

Employment First Ramsey County

Summary Report



The Minnesota Employment Training and Technical Assistance Center

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Ramsey County Community Human Services

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Introduction

The Minnesota Employment First Coalition hosted its first statewide Employment First Summit in June of 2007. This event marked a pivotal year for Minnesota because it sparked a new conversation and strategy for advancing the employment and economic participation of people with disabilities. Today, Employment First continues to gain momentum not only in our state but across the country.

The Employment First “Consensus Report “ and subsequent reports from more recent summits outline specific recommendations for advancing employment. One of those recommendations is the need to launch and support local community initiatives. Ramsey County Community Human Services (RCCHS) has been a longstanding member of the Employment First Coalition and shares its commitment to improving employment outcomes.

On October 25, 2010, the Disability Services Section of RCCHS along with Arc Greater Twin Cities, MN APSE, The MN Employment Training and Technical Assistance Center (MNTAT) and the MN Employment First Coalition sponsored a local Employment First summit specific to Ramsey County with over fifty diverse stakeholders in attendance.

The Disability Services Section of RCCHS serves approximately 6,000 children and adults. This includes persons with intellectual and developmental disabilities that receive Rule 185 Case Management as well as people with a wide range of disabilities, including physical and psychiatric disabilities, who receive services funded by a Home and Community Based Waiver. Disability Services launched its employment initiative a number of years ago primarily in response to the changing preferences and needs of youth and their families. This initiative is about building partnerships and improving policies and practices in a way that promotes opportunities for people to contribute as valued members of the American Workforce.

While RCCHS played a key role in hosting the event, the local summit focused on Ramsey County as a community rather than a government entity. A committee of people from advocacy organizations, community service providers, and local school districts worked with RCCHS staff over the course of several months to plan this event.

Employment First

The Minnesota Employment First Coalition has hosted a number of summits to sustain dialogue and action among employment first champions throughout the state. The Coalition describes “Employment First” as the vision of making employment the first priority and preferred outcome of people with disabilities. This is the vision that inspired discussion at the Ramsey summit.

Put simply, the Coalition consists of a group people committed to advancing employment for people with disabilities. Persons on the coalition also represent the following organizations: Minnesota APSE: The Network on Employment, Minnesota Department of Education, Pathways to Employment, Minnesota Department of Human Services, Minnesota Department of Employment and Economic Development, Institute on Community Integration at University of Minnesota, Ramsey County Community Human Services, Social Security Administration, The Consumer Survivor Network, PACER Center, Minnesota Training and Technical Assistance Center and Arc Greater Twin Cities.

To further illustrate this concept, the following excerpts are taken from the 2007 Employment First Consensus Report:

“EMPLOYMENT FIRST”

- *Means expecting, encouraging, providing, creating and rewarding integrated employment in the workforce*
- *At minimum or competitive wages and benefits*
- *As the first and preferred outcome for working-age youth and adults with disabilities*
- *Including those with complex and significant disabilities, for whom job placement in the past has been limited, or has not traditionally occurred.*

“EMPLOYMENT” is defined as regular or customized employment in the workforce

- *Where employees with disabilities are included on the payroll of a competitive business or industry (unless self-employed)*
- *Where the assigned employment tasks offer at least minimum or prevailing wages and benefits*
- *And offer ordinary opportunities for integration and interaction with co-workers without disabilities, with customers, and/or the general public.*

Think Globally, Act Locally

Representatives from RCCHS and the Department of Education began the summit proceedings with introductory remarks. Ramsey County Commissioner Victoria Reinhardt was also present to welcome participants. The Commissioner reflected on how societal attitudes about people with disabilities have changed over the years. She commended Minnesota for leading the way in establishing employment first objectives and implementing practices that capitalize on the skills that people with disabilities can bring to the workforce.

The summit got underway with a thought provoking keynote presentation by Cary Griffin. Mr. Griffin is Senior Partner at Griffin-Hammis Associates, a consultancy that specializes in disability and employment. He is also Co-Director of the U.S. Dept. of Labor's National Self Employment Technical Assistance, Resources and Training project with Virginia Commonwealth University.

Cary talked about the impact of people committed to one simple idea, employment for everybody. Coalitions of people are organizing throughout the United States, in Minnesota and now locally in Ramsey County. He went on to share stories of people who have successfully secured employment through an innovative process known as Discovering Personal Genius (DPG) and Customized Employment. DPG is a "one-person-at-a-time" approach that identifies vocational themes and ideal conditions of employment to inform and fuel job development. Customized Employment strategies are designed to uncover possibilities that typically do not surface with more conventional methods. Having high expectations is fundamental to this process. This means intentionally choosing to think and act in terms of abundance, not scarcity. Cary called attention to resources that often remain unexplored, such as an individual's social capital or the value of relationships and networks. He also described the incredible potential for economic development within the small business community. A local community action team within Ramsey County has been working closely with the Minnesota Employment Training and Technical Assistance Center (MNTAT) to learn about and apply these practices.

The bulk of the afternoon was focused on small group discussion. Participants were assigned to specific tables to support a balance of perspectives. Tables were named for local community landmarks and included representatives from various disability groups. Those present included individuals and family members, vocational and residential service providers, county and school professionals as well as representatives from Vocational Rehabilitation and advocacy organizations.

Trained facilitators were at each table and a note-taker was assigned to record comments in response to three questions: 1) what impact does employment have for people in our community? 2) How can we make employment the first outcome for people with disabilities in our community? 3) As an individual, what is one thing that you will commit to that will improve employment outcomes? Each group shared key findings from their tables with the larger group following table discussion. Attendees

were also informed that a summary report from their submitted comments would be generated in follow up to the summit.

Common Themes and Recommendations Identified

QUESTION ONE: What Impact does employment have for people in our community?

Attendees of the summit had much to say about the profound impact that employment has on people's lives. Three primary themes surfaced in response to this question. A sampling of comments is included under each area below to more fully reflect participant feedback.

Self Identity, Worth and Purpose

- *"It builds self-confidence."*
- *"People are seen as competent."*
- *"Breaks Stereotypes."*
- *"Having a job raises your self esteem, a sense of contribution."*
- *"Employment is a part of a person's legacy."*
- *"There is structure in employment, you feel productive. We all need this."*
- *"Sense of individual purpose."*
- *"It is a way of belonging within a community."*
- *"Employment supports physical and mental health."*

Employment Builds Community

- *"It is part of our culture. We often ask each other "What do you do for a living?"*
- *"It brings the community together."*
- *"It keeps us all connected."*
- *"It is how we meet people and develop new friendships, decreases isolation."*
- *"Businesses are a critical part of our community."*
- *"It is how we relate to one another."*

Economic Impact

- *"Employment fuels increased spending in the community."*
- *"It gives people choice and power."*
- *"Stronger tax base."*
- *"The potential to support one's self leads to better quality of life and less reliance on social services."*
- *"Wear a t-shirt that reads 'Invest in people with disabilities, create a taxpayer!'"*
- *"Less Crime."*

QUESTION TWO: How can we make employment the first outcome for people with disabilities in our community?

This question marked the pinnacle of the summit and demanded the most time for reflection and dialogue. Seven recommendations were identified from the discussions as a consensus for action.

1. First and Foremost, Raise Expectations

- *“Raising expectations of people with disabilities. Everybody means everybody.”*
- *“Make it an expectation and start young.”*
- *“Instill the belief that employment is a goal from early on.”*
- *“Create a culture of high expectation.”*
- *“We can do this. Have the expectation from all involved.”*

2. Empower Individuals and Families

- *“Parents can have such an impact.”*
- *“Redefine roles of who should be driving the bus. People with disabilities!”*
- *“Get more information out to families about customized employment. Emphasize strengths.”*
- *“Tapping assets of the family and individual.”*
- *“Look to social capital of the family and break outside of the service silo.”*

3. Employment is a priority and outcome early on in life

- *“Kids should leave school with their own job.”*
- *“Employment should start in school.”*
- *“Finding the right time to move from school to work- not waiting to ‘age-out’.”*
- *“Discovery should be a part of transition in schools.”*
- *“Teens get jobs.”*

4. Service outcomes and resources should focus on employment

- *“Flexible funding for families, such as consumer directed options.”*
- *“Emphasis (and dollars) needs to be put into practices that produce results.”*
- *“Stop using funding as an excuse.”*
- *“Using paid supports efficiently and differently.”*
- *“Put our priorities and resources directed to individualized employment outcomes.”*
- *“Eliminate the work ready mentality. People don’t have to know everything before entering the workforce.”*
- *“Allow people with disabilities to take risks.”*

- *“Have employment be a part of the plan for every service program.”*
- *“We need to hold ourselves to a higher standard in service outcomes.”*
- *“Reinvest staff and resources differently so people can go through the discovery process.”*

5. Support individuals with benefits planning

- *“Help people see that they are better off working. Use of MAEPD, PASS Plans, Disability Benefits 101 and the Work Incentives Connection.”*
- *“The benefits system is too complex.”*
- *“People need a better explanation of how benefits are impacted by work.”*
- *“People get dependent on social security and benefits can keep people under-employed.”*
- *“Information about benefits.”*

6. Change our message and approach with business

- *“Look at small businesses.”*
- *“Stop charity approaches- seek to understand business needs.”*
- *“Personal relationships- Employers are People!”*
- *“Eliminate the pity-based presentation to the employer.”*
- *“Reexamine our language. For example, the message that businesses are doing a favor for people with disabilities.”*

7. People need more information, training and collaboration about strategies to advance employment

- *“Working more collaboratively vs. competitively.”*
- *“To have a partner you have to BE a partner.”*
- *“Breakdown walls between partners.”*
- *“MN APSE and the MN Employment First Coalition.”*
- *“Get the word out!”*
- *“Better communication: individuals and families, practitioners, county case managers, schools, VR.”*
- *“Provide training on discovery and CE practices.”*
- *“We need to be more knowledgeable about self-employment.”*

QUESTION THREE: As an individual, what is one thing you will commit to that will improve employment outcomes?

A community is made up of individuals that together can impact the employment rate of people experiencing disabilities. This question was asked to encourage participants to consider what actions (big and small) they can take as individuals to influence change. Each attendee committed to taking at least one action. To illustrate, one comment is recorded below from each table.

“I will...

- ❖ Build partnerships.”*
- ❖ Get the word out and into the water supply.”*
- ❖ Get (specific person’s name inserted) a job!”*
- ❖ Listen and be more open to what people say they really want.”*
- ❖ Work to better understand my community partners.”*
- ❖ Promote higher expectations for all.”*
- ❖ Challenge standard thinking.”*
- ❖ Share data to shift perceptions.”*
- ❖ Implement discovery in the school system.”*
- ❖ Mentor more teenagers.”*
- ❖ Network with more small businesses.”*
- ❖ Take risks and expand the scope of helping.”*

CONCLUSION

Ramsey County stakeholders that attended the Employment First Summit were clear in their belief that employment must be the first priority and preferred outcome for people with disabilities. The seven recommendations that surfaced from the table discussions demonstrate that there is also a strong intention to change direction in the vocation, be it professional or personal, of assisting individuals experiencing disabilities in discovering their own vocations.

This new direction begins with, as one attendee described, “creating a culture of high expectation”. It is from there that a community can begin to apply new practices and use resources differently so that people with disabilities and our entire community can reap the benefits and value that employment offers.

Many people drive across bridges in their daily commutes to work. There seems to be a call to construct a new “bridge to work” for individuals and families along with educators, social service professionals and others. With attention and diligence, the recommendations can serve as a helpful community road-map or guide in reaching this destination.

At the First Annual Disability and Employment Conference in 2009, the Minnesota Employment Policy Initiative established the goal “to double the employment rate of Minnesotans with disabilities by year 2015”. For Ramsey County, this means that by 2015, 30% of individuals who are receiving vocational services with Disability Services will be employed in individualized, integrated settings. This is an ambitious goal. Reaching it will require partnership on action steps that align with the recommendations as well as follow-through on the individual commitments made at the summit.

Effectively working the recommendations from this report will require involvement from people across various roles and arenas. The Ramsey County Community Action Team is just one example. As this work progresses, it will be important for the community to remain connected, learn from one another and record our success. The summit planning committee is currently exploring next steps which will include more opportunities to further the dialogue and build on the momentum from the summit.

One belief of effecting change is the impact of taking it “one-person-at-a-time”. If every Ramsey County stakeholder put employment first with even a single person and continued from there, the results would be remarkable.

If you would like to download reports from the Minnesota Employment First Coalition go to www.mnapse.org and click on the “Employment First” link.

To read about APSE’s White Paper on Employment First, “Establishing a National Employment First Agenda” go to <http://www.apse.org/docs/Revised%20Employment%20First%20paper%20709%5B1%5D.pdf>