Supporting consumer directed employment outcomes

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Abstract. Nationally, participation in sheltered/segregated programs continues to exceed participation in community-integrated employment for many individuals with significant disabilities. However, a number of community rehabilitation programs have evolved from providing services and supports that maintain individuals in segregated settings to a primary, at times singular focus on providing supports to individuals in community-integrated, inclusive employment settings. This paper briefly reviews the factors influencing this evolutionary process for community rehabilitation programs. It provides detailed examples of the organizational change process with two specific community rehabilitation programs, the Cobb and Douglas Counties Community Services Boards in Georgia and HPS, Helping People Succeed, Inc. in Florida. The core mission of both programs is to support consumer directed employment outcomes. The organizational change descriptions are accompanied by stories about individuals who are now working in inclusive employment opportunities after receiving supports through these programs.

Keywords: Supported employment, organizational change, converting community rehabilitation programs, customized employment

1. Introduction

Community rehabilitation programs (CRPs) are a primary source of employment supports used by individuals with significant disabilities. Historically, many community rehabilitation programs were primarily providers of day programs offered within settings segregated from the mainstream of the community and outside of the competitive labor market [18]. In recent years, many of these programs have gone through an evolutionary process involving a comprehensive redirection of their mission, goals, and services to reflect a prevailing emphasis on supporting program participants in achieving inclusive employment outcomes [16].

The purpose of this paper is to describe this evolution of community rehabilitation programs and the role these programs serve in providing employment supports to people with disabilities. After briefly reviewing factors that are influencing the evolution of community rehabilitation programs, detailed examples of this evolutionary process are used with two specific community rehabilitation programs. The core mission of both programs is to support consumer directed employment outcomes. The organizational change descriptions for the two programs are accompanied by stories about individuals who are now working in inclusive employment opportunities after receiving supports through these programs.

2. Background: Community rehabilitation programs and inclusive employment

Prior to the Rehabilitation Act Amendments of 1986, funding for community rehabilitation programs serving...
individuals with significant disabilities focused mainly on services in work activity and/or sheltered work programs [20]. Examples of these programs included sheltered work settings that performed a variety of short term sorting, collating, assembly, and disassembly tasks drawn from contracts with local employers. Whitehead [22] found that the average wage paid to workers within a sheltered workshop facility was $0.81 per hour in 1976 at a time when the minimum wage was $2.30 per hour. The 1986 Amendments to the Rehabilitation Act, in Title VI Part C, established the Supported Employment Formula Grants to all state Vocational Rehabilitation (VR) agencies. These funds could only be used to provide supported employment services that involved providing ongoing support to the person with a significant disability for as long as required to maintain job stability, including training and other supports at the job site itself as needed.

Supported employment targeted supports to individuals with significant disabilities who had not been successful or been limited to intermittent success in the competitive labor market. With supported employment, VR agencies had a new resource that focused on employment in integrated community work settings where individuals with significant disabilities would work side by side with non-disabled co-workers as peers and earn wages at minimum wage or above consistent with Fair Labor Standards Act [19].

In the two decades since the passage of the Rehabilitation Act Amendments of 1986, the number of individuals with significant disabilities working in competitive employment has increased steadily and the funding for supported employment has grown substantially. However, growth has also occurred in the number of persons in day and work programs in sheltered/segregated settings. Table 1 tracks growth in participation in supported employment and day programs from 1988–2002 [2]. In Fiscal Year 1988, only 23,000 individuals served by State Mental Retardation/Developmental Disabilities agencies were in supported employment; by comparison, 237,000 individuals were in sheltered day or work programs. By FY 1992, the persons in supported employment had grown over 200% to 75,000. From FY 1992 through FY 2002, supported employment participation continued to grow, but at a much slower rate than experienced from 1988 through 1992. In FY 2002, 118,000 individuals were in reported employment compared to almost 365,000 in a sheltered day/work program. The percent of individuals in supported employment of the total number in Day/Work programs leveled off at 24% in FY 2002 [1,2]. Every 1 person working in integrated job setting earning competitive wages, 3 individuals continued in sheltered settings. Earnings for those in sheltered employment were, on average, substantially below minimum wage [19].

The growth in funding of supported employment paralleled closely the growth in participation. Table 2 presents Federal funding of Medicaid for Day Programs and Supported Employment for the period Fiscal Year 1997 through 2002. The Balanced Budget Act of 1997 (PL 105–33) opened up funding for supported employment through the Home and Community Based Medicaid Waiver [21]. In FY 1998, Federal Medicaid Funding for supported employment totaled $35 million, compared to $514 million for day program services that did not include supports to persons in competitive employment. From 1998 till 2002, the funding for supported employment grew to $108 million, and the funding for day programs dropped slightly to $488 million. However, for every $1 spent on supported employment services that support competitive employment outcomes, $4 dollars continued to be spent for services that do not support competitive employment outcomes [1,2].

3. Factors influencing community rehabilitation programs

It is clear from the current participation and funding data that community rehabilitation programs continue to operate in environments where the higher percentage of funds are going to supporting non-competitive work outcomes. However, in states such as Connecticut, Alaska, and Oklahoma, the number of persons in competitive employment stands at approximately 50% or higher of day/work program participants [2]. These states provide excellent examples of effective systems change strategies that support community rehabilitation programs evolving their services and supports to a primary emphasis on competitive employment. These strategies can be cataloged under the following headings [11]:

- Mission Driven Systems
- Focus on Job Outcomes
- Align Dollars with Mission
- Expand Relations with Business
- Support Self Determination Among Program Participants
Table 1

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Fiscal year</th>
<th>Percent in supported employment as a percentage of total persons in day/work programs</th>
<th>Number of persons in supported employment</th>
<th>Number of persons in day or sheltered programs</th>
</tr>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1988</td>
<td>9%</td>
<td>23,000</td>
<td>237,000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1992</td>
<td>18%</td>
<td>75,000</td>
<td>300,000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1996</td>
<td>20%</td>
<td>92,000</td>
<td>328,000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2000</td>
<td>24%</td>
<td>108,000</td>
<td>357,000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2002</td>
<td>24%</td>
<td>118,000</td>
<td>365,000</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>


Table 2

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Fiscal year</th>
<th>Funding for supported employment</th>
<th>Funding for day programs</th>
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<tr>
<td>1997</td>
<td>$0.</td>
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<td>1998</td>
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<td>1999</td>
<td>$69m</td>
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<td>2000</td>
<td>$104m</td>
<td>$501m</td>
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<tr>
<td>2001</td>
<td>$106m</td>
<td>$488m</td>
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<tr>
<td>2002</td>
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These five state-level strategies parallel closely the key organizational development focal points emphasized by the CRP case studies detailed later in this paper. A clear example of the coming together of these five strategies to form a national systemic change effort is as follows. The passage of the Rehabilitation Act Amendments of 1986 created a Mission Driven National system emphasizing provisions of supported employment by state Vocational Rehabilitation agencies. As a result, VR agencies have made supporting individuals in competitive employment outcomes their primary mission [20]. Implementation of this new Mission required that VR system focus specifically on services directed at achieving Job Outcomes in the competitive labor market, and VR realigned its available monetary resources to accomplish its redirected mission. On January 22, 2001, the Rehabilitation Services Administration of the US Department of Education amended the regulations governing the State Vocational Rehabilitation Program to redefine the term employment outcome to mean an individual with a disability working in an integrated setting [7]. For decades with State Vocational Rehabilitation (VR), extended employment (sometimes referred to as non-integrated or sheltered employment) was an approved potential employment outcome for individuals with a disability who received VR services. Because extended/sheltered employment utilizes non-integrated work settings, the redefining of an employment outcome for a VR participant to mean ‘work in an integrated setting’ removed extended/sheltered employment as an approved potential employment outcome for Vocational Rehabilitation services.

Emphasis on developing relationships with business became a priority with the passage of the Workforce Investment Act of 1998 and the alignment of the VR system with business through the Business Leadership Networks and the One Stop Career Centers. Finally, the Rehabilitation Act Amendments of 1986, sharpened further by its subsequent amendments, such as P.L. 105–202 in 1998, emphasized choice and self-determination as the driving forces in the development of the Individualized Plan for Employment by individuals receiving services from the VR system. These five systems-level strategies set the standard for national and state level systems change. Community rehabilitation programs should focus on the same five key factors to successfully initiate and carry out plans for organizational redesign and development leading to an increased focus on supporting consumer-driven employment outcomes.

For example, a first step in the evolutionary process for a community rehabilitation program is to develop an organizational focus on achieving competitive employment outcomes [5]. This focus sets in place an organizational change process that is driven by a clear mission that focuses attention and resources on program participants achieving competitive employment outcomes [8]. This mission-driven effort involves the program’s Board, administration, staff, and consumers. Staff and programs are then realigned to support this mission [10]. A diversified funding base is developed, and funding is realigned to support the mission and focus on job outcomes [6]. Business and industry become a partner and a customer [17]. Finally, the consistent thread that runs through these efforts is the self-determined, informed goal of each individual served, including addressing the questions and concerns of family members [9]. National and state
level systems change strategies and organizational level
change strategies must be linked and fully complement
each other if the desired goal is to be achieved – in-
clusive employment that reflects the personal goals and
dreams of the individuals supported by community re-
habilitation programs.

4. Movement from segregated to inclusive
employment: Two examples of the evolution of
community rehabilitation programs

As indicated earlier in this paper, participation in
sheltered/segregated programs continues to exceed par-
ticipation in supported employment by individuals with
a significant disability. However, it is very important
to emphasize that a number of community rehabilita-
tion programs have moved from providing services and
supports that maintain individuals in segregated set-
tings to a focus on providing supports to individuals in
community-integrated, inclusive employment settings.
The Cobb and Douglas Counties Community Services
Boards in Georgia and HPS, Helping People Succeed,
Inc. (formerly Tri County TEC) in Florida are two
excellent examples of community rehabilitation pro-
grams that are moving through an extended organiza-
tional redesign process that has resulted in the elimina-
tion of their sheltered work programs. Both programs
now provide consumer directed supports to individuals
working in a variety of integrated job settings in the
community. The remainder of this paper provides a
description of the organizational redesign steps taken
by each program and also contains the stories of a va-
riety of individual program participants who are now
working successfully in competitive employment.

5. Cobb and Douglas Counties Community
Services Boards

During the summer of 2002, a business plan was
sent to the local funding board from the leadership of
the Cobb and Douglas Counties Community Services
Boards, two Boards that work together under the same
administrative umbrella. This document contained the
following value statement:

“... We will concentrate efforts on service/support
delivery that maximizes each individual’s opportu-
nity for inclusion, both socially and professionally.
Consumers will be provided with the tools to com-
pete for employment, including white collar jobs,
in their respective communities.”

The Boards were done with sheltered employment,
had been for about three years, and were forging a cul-
ture focused upon assisting customers in the develop-
ment of career paths. While change had come rapidly
in those years, it had not been without pain.

The Cobb and Douglas Counties Community Ser-
vices Boards are public agencies in the state of Georgia
created by law to provide mental health, developmental
disability, and substance abuse services/supports. The
organization provided supports to over 13,000 individu-
als in 2003. The majority of funds utilized to provide
services are generated through a contract with the state
of Georgia, Medicaid and Medicare revenue, funding
from Cobb County and Douglas County, Vocational Re-
habilitation, grants, and private pay. The organizational
goals include consumer choice, community inclusion,
work initiatives, and the expansion of the availability
and access to natural community supports through the
reduction of stigma.

In 1999, the Developmental Disabilities Services of
the Cobb and Douglas Counties CSBs operated
four sheltered workshop programs. The state fund-
ning streams reinforced facility-based services, mean-
ing that funds were used to maintain individuals in day
activity and sheltered work programs. The majority
of parents of the individuals attending the workshops
were elderly and did not want changes to be made in the
service system. Additionally, several of the staff had
worked in the programs for many years and were more
comfortable with the facility-based model. At that
time, shifting from a sheltered workshop to community-
based supports was not a priority for the Boards. As
a result, previous attempts at change were minimally
successful.

In the fall of 1999, the CSBs hired a new Chief Exec-
utive Officer who supported innovation involving mov-

ing the program to a more community-integrated ap-
proach to services. It was at this point that the change
process began in earnest, underlining the importance
of leadership support to implement system change. Sub-
minimum wage contracts were phased out. Individual
or small group meetings were held to involve fami-
lies and advocates in the change process. Many fam-
ilies were not in favor of the plans and for about six
months struggled with the idea. These struggles pre-

sented themselves through a range of behaviors from
productive discussion to personal attacks. This system
change effort was driven by the values of community
integration and self-determination for individuals with
significant disabilities. It was those same ideals that
were returned to frequently as a guide for problem solv-
ing, decision-making, and moral support during those first difficult months.

Complicating this situation was sabotage from a small number of staff that felt threatened by the dissolution of the facility-based program. Through discussion, planning meetings and training, most of these staff became resigned and even committed to community-based supports. The few remaining saboteurs finally on their own or with supervisory assistance recognized they were not in a good job match for the new direction the organization was taking and left, but unfortunately not soon enough. In a last attempt to thwart the plans, they effectively created myths that fueled families' fears, so extensive energy had to be devoted to damage control.

If the program leaders expected staff to support individuals differently, then it was our responsibility to give them the tools to succeed. In 2000, weekly on-site training began using best practice resources such as “A Customer Driven Approach for Persons with Significant Disabilities” [3] and “Closing the Shop” [12]. This inexpensive training method of purchasing the resources and utilizing them in roundtable, open discussions fit our very meager training budget. These weekly sessions laid the foundation for providing community-based supports.

Concurrently, the organizational structure was flattened. Staff was offered opportunities to assume different support roles based on their interests and skills. Self-directed work teams were formed with staff assuming more generic roles. Employment and the principles of community inclusion were our guiding light. Goal development was customer driven and determined by the individual’s passions. Person centered planning determined how staff turned these passions into customized employment outcomes.

The importance of pursuing diverse funding was recognized as critical for the programs to continue the innovations begun without the aid of additional dollars. By this time, staff and customers had achieved notable outcomes, demonstrating that the organization was worthy of grant dollars. In October 2001, the Cobb County Community Services Board was awarded a Customized Employment Grant through the Department of Labor/Office of Disability Employment Policy (DOL/ODEP). Training funded by the grant with Cary Griffin, Dave Hammis, Melinda Mast, Steve Hall, and Mark Hill enabled staff to achieve competencies in utilizing non-traditional assessments that are community based; decision support software; vocational profiling; systematic instruction; Social Security Work Incentives; writing business plans; using One-Stop generic supports to job develop; and assisting individuals with disabilities in such business enterprises as self-employment, resource ownership, and business within a business.

The Cobb and Douglas Counties Community Services Boards also invested funds in staff by purchasing on-line job coach certification training with Phil Chase and Adele Patrick through the University of Georgia Institute on Human Development and Disability. To increase the efficiency of obtaining quality community based outcomes, networks with the business community were developed to create coalitions that assist with linking customers to businesses in their community pertinent to each individual’s desires for employment. In 2003, roundtable open discussions using film, creative writing, civil rights, social justice, creativity and orchestrating economic development activities were begun to take us to the next level of skill acquisition involving undertaking new forms of social connections, community building, and civic renewal.

Staff has been privileged to witness the creation of a person-centered system and the unfolding of lives where competent individuals with disabilities have valued roles in their community and satisfaction from achieving their dreams. Our experience points to the following five key characteristics of a program that builds supports around the specific interests/needs of an individual with a disability:

- Flexibility/creativity
- Customer focused/driven and choice
- Strengths model as opposed to deficit model
- Respectful use of people first language
- Outcome based with a focus on employment and inclusion

In the following stories, the “diagnosis” or “label” is indicated merely to dispel stereotypes. The names used are not the real names of the persons described, but each story does describe a real person and events surrounding his/her moving into employment. The methodology of customized employment described in these examples has provided the tools to tailor systems to free people from segregation [4].

5.1. Marie’s story

Marie, whom I have known for over ten years, greeted me with a kiss on the cheek and a hug, which evolved into a pat on the back that persisted for a couple of minutes. I had become as happy and excited as
Marie when I realized I did not know what we were celebrating. She then slowly and teasingly informed me, “I got the job.”

She was born in 1942 and grew up in one of Georgia’s institutions. Her records note her “diagnosis” as mild mental retardation, epilepsy, and “difficulty relating to community due to her institutionalization.” Marie loves to work. She loves to clean and organize and keep busy. Her employment history consists of two or three service industry jobs and sheltered employment. As a Customized Employment Grant participant, she has created for the business an environment that is pleasant and that has never been cleaner. As she wished, her day includes cleaning, organizing, and sweeping. She purchased a washer and dryer, as well as a hair dryer chair with funds from her Individual Training Account through the grant. Marie is responsible for washing, drying and folding the salon towels and returning these clean towels to the cabinets for the stylists’ use. With her hair dryer chair, she assists customers with the correct setting and positioning of the dryer head. She owns these resources that she brought to the job with her and that she used to negotiate specific conditions for her employment that were important to her. Marie now has choices she never had before that include: remaining with this business; at some future point choosing another salon, should that be to her advantage; or exploring self-employment. Whatever Marie’s choice, the resources remain with her.

5.2. Tanya’s story

Tanya attended a segregated day program for individuals diagnosed with both mental retardation and mental illness. Her disability descriptions were recorded as moderate mental retardation and schizophrenia. As a result of her being involved in traditional segregated programs that lacked choice and options, she became further depressed, which resulted in her requiring assistance for bathing, dressing, and eating.

She was identified as a candidate for supported employment early in our system change process and before the award of the Customized Employment Grant previously referenced. Our strategy was to begin with willing individuals and their families in hopes that their successes would encourage those who were more resistant to the changes to loosen their grip on the status quo. With Tanya’s permission and input, staff developed a circle of support involving her family, key friends, and others chosen by Tanya to help learn about her unique skills, talents, and strengths, and to begin envisioning a job for her in her community.

The support staff spent time with Tanya away from the day program doing what she enjoyed so the staff could learn about her in diverse environments. A Vocational Profile emerged that took into account Tanya’s desire to dress professionally, have a computer, and work in a business environment.

Time was spent in several companies simply observing the social climate of the business. It became clear during the planning process that a calm and flexible work environment was key. A Fortune 500 Company was identified that met these specifications. While Tanya could not meet all the duties required in the company’s various job descriptions, she could meet some of them with job coach and co-worker supports. A customized position was negotiated with input from
the company’s Human Resources, Administration, and Senior Management staff.

The company is located in a corporate office in the business district of Atlanta. A position was carved-out for Tanya. Her job duties consist of simple data entry, office supply distribution, and conference room scheduling. Her title is facilities clerk. Tanya has been successfully employed in the position for over two years. As a result of her success, the Director of Human Resources asked if Tanya would be interested in job sharing. Her Employment Consultant was interested in such a position for a second person who also has the label of moderate mental retardation. Tanya works from 7 am – 11 am, Monday through Thursday and Lori, her job share partner, works from 11 am – 3 pm, Tuesday through Friday.

The work that Tanya and Lori provide for this company has resulted in greater productivity in their co-workers, and neither have been victims of the corporate lay offs that less fortunate co-workers have had to endure. The Human Resources Director told Tanya and Lori that as long as she is employed in the company, they will have jobs.

5.3. Charles’ story

Charles has a passion for cars and dreams of becoming a mechanic. He and his Employment Consultant went to various auto parts companies close to his home to submit applications. He had his sights set on a particular dealership. It was about two and a half miles from his home, brand new, and just the place he wanted to work. There is a story behind Charles and his job search. Every day for three months, he walked the 5 miles to this business, showing them his Employment Consultant’s card and letting them know he wanted to work for their company. Even though Charles has no verbal language, there is no doubt what he is indicating through his facial expressions. While he has limited use of his right arm and leg, he has learned to adapt and effectively uses his left side in compensation. He additionally has the label of mental retardation.

His support staff finally received the call she and Charles had been hoping for. The car dealership’s manager said, “Ok we are convinced. We will hire him”. The CEO was moved by Charles’ commitment and determination to work at his business. His job title is mechanic assistant. His carved out duties include pressure washing, spray painting the tire rims of vehicles, stocking, and cleaning up. Charles, who is in his 20’s, went from high school into a residential VR funded vocational program. Other than this assessment period, he has not attended segregated programs.

He definitely thinks of his current employment choices as a part of a long-term career path, which he is determined will always involve cars. As support staff explored options with Charles and worked with Cary Griffin and Dave Hammis on self-employment ideas, and the notion of his being certified in emissions testing and owning his own emissions equipment became a goal. The team met with the CEO where Charles works. In investigating the certification training, it was discovered that the regulations in Georgia require one to speak and understand English to be certified as an emissions tester. Charles will be the first person in Georgia certified in emissions testing who does not speak English. An assistive technology device was purchased with funds from his Individual Training Account. The device will enable Charles to utilize pre-programmed verbal commands with his customers as he tests their vehicles. The CEO personally advocated for Charles with the certifying Board for emissions testing. With his sense of purpose and persistence, there is not doubt that Charles has taken the first step down his career path.

6. HPS, Helping People Succeed, Inc.

Tri-County TEC (Training Employment Community) in Stuart, Florida recently changed its name to HPS, Helping People Succeed, Inc. The new name reflects the mission of this community rehabilitation program. Since 1964, HPS has been committed to providing the support that individuals who have a disability need to live everyday lives just like the rest of society. The organization has survived and grown through a willingness to change to better fulfill its mission. HPS has moved from an arts and crafts program serving approximately 30 adults who have a disability (1964–1974) to a work activities/sheltered workshop serving approximately 175 people with a disability (1974–1984) to a totally community based approach (1984 – present) with four distinct divisions (Baby Steps, Behavioral Services, Community Living and Employment Services). Currently, HPS serves approximately 3,000 children and adults who have a diagnosed condition, are at risk of abuse or neglect, or are part of the typical population of adults who either have a disability or are welfare recipients.

HPS was founded in 1964 as Pioneer Occupational Center for the Handicapped, Inc. by a group of parents
who felt that their sons and daughters deserved more in life than sitting home watching television. In 1974, the organization became The Tri-County Rehabilitation Center, Inc. and, as the board comprised more business people, the focus became subcontract work and training programs such as consumer home economics, adult basic education, food service, and carpentry. The organization grew to serve approximately 150–175 individuals with developmental disabilities from the surrounding counties of Martin, St. Lucie and Indian River. In some cases, individuals had a 3-hour round trip bus ride to receive services.

In 1984, several very important events occurred. First, senior management became disenchanted because despite all the training programs at the facility, individuals were not exiting the programs for employment and, in many cases, were not demonstrating any real skill acquisition. Second, the types of subcontract work offered did not fit the skills or abilities of the individuals served. Wages were minimal and no jobs were being found. Thirdly, supported employment opened a new way of thinking and opportunities for individuals who have severe disabilities.

The Tri-County Rehabilitation Center, Inc. became Tri-County TEC (Training Employment Community). The senior management staff (Executive Director, Production Manager and Rehabilitation Manager) determined that supported employment strategies offered the means for the consumers to achieve employment outcomes that had been missing from the existing program services. The beginning of a long road to employment and community-based services began. The following were and continue to be the components of change.

6.1. Mission and vision

Moving from a facility based organization that was proud of its programs and services to one that was community based and proud of its outcomes began with a redefinition of its mission and vision. While management was convinced that supported employment represented the future, staff had to own the concept. They would have to actually perform the work to make supported employment happen successfully.

The first step was to hold staff in-service training sessions that questioned those values and concepts. A Values Clarification session was held with questions that started out global, probing the belief system that all people should have the right and opportunity to work. Then the values clarification session moved closer and closer to the individual staff member’s commitment and responsibility to helping achieve employment outcomes for the individuals served.

Following the values clarification exercise, all staff except senior management was asked to determine how many of the 150–175 individuals with developmental disabilities served by our program could work. They were directed to ignore barriers such as behavior, parental concerns and transportation: Just look at whether or not the person could work. Senior management expected that approximately 10% of the current population would be identified. Staff identified that 95% of individuals served could work, given proper support. We were on our way!

Tri-County TEC’s mission evolved from – Tri-County TEC serves individuals (infants and adults) who need special training, education, employment and living arrangements to improve their quality of life and become active members in their community – to a very simple mission of helping people succeed!

Helping people succeed is simple and to the point—it describes what HPS staff does as opposed to the population(s) served. It’s easy to understand and explain—people’s eyes don’t glaze over as it takes a significant amount of time to describe what you do!

6.2. Planning and implementation

Now that the organization had determined what it should be doing, getting there was the next step. Planning and implementation strategies have been the ongoing backbone of Tri-County TEC’s conversion to community-based options. Beginning in 1985, Tri-County TEC’s planning process was based on senior staff developing goals to compare and align with goals developed by direct services staff. Direct services staff, with senior management staff available for input and advice, developed implementation strategies. The planning process was conducted by an outside facilitator (Karen Flippo – Executive Director, National Developmental Disability Planning Council), allowing for questioning and input that otherwise might have been uncomfortable for staff. Presentations and training were conducted by experts in the field, including Dr. Paul Wehman and Michael Barcus from the Virginia Commonwealth University Rehabilitation Research and Training Center, and Dale DiLeo from the Training Resource Network, and by others.

Total commitment at all levels of the organization is necessary to “convert” an organization. The balance between programmatic and fiscal issues is critical to the success of organizational change. Information must
be shared, management/staff must have trust in each other, and planning has to be a constant activity. What has to be realized and shared by anyone is that community-based employment options redefine a person’s life—whether or not he or she has a disability. The person who has a disability, especially a cognitive disability, has a lot at stake when entering employment. The organization has to respect the choice of the individual and provide supports that achieve success. Otherwise, the organization will fail.

Tri-County TEC moved from a totally facility-based program in 1984 to one job coach (a former bookkeeper) in 1985 to a staff of 18 employment specialists (job coaches, follow along, and supported living personnel) in 2004. No services are offered on premises—the sheltered workshop was a thing of the past. Tri-County TEC’s first plan, completed in 1984, was a three-year plan that attempted to convert all 150–175 individuals served to competitive employment. Staff quickly realized that this goal was impossible to accomplish in a three-year period. Planning and implementation continued until Tri-County TEC achieved total community-based services in 1991. Tri-County TEC’s conversion was a true conversion-existing funding was converted from training dollars to funding for employment supports; the 19,000+ square foot building was sold; the organization relocated to the Chamber of Commerce building where no services were provided on site; and success was measured by the employment outcomes achieved. Since 1991, the organization has continued to grow and expand.

6.3. Consumers and families

In 1984 as the conversion efforts were being planned, the assumption was that consumers and their families would want this option. Management and staff assumed that consumers were just as fed-up as we were, and that for them, the programs were circular—year after year, individuals were performing the same tasks, going through the same training programs, and never leaving the workshop.

Our assumption about consumer and family preferences was incorrect. In most cases, the families had never considered the fact that their sons/daughters might work in the community; they were satisfied with the current system. Parents felt their sons/daughters were safe and secure in “the workshop”. Community based options threatened that illusion of safety.

A series of parent meetings were held. The approach taken by staff with the parents was, “What kind of employment do you see as most appropriate for your son or daughter?” The answers ranged from “what do you think” to “over my dead and mangled body will my son/daughter work.”

Without family support, any consumer attempting a community-based placement would very likely fail. Tri-County TEC’s conversion effort began with consumers and families who indicated they wanted to work. During the first 3–5 years of our conversion efforts, the consumer was a part of the process and the outcome was the central focus. Today, the consumer is the focus and their wants, desires and needs drive the process to achieve the outcome.

As the conversion effort became more solid, community-based employment outcomes became the norm for the organization. Individuals and families began to push for employment as their outcome. As the person centered approach evolved, families became more comfortable with the idea and actuality of employment—they are a part and feel included as part of the team. Again, this involvement by families is critical to success.

Consumer desire for employment was never an issue. Given the opportunity to experience their community in a positive way, employment is the natural next step. HPS, Helping People Succeed, experiences the same issues as every other organization—transportation, benefits, economic changes, and uncertainty in funding are issues our organization struggles with daily. The difference with our program is that each of the issues is approached as simply a cog in the wheel that has to be solved in order to achieve success.

6.4. HPS, Helping People Succeed, Inc – The present

When the journey to community-based employment services began, HPS did not have a clear picture of where it would end up. However, management and staff knew that providing the support for people with disabilities to become a part of their community was the right thing. The changes and results have been dramatic.

Once committed to community-based services, the organization expanded significantly in all areas. HPS continues to be defined by our outcomes—services that assist in the obtaining and retaining of employment. Major changes have included:

– Growing from serving 3 counties (Martin, St. Lucie, Indian River) to 11 counties (Martin, St. Lucie, Indian River, Okeechobee, Highlands, Hendry, Polk, Hardy, Glades, Broward and Palm Beach);
– Change from process based services to outcome-based options;
– Funding sources approach HPS to offer or expand services;
– Moving from a single stream funding to 19 funding sources;
– Addition of the Welfare to Work population funded through TANF;
– Growing from 25 to 142 staff members;
– Moving from 175 consumers in a long-term sheltered workshop setting to 225–250 entering employment on an annual basis; and
– 98% satisfaction ratings from consumers/families, employers and funders.

HPS successfully “converted” to a totally community based series of options, for not only people who have disabilities, but also a variety of populations. Approximately 30 consumers work in community jobs being paid under the Section 14c Minimum Wage Certificate; all of the remaining consumers work in competitive jobs at minimum wage or higher. HPS is successful because of a complete commitment to helping people succeed through employment and community based options.

In today’s world, for an organization to be successful in transitioning services to the community, that commitment must be present and must be guided by a person centered approach that focuses on the wants, desires and needs of each person served. Helping people who have been invisible in our society live everyday lives as taxpayers, not welfare recipients, is the key to long-term success. Here are the stories of two individuals who receive employment support through HPS, Helping People Succeed.

6.4.1. Sue’s story
Sue is a 57-year-old woman who has developmental disabilities and who was institutionalized as a baby and spent the first few years of her life in a crib with two other babies. Her growth was stunted and mobility impaired by this experience. While her history at the institution is not clear, upon release she was referred to HPS for services. Sue became quite angry working in our sheltered workshop as her daily tasks were minimal and she felt she was capable of doing tasks that were meaningful. She became frustrated and actually had screaming outbursts indicating that she wanted a “real” job.

In 1990, Sue got her wish. With the assistance of a job coach, she was employed in a prestigious multi-attorney firm. Her job is to microfilm all of the confidential documents for the firm. Workplace modifications included the strategic placement of mirrors so she could see the counter to know when she was finished with a task, a “back scratcher” to turn the lights on and off, and a motorized scooter (acquired through VR funding) so she could move more quickly throughout the office. Due to the shortness of her legs, a footrest was placed on her scooter so she would be comfortable.

While extensive job coaching was necessary to help her acquire all of the skills necessary to perform her job, today she requires only minimal follow-up support with very few interventions. She is a full time employee with full benefits, including profit sharing. She has made many friends who help her with grocery shopping and lawn work and just to talk. Sue purchased her own home and has a roommate who pays rent. Sue is included in all of the different activities with the firm including luncheons and firm parties, and she receives invitations to many birthday parties and other events.

Sue has changed very much during the past years. Once shy and quiet, she now demonstrates a great sense of humor, a wonderful attitude and no angry outbursts. Sue allows HPS to use her success to let the community know what the organization is about. Sue has won many awards, including the Governor’s Employee of the Year Award. While Sue still has developmental disabilities, she has her job, a home, and a community that she blends into. Most of all, Sue has her independence!

6.4.2. Dan’s story
Dan has developmental disabilities and a history of aggressive behavioral issues that have not only been barriers to employment but also to maintaining a place in an adult day training/sheltered workshop. Dan bores easily and needs to keep busy and moving to be successful.

HPS’ staff worked hard with Dan to determine what kind of job might give him his freedom to move around but also offer enough of a challenge to keep him motivated. Dan became employed at Walmart in 1998 as a shelf stocker with other duties as needed. This was a challenge as Dan does not have reading skills. The on the job training that Dan needed had to be very carefully constructed as he did not want to be “different”. Dan’s supervisor was very clear with him as to his expectations of his job performance, duties and attitude. Dan responded well to his supervisor’s instructions, and HPS staff began to coach the supervisor rather than Dan.
Wal-Mart has found Dan to be a valuable employee who has actually been named this store’s Employee of the Month more than once. Dan has found a place that satisfies his needs – he has what he considers a “responsible” job, he can keep moving and he is quite proud of the fact that he no longer needs “that behavior person”.

Dan lives with his mother who at one time was considering asking the state to place him in a group setting as she was afraid of him. Luckily, there was no such placement available at that time. She has indicated that he is now a “delight” to have around – he’s proud of his contributions to the household, helps out some and does not exhibit the anger that he carried around for many years.

Dan would like to live in his own apartment and that is the challenge that he will be tackling next with the assistance of HPS.

7. Conclusion

The examples provided by Cobb County and Douglas County Community Services Boards and by HPS, Helping People Succeed, Inc. clearly point out the real challenges and potential rewards involved in evolving a community rehabilitation program from a sheltered service setting to a vibrant, diversified source of supports for people with disabilities working in competitive employment. This evolution is a process that grows slowly but steadily over an extended period of time. It usually involves a one-person-at-a-time focus because to truly support an individual in pursuing his or her employment dream, time needs to be taken with each person. The rewards of embarking on a mission driven, person centered organizational change process are found in stories told in this paper about and by Marie, Charles, Tanya, Dan, and Sue and all the other individuals who reaped the full benefit of the efforts of the Board, administration, staff, and other key stakeholders at Cobb and Douglas Counties Community Services Boards and at HPS to redirect and evolve these programs.

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