director

BACKGROUND

In October 2000, Rhode Island received several grants (collectively known as the Rhodes to Independence) designed to make system changes to facilitate the competitive employment of people with disabilities. These grants were awarded by the Social Security Administration (SSA) and by the U.S. Departments of Health and Human Services (HHS) and Labor (DOL), in partial fulfillment of mandates within the 1999 Ticket to Work and Work Incentives Improvement Act (TWWIIA). In its grant applications, RI identified multiple barriers to employment for its citizens with disabilities and potential system improvements and won all grants available. Due to these grants, Directors of the RI Departments of Human Services and Labor & Training and the grant managers chose to proceed collaboratively and created a joint oversight committee known as the Steering Committee for the Rhodes to Independence (RTI).

Since its inception, an ever-increasing number of stakeholders around the state have come together with the shared mission of removing employment barriers for people with disabilities, through systems change in the Medicaid program and other state and local programs. The initial Steering Committee (2001-2006) formed through the grants represented the first Rhode Island entity in which representatives from the relevant systems (from health care to education to housing to workforce development) as well as consumers were sitting around the same table to coordinate meaningful systems change. The original RTI Steering Committee and its Workgroups became a central place where the traditional silos have been broken down and people work together to help people with disabilities retain necessary supports as they become competitively employed and self-sufficient.

In 2007, the Steering Committee was restructured into an Advisory Board. It provided an opportunity to bring in new people and reinvigorate the RTI initiative. The Steering Committee structure and composition fulfilled a term and condition of one of the other grants which has ended. As a more flexible and broadly inclusive structure, the RTI Advisory Board, has taken on additional challenges and is more responsive in "real time" to what is going on in the state and nation regarding concerns, issues, and initiatives. In place of the topical workgroups, which were part of the formative process in Rhodes' early years, subcommittees are formed to address relevant areas and issues as they arise and acknowledged.

RTI initiatives have focused upon target populations that include people with disabilities currently receiving SSI as well as the others populations with disabilities (e.g., youths in transition) and individuals with a progressive disability (e.g., people diagnosed with Multiple

Sclerosis or HIV) or who become disabled from becoming dependent on benefits / help them retain or attain employment - the emphasis is on "prevention" for this population. The crowning achievement of the first four years of MIG funding was the passage of a RI Medicaid Buy-In in July 2004, which would have been impossible before the advent of the RTI Steering Committee and stakeholders working together to enact it, particularly during a period of budget constraint. The Sherlock Plan, as the Rhode Island Medicaid Buy-In is called, was launched in January 2006. By the end of 2007, there were 22 participants.

In 2006, 15.8% of Rhode Islanders (ages 5 years and older) reported having a disability. The prevalence of disability in the non-institutionalized working aged population (ages 21-64) was 13%. The population Rhodes to Independence is primarily targeting for its initiatives are people with disabilities who are recipients of SSI, SSDI and those who are eligible for Medicaid's Medically Needy category. In fact, it is this last group of individuals who are eligible for the Sherlock Plan - consistent with Rhodes' emphasis on early intervention and prevention in terms of individuals losing employment due to medical needs. At the end of December 2007, there were 27,189 SSI recipients in RI of all ages with disabilities. There were 19,547 individuals with disabilities age 18-64 receiving SSI benefits; 11,958 were also SSDI recipients. To increase the number of SSI recipients who take advantage of the 1619(a) and 1619(b) work incentives programs, since 2004 RTI has undertaken research and communications initiatives including the production and dissemination of a Work Incentive brochure (printed in English and Spanish).

In 2006, 36.3% people with a disability (ages 21-64) in Rhode Island were employed (adults without reported disabilities had an employment rate of 82.5%). The difference in employment rates by disability status is directly correlated to disparities in household income. State residents with disabilities were more likely to be poor, with 22.4 percent reporting incomes below poverty level in 2006. In the working age population, the median annual household income was \$39,600, compared to \$72,300 people with no reported disabilities.

Through passage of the Buy-In, environmental scans undertaken by the Rhodes' workgroups and other initiatives and activities, substantial progress have been made to identify barriers in health care and employment supports and begin - as with passage of the Buy-In - to create systems change that will result in a comprehensive system of supports available for people with disabilities who wish to return to work - or retain employment. The Advisory Board plans to continue both the environmental research and building of leadership, networks, and initiatives that will lead to sustained and broad system change.

HIGHLIGHTS

Employment and Training

A substantive achievement in 2007 was the RI Social Security Summit that took place on March 27th. Among the 30 round-table participants were employers, Social Security officials, state agency leadership, consumer advocate representatives, and individuals from outside the state with relevant expertise. As a result of the Summit, Raytheon – an international business based in Rhode Island – offered to take the lead in follow-up strategic planning (utilizing the "Six Sigma" process).

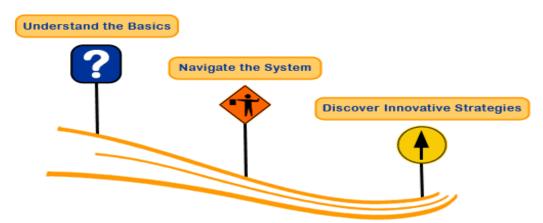
Moreover, RTI partnerships expanded through the addition of Family Voices and the Homestead Group (ARC of Northern RI) who are now represented on the RTI Advisory Board. Top leadership in the state including the Departments of Human Services, Labor and Training and Mental Health, Retardation and Hospitals have committed to participating in the Six Sigma process and follow-up.



In September, a follow-up daylong retreat focusing on Raytheon's Sigma Six process took place, facilitated by a Six Sigma "Master Expert." The process is utilized as a change agent. Thirty-five individuals representing legislators — notably Congressman Langevin - key agencies, organizations and individuals participated. The attendees prioritized issues and barriers relative to people with disabilities discussed root causes and identified key "champions" who will create implementation plans and craft strategies.

RTI continued its partnership with netWORKri co-sponsoring the 2007 Job Fair. As with the 2006 Job Fair, the event was a great success attracting 231 job seekers (of whom 83 indicated they have a disability) and twenty employers. We anticipate collaborating with netWORKri in 2008 to implement our third annual Job Fair.

In 2005, RTI supported the organization and launching of the Rhode Island Business Leadership Network. Through 2006 and into 2007, RTI staff continued to help facilitate meetings and events. By the close of 2007, the BLN has evolved into an entity which is primarily business-driven and self-supporting. RTI is proud of its commitment to support the organization launch and implementation of the BLN and will continue to regard the BLN as a resource.



A Self-Employment Subcommittee was constituted in 2007 to ascertain resources and programs available for Rhode Islanders with disabilities interested in self-employment and microenterprise options. Members included consumers, agency representatives ranging from ORS to Veterans Affairs. Nationally recognized small business and entrepreneurship consultants Griffin and Hammis provided input, and an informal survey of available services and supports was conducted. The work performed by the Self-Employment Subcommittee will serve as the foundation for a major 2008 self-employment initiative, which will eventually increase the number of adults with disabilities in the state who are aware of small business ownership as an option and are provided with the knowledge of the process and resources for starting a business.

Housing

Without a home, it is impossible for almost any person to stay employed. Several of our 2007 activities focused on housing. As 2007 ended, a Rhodes to Independence Home Modification Brief was close to publication. This issue brief describes current home modification options and programs in the state, as well as the Massachusetts Home Modification Loan Program, and recommends a similar program for Rhode Island.

In addition, RTI began developing a Home Modification 101 Workbook that has reader-friendly, broad information on how to acquire home modification for any individuals requiring such accommodations that will allow them to live independently in the community or housing arrangement of their choice. Upon completion, the workbook will be made available to service providers and consumers in conjunction with presentations and seminars.

Finally, RTI is collaborating with RI Housing to create a RI Housing Registry that includes information on accessibility for available housing, whether rental units or houses. RTI is providing the funds to purchase registry software. It is anticipated that the Housing Registry will up operational in 2008.

Health Care

Access to health care services and insurance coverage are essential to all people. For those with chronic health care needs this is an especially critical area. Research provides the basis for policy development regarding people with chronic conditions as well as improving health care access and quality.

Over the past five years, the Rhodes Project Director and consultants have analyzed the Rhode Island Medicare / Medicaid linked database. In 2007, the first chart book - Profiles of Dually Eligible Beneficiaries in Rhode Island 1995-1999 - was completed. This chart book - and future research based on more recent data - will serve as valuable tools for policy-makers and state agencies to provide a basis for future strategies to bridge gaps and reduce barriers for people with disabilities to access health care.



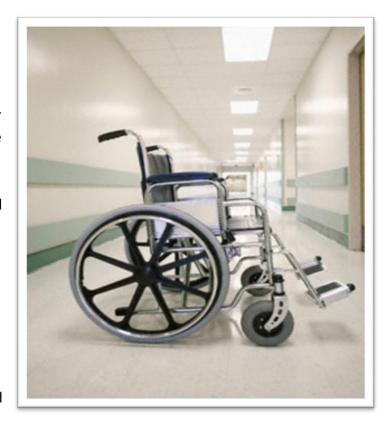
RTI also produced informational brochures and fact sheets regarding support programs for adults with disabilities. The handouts provide details concerning federal support programs for workers with disabilities, notably the 1619 a and 1619 b Social Security Administration programs. There is also information - in the work incentives brochures as well as a fact sheet - concerning the Sherlock Plan (the state's Medicaid Buy-In) which allows eligible workers with disabilities to purchase needed medical services through buying-into Medicaid coverage.

In addition to producing informational materials, during 2007 RTI staff has provided counseling for people who are inquiring about the Sherlock Plan and connected potentially eligible individuals to the Department of Human Services. Staff is active in giving presentations on the Sherlock Plan and other work incentives and support to service providers, advocacy organizations, and other interested entities.



Over the past year, the RTI
Project Director has participated
in the development of new
voluntary managed care options
for adults with disabilities - Rhody
Health Partners and Connect Care
Choice - which are now available
(along with the traditional
Medicaid fee-for-service). RTI will
continue providing information
and outreach support concerning
all health care options for
Medicaid recipients with
disabilities.

An intense effort is underway by the State Governor and policymakers to "re-orient the Medicaid program to incorporate the



principles of reform and shift the bias away from high cost and institutionally-based forms of care." The passage of the "Long Term Care Service and Finance Reform Act of 2006" ("The Perry-Sullivan Long Term Care Reform Act") outlined a plan to perform both the funding and service delivery systems of long-term care, placing an emphasis on increased access to home and community care programs and decreasing the state's reliance on nursing homes. DHS has the responsibility of implementing the law. With the awarding of a five-year CMS Real Choices System Transformation Grant, DHS determined that the most efficient approach would be to combine the strategic planning effort required under the grant with the strategic planning effort involved in implementing the Perry-Sullivan Act.

As part of this effort, DHS formed three stakeholder workgroups (Access, Finance, and Quality) to solicit advice from all interested parties. The RTI Project Director serves as facilitator for the Access Workgroup and attends the other two workgroup meetings. The State is also developing a Section 1115 global waiver request to CMS that will allow it to restructure its Medicaid Program. The waiver will give the state the flexibility to restructure its benefit package, increase cost-sharing and setting up waiting lists for additional non-traditional Medicaid services. The RTI Project Director has been providing assistance on the development of the waiver.

Information and Outreach

In addition to the aforementioned Work Incentives brochure, Housing Modifications Issue Brief and Sherlock Plan fact sheet and presentations, information and outreach that provide accurate information to citizens concerning state and federal programs and Rhodes' activities are ongoing. RTI staff was represented on panels around the state speaking and answering questions regarding accessible housing and transportation for people with disabilities, health coverage and work supports and areas such as youths with disabilities transitioning from high school to work or further education. We also listened to people's concerns. By sponsoring the Governor's Commission on Disabilities Public Forums, hosting one, and attending the other Forums as well as just talking with consumers and their advocates, we gather information that is utilized in formulating Rhodes' initiatives and activities.

In 2007, the Rhodes to Independence website was redesigned and improved to become a more vibrant, interactive and inclusive vehicle that can be used as a resource and as a sounding-board for individuals' questions and concerns.

Transportation



Accessible, affordable transportation that workers can utilize to get themselves from their homes to work and back in a timely fashion is lacking for many individuals with a disability and continues to be a major barrier to attaining - and retaining - employment.

In 2007, seven state agencies embarked on a planning development effort under the direction of a Coordinated Public Transit Steering Committee for Rhode Island. This

Committee - largely mirroring the Interagency Coordinating Council on Access and Mobility established in 2004 - was formed to promote interagency cooperation and better coordination of transportation programs on the federal level. This planning effort was due in part to SAFETEA-LU, the federal transportation act, which requires that a plan be in place before services and transportation providers in the region may access certain specific funding programs offered by the Federal Transit Administration. These funding programs involve transportation services for persons with disabilities, older adults, and persons with lower incomes provide strategies for meeting these needs, and require prioritization of transportation services for funding and implementation.

Federal program guidelines require that locally coordinated plans be developed through a process that includes input from a wide range of stakeholder groups. Rhodes to Independence was invited and took part in the process. The final Coordinated Transit Plan, to be released in early 2008, will iterate recommended objectives and strategies to enhance human services transportation in RI.

Partnerships

A key success of Rhodes to Independence has been its ability to initiate collaborations and partnerships that have previously not existed and facilitate a cooperative process for working together on relevant issues, problems, and policy initiatives. This continued throughout 2007 beginning with the March Rhode Island Social Security Summit and enhanced through the September Six Sigma retreat. Relationships with the Department of Human Services and Office of Rehabilitative Services were revitalized. New employers and consumer organizations participated in Rhodes for the first time.

Despite the energy and synergy generated in 2007, the state's budget deficit and state agency personnel downsizing have created an environment that poses a challenge for all in the state, including Rhodes to Independence, in terms of moving forward. As the year ended, unemployment is on the rise and fewer jobs are available. Wherever there is challenge, however, there is opportunity. The partnerships forged by Rhodes to Independence – particularly among employers and economic development entities – can take advantage of this time of flux to continue to forge a pathway to independence and employment for Rhode Islanders with disabilities.





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Finally, the staffs of three technical assistance entities, which provided valuable services to us last year deserve commendation for their help and technical support: the New England States Consortium System's Organization (NESCSO), the New England Partnership (NEP), and the Center for Workers with Disabilities at the American Public Health Services Organization.

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