

Best Practices in Collaboration: Massachusetts One-Stop Career Centers and Community Agencies Serving People with Disabilities

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Many individuals with disabilities receive employment supports and assistance from various community agencies. Since the inception of the One-Stop Career Center system in the mid 1990s, these community agencies have collaborated with Massachusetts Career Centers in a variety of ways. This collaboration has been mutually beneficial, allowing community agencies to expand the resources available to assist job seekers, while enabling Career Centers to expand their capacity to meet the needs of individuals with disabilities.

Types of Collaboration

The strategies that community agencies serving individuals with disabilities use to collaborate with Career Centers fall into three categories:

- Staff and job seeker together: Staff from the community agency assist an individual to use the core services of the Career Center (such as the resource library, workshops, etc.), and to access intensive and training services.
- Job seeker independently: An individual receiving services from a community agency goes to the Career Center on his or her own, with the external support of the agency.
- Job developer on his or her own: A staff member from a community agency uses the Career Center independently (without the consumer) to obtain job listings and similar information to assist job seekers.

Benefits of Career Center–Community Agency Collaboration

Service providers at community agencies report that supplementing their existing services with those of Career Centers has resulted in enhanced placement outcomes. The Career Center allows the service provider and job seeker to connect with a wider array of resources. It also provides an opportunity for an individual to receive services in an integrated community setting with members of the general community, and not exclusively with other people with disabilities.

Career Centers can be particularly useful for community agencies in working with consumers who are ambivalent or hesitant regarding a job search. Going to a Career Center is a way for such individuals to ease into a job search, which helps to reduce their anxiety. Visiting a Career Center also helps show consumers that looking for a job is a typical process for many people, and is not a result of having a disability. The Career Center can demystify the job-search process, breaking down the search into a series of manageable steps. Given their self-directed nature, Career Centers also provide a sense of personal choice and control for job seekers. The community agency can also use the Career Center to teach job seekers how to use a resource which will be of value in future job searches.

Examples of Collaboration

- Staff from community agencies accompany the job seeker, and provide support in using the services of the Career Center. This includes support in workshop participation, use of the resource library, access to job listings, and participation in employer recruiting events and other activities. This staff support helps ensure that the individual is receiving the assistance and accommodations necessary to benefit fully from Career Center services. In addition, the staff person serves in the role of advocate, ensuring that accommodations are provided during workshops, job fairs, and similar events.
- Career Centers have provided office space to community agencies for a day or two per week to meet with referrals from other staff at the center,

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enabling the community agency to use the Career Center as a satellite office. For example, the Career Place and Career Source in the Metro North workforce region have provided office space to a community rehabilitation provider on an ongoing basis, as has the Career Center in Taunton.

- One community agency serving people with disabilities in the Springfield area has been particularly proactive in utilizing Career Center services. All new staff at this agency go through Career Center orientation. Each job seeker the agency serves registers with the Career Center, and then uses the Career Center as part of their job search in ways that meet their specific needs, with provider staff supporting them as appropriate. The Career Center provides space for the community agency to hold their job club, resulting in a stronger employment focus and activities away from the “human service” atmosphere of the agency. Additionally, agency staff have used space at the Career Center to teach a computer class, with the curriculum modified for people with cognitive disabilities.

Tips and Guidelines for Collaboration

The following are some tips and ideas for Career Centers about collaborating with community agencies:

- Develop an Associate membership. If not already in place, develop an “Associate” type of membership for community agencies. This helps ensure that the use of the Career Center by community agencies does not count in terms of job-seeker data, and also helps to ensure clarity regarding the role of the community agency.
- Create guidelines for use. Develop some basic guidelines for use of Career Centers by community agencies. This can include the types of services that the community agencies can utilize

at the Career Center, tips on how to best support individuals in using the Career Center, and parameters regarding use of the Career Center by community agencies during times of high customer volume. In conjunction with the development of these guidelines, Career Centers may wish to provide a customized orientation specifically for community agencies.

- Use community agencies for increased customer supports. Particularly in times of high customer volume, it may seem to Career Center staff that working with community agencies is not a high priority. However, community agencies can actually be an asset during such times, providing additional supports and guidance to customers with more significant needs, thus helping Career Centers better respond to these customers during times of high unemployment. Career Centers may even want to pull together a group of community agencies when unemployment is high, to discuss how they can work together to mutually meet one another’s goals in challenging times.

Conclusion

It is important to bear in mind that the purpose of these types of collaborations is to supplement, but not replace, the more intensive services that an individual is receiving from the community agency, and for which the agency is being funded. The agency providing employment supports still has the primary responsibility for placement. The Career Center should not be viewed as an entity to which the community agency can “hand off” the job seeker, nor are Career Centers, given their high-volume service model, designed to substitute for the intensive services of community agencies. At the same time, done properly, Career Center and community agency collaborations can be mutually beneficial to all concerned—in particular, to job seekers with disabilities.

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