

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.

Strengthening Rhode Island's Workforce: Insights from the RI WINS Coaching Call



Among the key components of the RI WINS Transformation Grant are regularly scheduled "coaching calls" that provide staff from community DD agencies an update of employer contacts, agency member follow-up from many previous training sessions, and reports of new job candidate interviews and job landings. These meetings include discussions regarding new initiatives, the introduction and feedback from the latest cohort completing the "Employer Engagement Training" led by Doug Crandell, and reinforcement of the importance of building relationships with employers instead of focusing on immediate candidate placements.

As anticipated, the evaluations from the training are always favorable, but also provide insight based on the agency representatives' previous experiences – a stark contrast and distinct benefit. Noticeably, there is a difference when the "informational meeting" with the prospective employer is not a "cold call," meaning staff and the RI WINS business consultants have already paved the way for the incoming Crandell trainees. According to Kelly Michaalek, from West Bay RI, "it was a great way to work with businesses...just hoping they will say 'yes' to the site visit is the first step."

During these sessions, the emphasis after the informational interview is on follow-up with the businesses, checking

in with those who were to be the team's "point person" to stay in touch with the business contact after the presentation and feedback session is complete. The goal is establishing a relationship, not necessarily making an immediate match between the business and job candidate. That happens later; sometimes, much later. With humor Danna Spencer - Associate Director of Client Services for Inclusion at Skills for Rhode Island's Future (SkillsRI) adds, "leave no relationship stone unturned." Both Brittany Dorrance - Client Services Associate at WorkABILITY at SkillsRI - and Danna cite several examples of their initial informational meetings with a business, follow-up discussions, quick calls, and eventually, a job opens. Together, they emphasize building the "community of practice" that continually strengthens the overall effort.

In addition to the recap of the last training session, updates on employer contacts and potentially new opportunities for job candidates, Sue Babin announced a new initiative. "We would like to start a process over the next few months to obtain feedback from employers who have hired people with disabilities to hear their thoughts on how their workplace has changed and improved by the inclusion of employees with disabilities."

"The purpose of this is to get some really good data and comments back from employers on how we are doing as a system, which will also be important information to publicize statewide and nationally the benefits to employers of expanding and diversifying their workforce." All the individuals in this meeting understand the benefits and are committed to reinforcing the values during their various company outreach efforts. Participating agencies in this initiative will also receive a summarized report of the responses and comments of employers working with their individual agency.

The full agenda ends with a substantial list of next steps for the staff from agencies and the leadership team. For the agency staff, the task is to steadily build on existing contacts and relationships while identifying new opportunities. The team continues to support those job developers, maintaining channels of communication for them, and to move forward on new initiatives intended to bolster the internal organization – "the community of practice" – and enhance the RI workforce through diversity.



Employer Engagement Training

Expanding the network of agencies creating relationships with RI businesses, the seventh cohort of “Employer Engagement” Training led by Doug Crandell, of Griffin Hammis - a national leader in customized employment services for people with disabilities - concluded on April 25, 2024 at Red, White & Brew, a coffeeshop in Warwick. Four four-person teams represented eight different community agencies connected with local businesses, conducting informational interviews following their first training session on Customized Job Development and Ideal Conditions of Employment.

The nine community agencies that participated in this three-day session were: Community Living of RI, Fogarty Center, Maher Center, Providence Center, Perspectives, Trudeau Center, West Bay, ProABILITY, and Skills for RI’s Future.

The companies that were invited to participate included O2J, a packaging center; Coastal One Credit Union; The Empowerment Factory, a local non-profit focused on supporting youth through creativity, civic pride, and self-esteem building; and The Blackstone Valley Tourism Council. Widely varied, these businesses welcomed team members, explained their business mission, programs, products, community involvements, and workforce needs. The teams’ focus was to learn information about the business, identify their key workforce needs, analyze their findings, and identify potential solutions, while establishing relationships and paving the way to economic development. Powerpoint presentations were the backdrop for each team with a twenty-to-thirty-minute discussion, designed to share their experiences with other teams, agency members and guests. A tallied

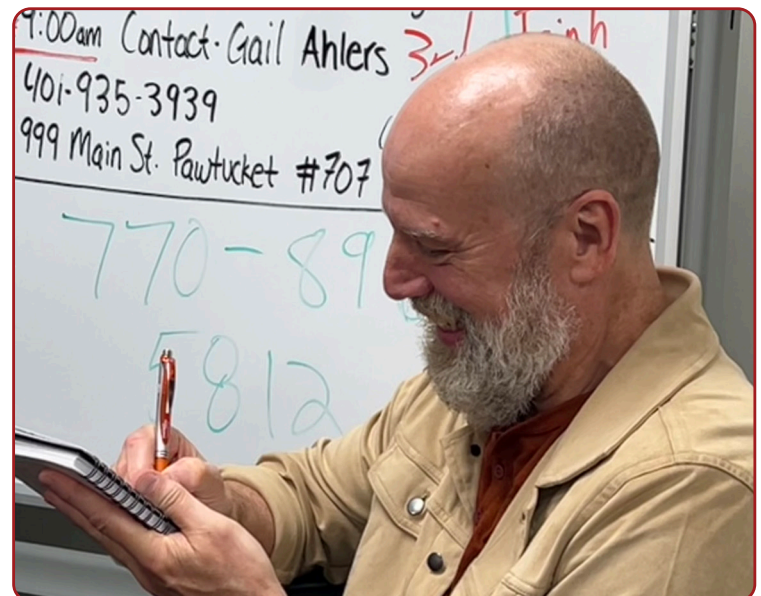
vote for the best presentation earned the O2J team a \$100 gift card for each team member and earned every team several rounds of applause.

To set a foundation for a relationship that continues far beyond the training session itself, the participants first gained an understanding of each business and their products and services rather than just place a person in a potential job opportunity.

The working partnership between Doug Crandell and Sue Babin, project leader for the RI Developmental Disabilities Council and lead on the collaboration between RIDDC, RI Cross Disability Coalition, and Skills For RI Future, structured the process for informational interviews with RI employers. Employers were identified by Paul Ouelette from the Transformation Project, Brittany Dorrance from Skills and Elvys Ruiz from DD. Staff of each agency were assigned into new teams, forging new relationships with people from other agencies as well as with their newly assigned business participants – the four company owners or CEOs.

Sue’s rapport with Doug, as well as the agency participants, provided a model to the groups that helped them to form strong working relationships which increased the effectiveness of the training and working session and develop ongoing collaborations that last outside of the training. Affable as always, Doug congratulated the group on their work and announced, “RI always does the best job with this training.”

Classroom training and discussion of the core topics related to economic development versus traditional



job placement prepared the participants for their onsite sessions with the businesses. Among the many elements of the training, which was supported by Doug Crandell's data-rich PowerPoint presentation, helped the participants gain an understanding of demand-driven and customized job development approaches, the local labor market, return on investment, social capital, purchasing power, community building, discovering unmet needs, and the basics of negotiation.

The last day of training brought participants and their agency supervisors/directors together in an atmosphere that was collegial, with members from each team prepared their research findings. The synergy was apparent. Building relationships with employers to identify their needs takes time, commitment and follow-up. At the end of the competition segment, Shannon Laihot, from the Maher Center, remarked: "This training was really excellent and should be required for anyone who does this job or work relating to employment."

Everyone applauded.

***Collaboration at Work- The State Agency,
The Provider Agency and The Employer;
From BHDDH to Spurwink|RI to Downtown
Makers Marketplace***



Elvys Ruiz is firmly rooted as a Business and Community Engagement champion formerly in the Rhode Island Department of Administration, and currently, The Department of Behavioral Healthcare Developmental Disabilities and Hospitals (BHDDH). He has a strong background working with the Rhode Island business community for

over 20 years, including managing the Supplier Diversity Office at the Division of Equity, Diversity, and Inclusion (DEDI) where he also oversaw the Minority Business Enterprise (MBE) while acting as Interim Administrator of the Minority Business Enterprise Compliance office (MBECO). In an interview he noted that "he was the first community outreach person for the RI Parent Information Network working on behalf of people with developmental disabilities and has also worked for the Department of Human Services and served as a board member for the Ocean State Center for Independent Living."

Integral to his work is educating businesses about the benefits of hiring people with Intellectual and/or Developmental Disabilities (I/DD), especially their contributions, gaining an understanding of the unique needs of each business, and then connecting with the community providers that may have the best potential job candidate to meet that need. To accomplish that task, Elvys relies on a Supported Employment Provider Questionnaire developed to determine the referral capacity of each agency provider, including the skills and areas of interest of each potential job candidate.

"It may take several months, notes Elvys, "I keep the conversation with employers going. It is about consistency. They may not be able to hire a person right



away, due to slow production times, but the time will come when they call you to offer a job and that only happens if we are engaged with the employer, they understand the benefits of hiring people with intellectual/developmental disabilities and are enthusiastic about it.



Elyvs recently connected with Mary Anne Maciel, Director of VocLinks, the employment and community connections program of Spurwink|ri. The two first met with Luca Carnevale, Benny Barber and Eric Betz at Downtown Makers Marketplace run by Hope & Main to learn more about the current hiring needs of that employer. Mary Anne identified a potential candidate whose skills and interests aligned with the business needs, brought him for an introduction, tour, and an opportunity to learn more about the position. Both parties were able to customize a position that met the needs of the business and aligned with the skills of the candidate while allowing potential for growth.

Shakirudeen Alli Owe – aka Deen – started as a “modified” food prep position, portioning and packaging various sauces and condiments. During this initial “job trial” or internship phase funded by the Office of Rehabilitation Services (ORS), a VocLinks employment specialist was on-site to assess his performance, while identifying and training on areas identified for additional growth. Following this assessment period, Deen was offered a part-time position and went on payroll. “Follow-up is our responsibility, so we stay in touch with the employer and make sure everything is going well,” says Elyvs

Mary Anne provides context for when Deen was the candidate for a job at Hope & Main: “Deen was initially

very hesitant about re-entering the workforce due to a significant fear of failure. He had been in Nigeria for 10-12 years and then resumed services with Spurwink|RI when he returned. Spurwink had previously provided services when he graduated from high school many years ago.

In conjunction with ORS, and after spending some time in the discovery phase, Deen was introduced to Luca, Benny, and Eric at Hope & Main Marketplace for an overview and tour. She notes, “Although Spurwink already had a long-standing relationship with Hope & Main, Elyvs was instrumental in introducing us to the Marketplace.” At Hope & Main Luca, Executive Director of Operations, speaks about Deen helping to fulfill the mission of the organization. “He’s part of the community. He helps us feel good and we’re happy to work with his accommodations.” Deen’s direct supervisor at The Maker’s Marketplace is kitchen manager Eric, who discussed the scope of the work and Deen’s growth.

“He weighs, packages, and labels a variety of snacks for our marketplace, and portions most of the sauces and salad dressings used in our cafe. Recently I’ve been teaching him how to follow recipes and prepare items such as honey mustard sauce and spicy aioli,” notes Eric.

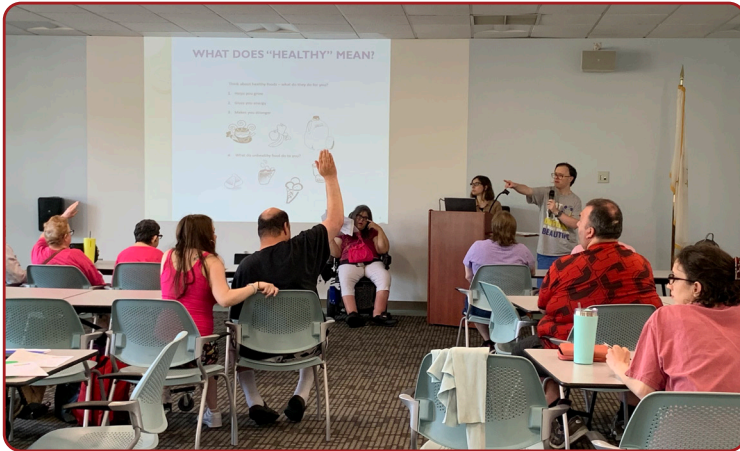
Eric added, “Deen shows up for every shift with a smile and a positive attitude. I think all our staff members enjoy working with him. We had an intern a few months ago who shared Deen’s passion for basketball. It was cool to see their friendship grow. Deen even made cards for the interns when they finished their time with us.”

From job performance to enriching the work culture, Deen is clearly a valued and valuable employee.

He also observed that VocLinks’ job coaches were helpful getting Deen started, and then started stepping back, little by little, as Deen gained skills and independence.

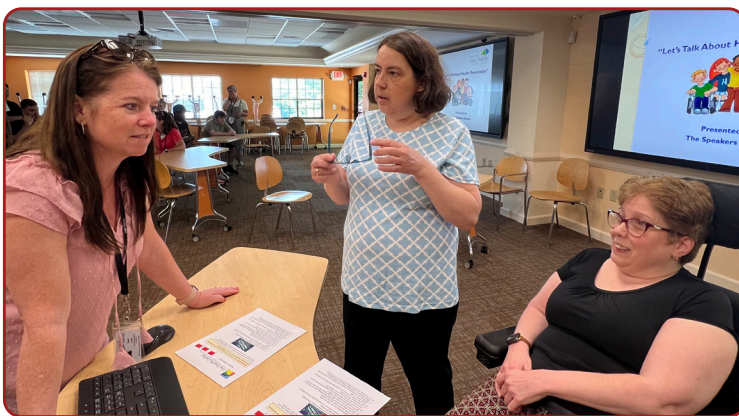
According to Mary Anne, Deen began a short-term Community-Based Work Experience (CBWE), and received on-site job coaching throughout that phase, initially trialing just one 4-hour shift per week. “Upon completion of the job trial with CBWE, a hire was negotiated at two 4-5 hour shifts per week above RI minimum wage, while simultaneously developing natural supports. It has been a great job match and Deen is so proud of his accomplishments and the team at the Marketplace are thrilled as well. Overall, it has been a tremendous win-win.”

Speakers Bureau 5.28 - AVA Voice



At the Warwick Public Library, presenters from the RI Cross Disability Coalition's Speakers Bureau Rachel Ferreira, Heidi Showstead, Bobby Macaux discussed "Healthy Relationships" with a full group from the Ava Voice Self Advocacy Group. In an informal Q&A guided by a PowerPoint, our 3-person team engaged the group in what constitutes a healthy relationship as well as reviewed important tips for staying safe in various interpersonal encounters, ranging from friends and family to those with professional services.

Speakers Bureau 6.4 - Sargent Center



Keeping it real, Tanja and Deanne teamed up to discuss what it takes to recognize and build a good healthy relationship in this Speakers' Bureau presentation. The group of more than 20 students in transition at the Warwick-based Sargent Center started out by naming friends, and why they called that person their best friend. To start the open dialogue, Deanne & Tanja even shared their own anecdotes about beginning a relationship, and then continuing a deeper discussion by sharing examples of what works in a healthy friendship. With lively interaction among the students and their hands eagerly raised to

participate, the students demonstrated that they were also able to identify an unhealthy relationship. Together, the leaders and students explored the PowerPoint examples of tips for making healthy choices and staying safe in relationships.

Speakers Bureau 6.18 - AVA Voice



At Avatar, the Warwick-based Ava Voice self-advocacy group, Speakers Bureau leaders Deanne Gagne and Tanja Blicher-Ucran took a lighthearted approach to the important topic: "Let's Talk About Money." On the first very hot day of this summer, twenty-five participants, together with staff, discussed why money is important after listing the enjoyable ways of spending their money, ranging from vacations and manicures to sporting events and concert tickets. Deanne and Tanja addressed income sources and typical expenses, ways to make and save money, and reduce expenses, and the importance of a budget. The PowerPoint presentation enabled them to show a budget, line by line, as well as how a monthly budget is created. From groceries and cleaning supplies to clothing, pet care and medical costs, the group eagerly shared how their money is spent. With hands raised for every question, the participants openly discussed differences between their wants and needs, including the use of cell phones, credit and debit card and Internet. Time passed quickly as the participants focused, laughed, and responded well to a wide variety of questions.

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

- **Tanja Blicher-Ucran, RI Cross Disability Coalition, tanja@riddc.org**
- **Sue Babin, RIDDC, suebabin@riddc.org**
- **Danna Spencer, Skills for Rhode Island's Future, dspencer@skillsforri.com**