

THE
UNIVERSITY
OF RHODE ISLAND

COLLEGE OF PHARMACY

THINK BIG  WE DOSM



RHODES TO INDEPENDENCE

RI Employment First Summit: Summary Report

March 2010



Rhode Island Employment first Summit

On December 9, 2009, over 130 citizens from across Rhode Island were invited to the Renaissance Providence Hotel to take part in the first statewide community conversation about how to increase the employment rate of people with disabilities by making employment the first and preferred choice. Rhodes to Independence, the Rhode Island Medicaid Infrastructure Grant (MIG), and the Employment Workgroup of the Rhode Island consumer choice Compact Global Waiver Task Force (GWTF) hosted the event. The Employment Workgroup was given the charge of developing recommendations in the following areas:

- How to increase employment among Medicaid beneficiaries with disabilities in RI
- How to support Medicaid beneficiaries with disabilities who are currently working

The Employment Workgroup agreed that the overarching goal was to make Rhode Island an “Employment First” state for all people with disabilities. Through consensus, the following explanation of what this means for Rhode Islanders was developed:

Rhode Island Employment First Goal: “To improve competitive employment outcomes of individuals with disabilities through demand-side business, strategies that ensure any individual with a disability who wants to work has the proper skills, tools and access to training and employment opportunities.”

On September 30, 2009, the Employment Workgroup submitted their Recommendations Paper to Gary Alexander, Secretary of the Executive Office of Health and Human Services (EOHHS). The document outlined a set of specific recommendations for the state of Rhode Island to make employment a reality for more Rhode Islanders with disabilities. The Recommendations Paper in its entirety is included in the appendix of this report.

The Employment Workgroup decided to address many of the recommendations put forth in the paper by hosting *The Rhode Island Employment First Summit* with the following two goals in mind:

- To bring together key constituents throughout Rhode Island who believe strongly in the idea that integrated employment in the workforce at competitive wages should be the expected and first choice of Rhode Islanders with disabilities.
- To change conventional thinking about what is possible by sharing new methods to narrow the employment gap and increase the productivity of all people with disabilities.

The Rhode Island Employment First Summit would adopt a format for the event that had been used in other states to facilitate the conversation and develop a set of consensus recommendations to advance competitive, community-based employment of people with disabilities in Rhode Island. The format involves inviting key leaders, policy makers, state agency personnel, people with disabilities, educators, and other community

leaders to take part in facilitated conversations about increasing the employment rate of people with disabilities in the state.



The Summit was a one-half day event. Despite the arrival of the first snowstorm of the year, 118 of the 134 invitees attended the event. The Summit attendees were assigned to tables that were organized into “affinity groups.” The affinity groups were:

- Directors of State Agencies
- Employers
- Policy Makers
- Neighborhood and Community Leaders
- People with Disabilities
- Interested Citizens
- Family Members
- Funders Employment Service Providers
- Disability Advocates
- Employees in State Agencies
- Educators

Each group was assigned a facilitator to lead the discussion and record the comments of the group participants. The comments were collected and recorded by a cadre of recorders that had been recruited from the local AmeriCorps Program. The comments and recommendations of the Summit

participants recorded by this group appear throughout this summary report. The full set of Summit comments in their entirety are included in the Appendix of this report.

The groups were asked to take part in two conversations. In the first session, the participants would remain in their affinity groups and respond to the following questions.

What’s working? What are we doing right in Rhode Island? What facilitates employment of Rhode Islanders with disabilities?

For the second session, the groups would be mixed and asked to answer the following:

What will it take (actions) to increase the participation of Rhode Islanders with disabilities in the workforce?

The day began with a welcome by Rhode Island Lieutenant Governor, Elizabeth H. Roberts, who expressed support for increased employment of people with disabilities and for the work of the assembled group. Following the Lt. Governor’s welcome, Elaina Goldstein Executive Director of Rhodes to Independence, introduced a video greeting by Rhode Island Congressman, James Langevin, who also expressed his gratitude to the assembled group for coming together to address the employment issues of people with disabilities. Goldstein then provided a brief background of Rhodes to independence, the Global Waiver Task Force and the Employment Workgroup. She restated the goals of the Summit, which were:

- Change conventional thinking about “what is possible” and narrow the employment disparity between people with and without disabilities,
- Leaders in Rhode Island will develop a Blueprint that will turn the “Employment First” Goal into reality.

She also set out a schedule of what would happen to the information and work of the Summit participants. This included creating and distributing a summary report of the Summit that would be sent to the attendees and other stakeholders by March of 2010. Following the distribution of the report, a second summit would be held in late March or early April to begin the process of crafting an Employment First –Blueprint- for Rhode Island. In October of 2010, a third summit would be held to measure progress toward achieving the goals laid out in the Blueprint, and set the stage for the future of employment of Rhode Islanders with disabilities. Elaina Goldstein introduced Bob Niemiec, of The Center for Social Capital, to explain the format of the Summit and the expectations of the participants.



Rhodes to Independence enlisted the aid of Bob Niemiec to help plan, prepare and host the Rhode Island event. He is a founding member of the Minnesota Employment First Coalition and has been actively involved in Employment First efforts in several states. He was a key planner for the Minnesota Employment First Summit, and contributor to the Minnesota Employment First Consensus Report.

Niemiec welcomed the Rhode Island Summit participants. He introduced the first session question and explained the role of the participants,

facilitators and recorders. The following summary represents the collective themes from the Summit participants in response to the first questions. The responses from the affinity groups were categorized by the following topics/themes and have been ranked by priority of interest:

Session One: What's working? What are we doing right in Rhode Island? What facilitates employment of Rhode Islanders with disabilities?

The responses from the affinity groups were categorized by the following topics/themes and ranked by priority of interest:

CULTURE OF RHODE ISLAND (41 Comments)

Rhode Island is a small state with a history of public-private partnerships. There are close-knit relationships among state agencies and routine communication. The stakeholders are willing to come to the table and discuss issues as evidenced by their participation in the Summit. An entrepreneurial spirit exists in Rhode Island as well as a positive outlook. Because of its size, the state enjoys great connectivity among its community leaders. The ability to get all the people who need to be in the same room together to discuss issues and solve problems is a real positive.

GOVERNMENT PROGRAMS (32 Comments)

There are several government programs that exist in RI to advance employment: The Office of Rehabilitation Services (ORS), Rhode Island Department of Education (RIDE), Department of Labor and Training (DLT), Division of Developmental Disabilities (DDD), and Veteran Affairs (VA). Inter-agency collaboration and coordination involving ORS, RIDE, DLT, and DDD to name a few are working. There are state internship programs, work incentive planning, connection with the VA and the Aging and Disability Resource Center are also improving options for people.

EMPLOYMENT PROVIDERS AND THEIR SERVICES (29

Comments)

Many employment providers have quality, dedicated staff that can think outside of the box. Professional job coaching is often provided. Agencies are developing the talent for assessment and job development. Providers have expressed their desire to do evidence-based practices. There is increased collaboration among agencies, and increasing supports and services for employment. There has been more emphasis on fitting a job to a person rather than fitting a person to a job.

SCHOOL-TO-WORK TRANSITION (29 Comments)

Schools are beginning to expect that students will work as adults. They are doing a good job of vocational placement with job coaching. Early intervention will continue to help establish the expectation of employment for young people with disabilities. Community colleges are offering supports and training opportunities. In Rhode Island, students have access to counselors in schools, so education assistance begins early. Various educational conferences in the state promote jobs from the school level and on.

BUSINESS AND EMPLOYER INITIATIVES (26 Comments)

There is strong corporate commitment to diversity and social responsibility. The employer buy-in of people with disabilities as a viable talent pool is strong. There are an increased number of businesses that currently employ people with disabilities as well as more meaningful and significant employment opportunities. There is still a need for strong partnerships in the community to assist in the recruitment of workers with disabilities, but greater employer awareness and assistance can help foster such partnerships. Support and consultation for businesses, especially smaller businesses could accelerate the employment of people with disabilities in the Rhode Island workforce.

EMPLOYMENT INFORMATION AND TRAINING OPPORTUNITIES

(26 Comments)

There is better access to training on self-employment, person-centered planning, and job matching. There are more opportunities for on-the-job training that leads to employment. Good communication exists to make people aware of training opportunities and information. Job fairs, better access to resources, and access to outside trainers and experts has helped the situation.



EXPECTATION OF EMPLOYMENT (21 Comments)

The group agreed that a “culture shift” was taking place. A theme of Employment First was emerging whereby there was a higher expectation that people with disabilities can and should be working. People with disabilities represent an unused source of talent. There is an increased focus on competitive employment – people earning regular wages doing regular jobs in regular places of business.

DISABILITY ADVOCACY (16 Comments)

The disability advocacy community is strong and involved in the state. There are peer support programs that provide credibility and experience to others. People are vocal about disabilities being understood and accepted. Advocacy organizations have improved broader understanding of

underlying issues related to disabilities as well as increased education. There was a strong sentiment for families and individuals to design their own services and build their own community support.

[BENEFITS COUNSELING](#) (12 Comments)

Work incentives planning and counseling exists but more work is needed in this area. People are afraid of working and earning too much for fear of losing benefits. Disability navigators and others can help allay fears by providing individuals and families with good information about working and its effect on benefits.



[TRANSPORTATION](#) (8 Comments)

Although transportation is an ever-continuing issue that needs constant attention, there are some good things happening in Rhode Island. Some communities have accessible public transportation (Providence, Newport). Para-transit also exists. There are travel-training programs and the RIDE program prioritizes working people.

[FUNDING](#) (5 Comments)

There was a suggestion to use stimulus money to support employment. The Global Waiver was seen as an opportunity for creative uses of funding. An area to watch is the push for cost effectiveness in challenging economic times.

The first discussion session was followed by a presentation by Lisa Alford of the Alabama Department of Rehabilitation Services. Ms. Alford provided a brief rundown of efforts in Alabama to expand Customize Employment to people with more intensive support needs. She outlined a brief history of employment efforts, payment structures, and training and development of providers. She discussed a project in Alabama to pilot a new service delivery system that provides a wrap-around approach, using Discovery, and other tools of customized employment to provide VR customers the supports they need to work successfully. She talked about some of the challenges they face including cuts in state funding, the rural population, the size of the state, and the poor condition of the economy. She also talked about a future that included a greater focus on employment as the first option for people with disabilities in Alabama – Employment First.

Following Lisa Alford's presentation, the participants were directed to move to their second assigned groups that were a mixture of each of the affinity group members. After a short refreshment break, they began work on the second discussion.

Session 2: What will it take to increase the participation of Rhode Islanders with disabilities in the workforce?

[ENGAGE, EDUCATE AND ENCOURAGE EMPLOYERS TO HIRE PEOPLE WITH DISABILITIES](#) (45 Comments)

Find ways to engage employers. Invite employers to be part of agency boards of directors. Remove the perception that people with disabilities pose a greater health insurance or Workers Compensation risk for employers. Educate businesses about ADA so they understand the intent of the law and are not afraid of the implications of hiring people with disabilities. Encourage engaged businesses to speak to other businesses about hiring people with disabilities. Provide greater training and support to

employers. Develop consulting centers for self-employment and business start up.

[CHANGE ATTITUDES REGARDING THE EMPLOYMENT CAPABILITIES OF PEOPLE WITH DISABILITIES](#) (33 Comments)

Invest in marketing and more media exposure about people with disabilities and employment. Generate more public awareness about people with disabilities. Share success stories about businesses that hire people with disabilities and about workers with disabilities. The service system should celebrate the successes related to employment and people with disabilities.

Follow the examples of successful social issues and their public awareness campaigns like breast cancer, etc. There is a need to develop easy to use information and to raise awareness at many levels – parents, schools, employers, and individuals with disabilities. Raise expectations about people with disabilities and employment.

[STRENGTHEN AND FORMALIZE COLLABORATIVE EFFORTS](#) (30 Comments)

Although there is collaboration among state agencies, there needs to be more focus on coordination. Certify job coaches and job developers. Rhodes to Independence should pull agencies together to talk about crafting a consistent message to both employers and job seekers. There should be more events like this summit to keep the momentum going. Streamline the Employment Committee. Do a better job of reaching out to local communities. Network with people who know where the jobs are. Increase opportunities to share resources. Build greater linkages with the medical community.

[INCREASE AND ENHANCE CAPACITY OF EMPLOYMENT PROVIDERS](#) (30 Comments)

Train more and better person-centered planners. Identify and promote evidence-based practices and

models. Put those approaches that work into place. Find top employment specialists and have them train others. Increase the ability of organizations to match people and jobs. Move to a “discovery” process for employment.

[DEVELOP A COMPREHENSIVE EMPLOYMENT FIRST POLICY FOR RHODE ISLAND](#) (23 Comments)

There should be an Employment First policy for the state – a Contract with Rhode Island – that will change the system and make employment the first choice for people with disabilities. Simplify the language so that everyone can understand the services and supports. Create and support strong leadership to implement the changes. Work on revising the Sherlock Plan and options for health insurance that allows people to work.



[EXPAND AND ENHANCE SCHOOL TO WORK TRANSITIONS](#) (22 Comments)

Increase work opportunities and experiences for students with disabilities. Create better connections between education and business. Start younger – middle school – to raise the expectation of employment for students with disabilities. Develop a “culture of capability” in elementary schools.

[EDUCATE STAKEHOLDERS ON GOVERNMENT WORK INCENTIVE PROGRAMS](#) (21 Comments)

Increase information and awareness about existing benefits and services, and how they are funded. Enhance the availability of benefits counseling and work incentives education. Increase benefits planning, financial planning, and the effects of increased wages. Explain tax incentives for low-income families. Work with the legislature to create additional work incentives. Train schools, families and service agencies about Social Security work incentives. Get the word out that supports are available – there are lots of resources but not everyone knows about them.



[Braid and Blend Funding Streams](#) (18 Comments)

Simplify the system – there are too many funding “silos.” Create a feeling of opportunity within state agency leadership and staff. The lack of money is not an excuse, but be prompt to re-tool and re-engineer. Build flexibility into the funding – authorize more vouchers for individual budgets. Identify alternative funding sources to support training and education. Funders should collaborate – restructure work incentives so they are not disincentives.

[SUPPORT DISABILITY ADVOCACY](#) (12 Comments)

Promote the image of people with disabilities by showing positive role models. Avoid stereotypes and keep the message positive. Present information to families that they should expect that their family members should and can be employed. Create better peer education programs and certified peer specialists. Simplify the language – decipher the acronyms.

[IMPROVE TRANSPORTATION SYSTEM FOR WORKERS WITH DISABILITIES](#) (11 Comments)

Improve transportation for people with disabilities, including second and third shift workers. Use flexibility in the Global Waiver to pay for individualized transportation. Create jobs for people with disabilities that will provide transportation. Expand RIDE. There was very strong agreement among the participants to increase public transportation in all parts of the state.

Conclusion

There was a palpable energy and sense of enthusiasm in the room. Summit participants expressed their gratitude to Rhodes to Independence for hosting the Summit and inviting them to attend. They were eager to see the results of the Summit and begin the work of creating the Blueprint. Elaina Goldstein thanked everyone for attending on the difficult travel day, and for their willing and eager participation. She re-stated the plan to create and distribute the summary report and to hold two subsequent events to create a blueprint for the state and measure progress toward achieving the recommendations from the summit.

Appendices

- ❖ Summit Agenda
- ❖ Employment Workforce Recommendations Paper
- ❖ Facilitators and their affiliations
- ❖ List of Participants
- ❖ Session input (the complete record)
- ❖ Congressman Langevin's video – Link: www.RhodesToIndependence.org
- ❖ Elaina Goldstein's presentation
- ❖ Lisa Alfords presentation
- ❖ Disability Determination (If no SSDI or SSI) Chart

