

*This is a project of the  
RI Cross Disability Coalition*



**STATUS NEWSLETTER  
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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. This newsletter provides information on the status of implementation of the goal areas within the project and efforts to educate and provide support to people with disabilities, staff from community agencies, and RI employers on creating sustainable change for meaningful and inclusive lives for individuals with disabilities.



### *RI Developmental Disabilities Council Chosen to Lead Two National Community of Practice Webinar Series*

The federal US Department of Labor's Office of Disability Employment Policy (ODEP) and the national Disability Employment Technical Assistance Center (DETAC) recently invited the RI Developmental Disabilities Council (RIDDC) to lead two of their National Community of Practice Webinar Series. The Office of Disability Employment Policy (ODEP) is the only non-regulatory federal agency that promotes policies and coordinates with employers and all levels of government to increase workplace success for people with disabilities. The DETAC Center provides evidence-based training and technical assistance to the Administration on Disabilities (AoD) grantees aimed at improving competitive, integrated employment and economic outcomes for individuals with disabilities across the nation.

RIDDC's "Self-Employment Business Incubator Project... The Spirit of Individual Enterprise For People With Disabilities", includes a multi-faceted entrepreneurship program and is now in its sixth year. The program is spearheaded by Project Director and founder Sue Babin, who was also the lead presenter of both webinar presentations. Additional presenters were entrepreneurs who successfully completed the program and launched their own businesses, together with family members who support them.

The two topics were:

1. DETAC February 13: Supporting Self Employment for Entrepreneurs with Disabilities: Family Perspectives: [bit.ly/DETAC](https://bit.ly/DETAC)
2. ODEP February 28: Stories of Entrepreneurship and Competitive Integrated Employment
  - Presentation Slides: [bit.ly/ODEPSlides](https://bit.ly/ODEPSlides)
  - Recording and Additional Materials: [bit.ly/ODEPZoom](https://bit.ly/ODEPZoom)

RI's self-employment program, which has recently been adopted in Maine and is under consideration in other states, consists of eight weeks of business classes, one-to-one, ongoing support from staff and peers, weekly entrepreneurship networking forums, business portfolio development, mini-grants, and assistance with direct selling platforms.

Ms. Babin prepared a slide presentation which featured the unique components of the program along with information on the various businesses of the featured guest presenters. Family perspectives seminar included entrepreneurs: Bryan Baron of "Double B Photography", with his mother, Sue Baron; Alton Stuckey of "Alton Stuckey Portraits and More", with his mother, Iraida Williams; and Rachel Rasnick of "Rachel Rasnick Art", with her mother Karen Rasnick.

During the February 28, 2024, discussion Sue Babin was again the main presenter. Other presenters included Rebecca "Becca" Beaton of "Rebecca's G Cards", Ben Del Rosario of "Ben Del Rosario Photography", and Michael Coyne, of "Red White & Brew Café/The Budding Violet" retail shop, who shared their experiences as entrepreneurs with disabilities. Each presenter's segment featured examples of their work.

In addition, Ms. Babin highlighted the unique features of the program, including funding for the project from the State Department of Labor and Training (DLT), hiring of business professionals as instructors for the project's curriculum, hiring of family members as staff mentors for aspiring entrepreneurs, support to community DD agencies on business development to assist entrepreneurs, mini-grants for the new business owners to purchase supplies,

materials and other start-up costs, statewide “Speakers Bureau” promoting self-employment and ongoing support to small business owners through a weekly Entrepreneur’s Forum.

According to Ms. Babin, “Entrepreneurial education teaches each person very important life skills. And you know what, whether they start a business or not, it’s all useful information and experiences including working with a team, speaking in public, and talking about your business. It’s problem solving and thinking creatively. People gain and increase their self-esteem, we’ve seen it. It’s just incredible. Another important point is that RI’s self-employment program has progressed in six years from what was a little-known option for employment for people with disabilities to one which is prominent statewide and nationally recognized as a model for other States!”

### ***Speakers Bureau***

#### *Community Outreach and Workforce Development*

The RI Cross Disability Coalition (RICDC) has been consistent in their outreach efforts to educate people with disabilities about various topic areas and to strengthen the work/life skills of students in transition as well as the workforce. RICDC Peer Directors, Tanja Blicher-Ucran, Deanne Gagne and Rachel Ferreira have conducted 7 sessions on a variety of topics at select locations, including Pawtucket School Department and The Miriam Hospital.

The list of topics available through the Speakers Bureau presented as an informally led discussion supported by PowerPoint slides include:

- Life Is Good
- Healthy Relationships
- Sexual Abuse
- Person Centered Planning
- Employment Can Work For You
- Let’s Talk About Money
- Self Employment

Among the agencies requesting presentations thus far:

- *John Janusz*, Special Education Instructor, Transition Program. Pawtucket School Department, which includes Shea and Tolman high schools
- *Sharmey Holloman*, Project SEARCH Instructor at Miriam Hospital. Project SEARCH is a 1-year work life skills transition program for students with intellectual disabilities. This program was conducted in collaboration with The Office of Rehabilitative Services (OHS), The Providence School Department and several host businesses

Additional DD agencies that have received presentations: Perspectives Corporation, West Bay, Refocus, Inc., and Avatar.

Tanja Blicher-Ucran states, “this has been a very ambitious program to put together, with a lot of moving parts as we coordinate speakers, locations, and attendees but it has been well worth the effort. We’ve had great feedback that they are receiving valuable education and advice from various community members, staff, and stakeholders.”

53 Speakers Bureau sessions have been completed since January, 2023, with invitations continually submitted to RICDC. Please contact: [Tanja@Riddc.org](mailto:Tanja@Riddc.org) for more information.

### ***John Janusz - In His Own Words***

As a Special Education Instructor of the Transition program within the Pawtucket School Department, John works closely with the students. He sees them, knows them and remarked about the benefits of the program, including one presentation in particular that surfaced in sessions that followed our presentation

*Life Is Good.* “This is the one presentation that stood out not only to the students, but also honestly to the adults,” according to John. The three presenters that day were: Zachary, Heidi, and Kevin. It is now spring, but conversations are still being held around that presented topic.

He continued, “They are living their lives to the fullest – each one. And, they understood what their individual needs were, and how to advocate for assistance for those specific needs, so they could live the best life possible.”

Offering an example, he referred to Kevin, who could do laundry living in a group home, but he had a problem with a microwave. “It was on too long , causing a little bit of a fire. This is an area where he needs help. Zach, on the other hand, has other needs. It just brought the students to really think about strength, and speaking about some of the things that they’re going to need, and about how they’re going to get that assistance.

This is critical for everyone to learn, and it is a point that struck a familiar chord each time someone experienced a change or transition. “Advocating for those little things that they need, or major things that they need, helps them live the best life possible, given their disabilities.”



***Sharmey Holloman - Project SEARCH  
Instructor at Miriam Hospital***

Sharmey Holloman, special education teacher working for Providence Public schools Department (PPSD) and Thelma Mejia, Community Transition Assistant Liaison chimed in with their own genuine interest in helping students with entrepreneurship while calling attention to the specific interests' students had in graphic design, for example.

Launched in 2009, the nationally vetted PROJECT SEARCH works with students, aged 18-22, who are transitioning from school to the workplace. This cohort of 5 at Miriam Hospital works in a 10-to-12-week rotation of the departments in which they have shown interest, have been interviewed, and then have successfully landed a placement. Among the many departments are:

- Clinical Rehabilitation
- Patient Care
- Facilities
- Stores "Supply"
- Linen
- Kitchen
- Transport
- Cafeteria
- ESD (housing)

Project SEARCH is a collaboration between Providence Public School Department, the Office of Rehabilitative Services (ORS), BHDDH, while the host business for the project is The Miriam Hospital. Now in its tenth year with this program, Miriam Hospital was the first in the state to participate.

As with almost every topic presented to this group which began last fall, Sharmey offered her perspectives, as well as the student's reactions.

As intended, the Speakers Bureau exposed the students to various issues that will affect them. Sharmey noted

that it was very helpful coming from the adult perspective, rather than a parent or a teacher. "It is different from the nature of the school setting- students can be shielded from the need to be independent, with decisions often made for them. While at Project SEARCH, they learn that they must take charge of their own success. They began to realize that in the real world, there won't always be someone to remind them or do things for them and they must develop the skills that will help them live the "Good Life" as independent adults who are accountable and responsible for themselves."

Person Centered Planning was the topic that resonated most with the students. "We talk about it all the time, making it clear: "You make the decision," Sharmey commented.

Considering the status of the group, she said, "Hardest for them to realize as they transition from school to post-school as adults is that they still need the input. Also, they must communicate – their needs, wishes, etc." At the same time, she admits to them that they should listen to advice but explains that they don't have to take the advice. She noted that presenters of this topic were experienced adults who shared their life experiences honestly, and this taught the students that they can direct their own lives.

While in this setting and central to their transition from student to adulthood, "they realize that they are the wind that fills their sails," - an uplifting thought which Sharmey readily shares with them.



***Nathan Markley - Self-Employed Podcast Host***

The RI Cross Disabilities Coalition's Speaker's Bureau continued its education program, cycling through its extensive list of topics, each designed to help students from Project Search prepare for their future.

This presentation focuses on Self-Employment, with Nathan Markley as featured speaker. He had participated in the RIDDC Business start-up series a few years ago, sharing his background, education, entrepreneurial journey, and the facets of his podcasting business. He adds that he is a podcaster who is autistic and supports others with various disabilities.

Wanting to own a business since he was a child, he is dedicated to hard work and undeterred by the typical challenges.

An active Q&A followed his comments and his PowerPoint. The students were interested in how he began his business as well as the more technical aspects of podcasting.



which draws 3,500 shoppers from around Southern New England. Developing his work into a profitable business was not a priority, reports adoptive mom, Iraida Williams.

Nevertheless, both his work and his business have gained quite a bit of traction and some national recognition. This was made evident by RI's recent invitation to present its successes self-employment nationally at Disability Employment Technical Assistance Center (DETAC). The RIDDC's Self Employment Project classes provided Alton the necessary foundation to grow his business, while his strong and supportive mom helped Alton recognize - and then maximize - his talent. In total, three entrepreneurs who have completed the Self-Employment Project classes - along with their supportive moms - were featured success stories through DETAC.



### ***Alton Stuckey Turns Passion For Portraiture into a Business***

Living your passion is admirable if not always lucrative. Turning that passion into a sustainable business is a challenge. The RIDDC Self Employment project helped Alton Stuckey learn about business; the RIDDC Transformation grant has featured his talent, his trajectory, and his family support as symbolic of "A New Way of Thinking" transformational change.

Renowned self-taught artist, Alton Stuckey, is excited to create – his portraits and landscapes are stunning. The Newport Art Museum is currently featuring his work by including a captivating series of portraits that showcase Stuckey's commitment to celebrating diversity and addressing pressing social issues. Clearly, his work is his passion.

In addition to this exhibit, he participates in the annual Small Business Saturday Shop RI holiday, pop-up mall event

According to Iraida, "The RIDDC business classes helped Alton with promotion and the elevator pitch, meaning his ability to share his business idea easily and repeatedly." Having a better understanding of business and the financial aspect of business also made a difference. "Alton needed to learn how to charge for his work, including the differences in cost between the various sizes of the finished work and even the difference in pricing between a pencil rendering and a portrait done as an acrylic. Plus, Alton received a grant at the completion of the business series that helped with the purchase of an iPad."

Iraida noticed that while Alton was always confident, he "developed a sense of self-worth, knowing that he never let his disability define him."

**For More Information on the Transformation Project and collaborative partners RI Cross Disability Coalition, RIDDC or Skills for RI's Future contact:**

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