

RI WINS (Workforce Investment & New Solutions) is the name utilized by the RI Cross Disability Coalition for our DD Transformation Grant in collaboration with the RI Developmental Disabilities Council (RIDDC) and Skills for RI's Future. The goal of the project is to create sustainable change for meaningful and inclusive lives for individuals with disabilities within local communities in Rhode Island. The focus of this newsletter is to highlight the excellent work of community agencies in building relationships with RI employers and assisting people with disabilities to obtain competitive employment.

RI WINS - Collaboration of Organizations

Skills for RI's Future along with The RI Cross Disability Coalition and The RI Developmental Disabilities Council (RIDDC) convenes monthly group meetings for staff from community agencies involved with building employer relationships to assist people with disabilities with opportunities for employment. In the initial group meetings, Danna Spencer, Associate Director of Client Services for Inclusion at Skills for RI's Future, commented, "anything that develops any outreach to develop relationships or that participants learned through the training, Skills for RI's Future wants to be able to share that wealth, those needs, the leads, and work on filling those needs together."

Skills for RI Future wants to get employers into their software system for tracking, and then "work together with agencies on how to develop this opportunity together for the greater good of the candidates that we all represent from this group."
"The group is for... the greater good" - Danna Spencer.



FEAST & FETTLE

Feast & Fettle- A Spurwink Success

Mary Anne Maciel, Director of Employment/Community Services at Spurwink RI, has been working with the I/DD community for years, connecting individuals and employers to create a more diverse workforce. As part of RI WINS, she has attended Doug Crandell's trainings to gain insight into his model and take the opportunity to integrate those practices with the proven practices her team at Spurwink was already using.

She had already been working with Jordan (last name withheld) for a bit of time when he expressed a specific interest in working within the food service industry as a dishwasher. He also wanted - as most people do - a position close to home. On a whim, Mary Anne decided to adjust her normal practice and approach a business - Feast & Fettle - on a cold call. The business is located quite close to his home and Mary Anne thought it was worth the time to quickly stop in.

Upon arriving, Mary Anne and Jordan were told that Feast & Fettle typically only hires full-time employees. As a small business that's rapidly expanding they had more than enough responsibilities and job opportunities to go around. However, after speaking with the pair, the team at Feast & Fettle decided that they would make an exception to their "full-time only" practice so that they could add Jordan to the team.



Feast & Fettle (cont.)

Initially, Jordan started on a job trial, as presented to the Feast & Fettle team by Mary Anne. After a successful job trial, he was officially onboarded and was working with them two days per week for four hour shifts, which then increased. Since Jordan already had another job working one day per week at another local retailer, he ended up with a cumulative total of 15 hours per week which suits him well.

According to Chris Smith, director of People Operations, “Jordan joined our employee community and almost immediately, we couldn’t imagine work without him! The enthusiasm and joy Jordan brings to his work is infectious and he has built strong relationships across our teams. We are so grateful for our partnership with Spurwink for introducing us to Jordan and hope to work with Jordan for many years to come!”



“The enthusiasm and joy Jordan brings to his work is infectious and he has built strong relationships across our teams.”

Chris Smith

The flexibility of the Feast & Fettle team to bend their typical scheduling structure to accommodate Jordan is an excellent example of customized employment. They were able to keep the duties and responsibilities of the job the same, while making a reasonable accommodation for the amount of time an employee needed to dedicate to the task.

Feast & Fettle is a gourmet, fully-prepared meal delivery service founded in 2016 by Chef Maggie Mulvena Pearson and her best friend, Nicole Nix. The company delivers high-quality prepared meals for busy families and professionals who are unwilling to sacrifice on quality.

Meals are prepared at local kitchens and distributed by their in-house delivery teams across Rhode Island, most of Massachusetts, and parts of Connecticut and New Hampshire.



At Access Point RI (APRI), Rory Carmody - Director of Program Development and Jennifer Quintana, job developer, have created a winning strategy for finding employers and making a match on behalf of their prospective job candidates. It begins as just looking for places that have a “job profile that meets the kind of conditions of employment needed and are community-minded,” whether that’s “mom-and-pop shops” or big box stores.

After landing the interview and the job, candidates have Jennifer’s assistance in developing the logistics and working to “design that opportunity for the person to do the job to the best of their ability.” Those details might include visual instructions on an iPad or color-coding coffee cups and napkins as they are stacked on shelves. “We make sure there’s continuity with what people are doing, that it complements what everyone else is doing. Then we fade out, but never completely walk away,” notes Rory reassuringly.

This coincides with the ongoing Employer Engagement Training series provided by Doug Crandall throughout the term of the Transformation Grant. Five APRI staffers participated in the three-day sessions focused on concrete strategies to shift from job development to economic and workforce development, plus creating ideas for building long-term relationships with employers. While Rory and Jennifer had participated previously, according to Rory, she sees the value in getting “everybody hearing the same information, rowing in the same direction.”

In 2022, Jennifer reached out to Brewed Awakenings in Warwick, requesting an informational interview, inquiring about their needs, providing a visual resume, and “demonstrating to the employer that the prospects have skills to fit those needs.” Ultimately, two of Jennifer’s candidates were hired. Both current employees – Timothy and Naquan - had expressed interest in working at Brewed Awakenings; Tim had prior food service experience and both good social skills. Timothy’s position is food prep, while Naquan is a dishwasher and busses the dining room.

Brewed Awakenings (cont.)

Working closely with Tim, Jennifer provided the context for his recent job. “Tim loves baking cakes and desserts for family and friends. He was interested in food prep, so we supported him in obtaining his food handler certificate.”

Initial job coaching for Tim included creating a checklist of reminders once he clocked in. He also needed support in requesting time off and advocating for additional hours. Long-term supports continue via APRI, including monthly check-ins, help with communications and feedback, and offsite support, as needed. Industrious Tim works two jobs, “five hours one day a week at Dave’s Market Place in their bakery department since 2016, and fifteen hours, three days a week at Brewed Awakenings since 2022,” added Jennifer.

Naquan had never worked prior to Jennifer’s working with him when they received a referral from Office of Rehabilitative Services for a vocational evaluation. She commented, “He was open to trying any position; he was very eager to start making money so he could purchase tickets for a trip to Jamaica.” (Naquan’s dad lives in Jamaica and he has family there.) Naquan was offered a part-time position during his trial/“voc eval” with Brewed Awakenings. Job coaching was initially provided as he learned the new tasks, and received support in meeting co-workers, and speaking to management and professionals. Receiving steadily fewer onsite visits, he is currently completely independent in his position, and has been working 15 hours per week since November 2022.

Not surprisingly, Jennifer remarks, “seeing someone earn their first paycheck and save for something they truly want is an incredible feeling and the reason I love doing this type of work.”

Asked about his staffers, Brewed Awakenings owner David Levesque quickly acknowledges, “Tim is a great guy. He’s funny, extremely reliable, always such a big help.” He noted that Tim is in their busiest store and is deeply involved in making myriad flavors of the protein snack balls, measuring every ingredient, and prepping for breakfast, which means portioning fresh meats, and bacon and scrambling the eggs for 1000s of egg sandwiches a week. “As far as I’m concerned, he’ll be a long-term employee.”

Owner of Brewed Awakenings, David Levesque, stresses the idea that “hiring people with disabilities isn’t the issue. It’s about the person. It’s about relationships.”



NAQUAN



TIM

Brewed Awakenings (cont.)

For years, Brewed Awakenings has given people a chance and holds everyone to the same standard. David adds, Tim and Naquan “show up and get the job done.” Importantly, David stresses the idea that hiring people with disabilities “isn’t the issue; it’s about the person. It’s about relationships.”

David has hired well, implementing company-wide his work philosophy. When he referred to several other longtime staffers, who then moved out of state, he remarked that they remain in touch.

Establishing good, long-term working relationships is a common thread weaving together agencies and employers for the benefit of all.



Danna Spencer has been developing business relationships as Associate Director of Client Services for Inclusion at Skills for Rhode Island’s Future, a Rhode Island non-profit workforce intermediary connecting employers, community partners and the jobseekers they support with work opportunities.

Trinity Repertory Company and the partnership that unfolded between workABILITY (SkillsRI’s Inclusion Hiring Initiative) and the highly respected Providence-based regional theater company highlights the depth and importance and most importantly the mutual benefits of such relationships fostered with employers over time. The goal is to learn more about a business’ needs while offering solutions that reflect their values and culture, and ultimately result in improvements to their business bottom line.



The first hire through Customized and Supported Employment and workABILITY turned out to be “one of the most incredible hires that I ever had.”

Bradley Widener, Director of Service and Experience, Trinity Rep.

Building a mutually beneficial relationship with Trinity Rep’s Director of Service and Experience, Bradley Widener, marked the beginning of a continuing story with the business, resulting in several successful job placements. Immediately after the introduction, Danna focused on the company and uncovering unmet needs while sharing information on Customized and Supportive Employment - and other resources that could benefit the employer. Her extensive experience with this proven process landed the all-important candidate tour and informational interview. Six candidates gained valuable, detailed insights about jobs in the theater. Most importantly, Bradley created a “customized” internship for the candidate who wanted a security job, issuing him a badge-like name tag and a walkie-talkie that is used for communication within the House Services team.

Bradley’s first hire through Customized and Supported Employment and workABILITY turned out to be “one of the most incredible hires that I ever had,” according to the Trinity Director. Time devoted to creating the business relationship and establishing an understanding of the employer’s needs made it possible to achieve the right match along with several additional matches that would eventually allow Bradley to create a “Clean Team” within House Services and let go of Trinity’s expensive outside vendor contract.

Danna’s emphasis on attending to the needs of workABILITY’s business partners is clear. When Bradley recently reached out to the workABILITY team to discuss additional support he felt a new hire needed to learn her job, she notes, “We jumped at the chance to meet with the employee’s supervisor to determine the resources needed support the worker and to make sure we to preserve that incredible relationship with our employer partner.”

Equally important for employers is the value of continued commitment to a placed candidate or a related business need . “It’s not a one and done. I will circle back...helping in any way I can,” a distinction that Danna underscores.

Trinity Rep (cont.)

WorkABILITY's approach to partnering with companies to provide services and solutions that meet their workforce development needs is modeled on the Griffin Hammis training for successfully engaging employers. The method aligns particularly well with employers who promote Diversity, Equity and Inclusion in their hiring practice. Griffin Hammis training has been provided to several cohorts of job developers and coaches from provider agencies across the state and made possible by a "Transformation Grant" offered by Rhode Island Behavioral Health, Developmental Disabilities and Hospitals.

The overall goal of Rhode Island's Transformation Grant projects is to improve the Human Services delivery systems to more effectively serve the individuals they support, which should ultimately have a positive impact on the surrounding communities as well. As is the case with Skills for Rhode Island's Future, the collaboration between entities to facilitate Employer Engagement training, and the partnership with Trinity Repertory Company that developed as result, the greatest impact Transition Grant funding will ultimately have is a positive one for our State's economy.

The trusted partnership that formed between workABILITY and Trinity Repertory Company has resulted in many successful hires and internships that considers applicants from all walks of life and abilities.

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