

# ***Autism Spectrum Disorders & Employment Learning Community***

## **Final Project Report**

January 2012

*This final project report concludes the Autism Spectrum Disorders & Employment Learning Community which was moderated by Jill Houghton, Organization Development Specialist, TACE Southeast, a project of the Burton Blatt Institute, Syracuse University and presented by Nila Benito, Community Supports & Public Policy Coordinator, and Brenda Clark, Employment Services Coordinator, both with the Florida Center for Inclusive Communities, at the University of South Florida.*

*Participants contributed to the development of this report to provide a brief review of the essential outcomes of the Learning Community experience, composed of a snapshot of the training content and salient outcomes for dissemination among participant agencies, affiliates, and beyond. Contributors included Lynda Schuchert and Susan Pierson-Bacon of the Florida Division of Vocational Rehabilitation (VR), Doug Warren and Lagena Bradley of the Mississippi Department of VR and Beth Mills and Mike Wall of the NC Division of VR.*

### **Content Review**

The Learning Community had four structured presentations and subsequent conference discussions that provided an introduction to the topic of Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD) and employment for people with ASD. These interactions defined and clarified ASD, shared wonderful and specific examples of cases and practices related to employment from both consumer and provider points-of-view, identified and detailed effective best practices for this topic and resulted in the group's charge of choosing important information from the experience and how to best convey and disseminate it most effectively and efficiently to our colleagues.

Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD) exists on a continuum from least to most severe and may include many diagnostic labels that have and will continue to be refined as knowledge and acceptance of the related manifestations continue to be explored, acknowledged and understood. Having a developmental etiology, ASD remains incurable and manifests in communication, social interaction and behavioral issues of varying degrees.

Methods for employment pursuits for persons with ASD and the people and systems intent on supporting the process have continued to demonstrate varied levels of success. Some clearly superior approaches have emerged and clarified salient factors thought to either exacerbate the inherent impediments of the disorders themselves or dramatically increase the efficacy of service provision when adequately designed to ensure vocational success. The more these factors are clarified and discussed the more they can be acknowledged, understood and addressed in the best interest of persons living with Autism Spectrum Disorder. These factors, for this Learning Community, were identified as 1) myths and stereotyping, 2) attitudinal barriers, 3) funding issues, 4) supported employment fidelity, and 5) the necessity of the Discovery process.

The attached exhibit is hoped to provide a context within which service provision for the population will be increased and improved wherever the information is shared and incorporated into practice.

### ***Myths***

Myth: **Individuals with ASD have hidden or exceptional talents.** An estimated 10% have savant abilities compared to 1% of the general population. Special or hidden talents are not prevalent as falsely assumed or rumored.

Myth: **Individuals with ASD do not develop significant or friendly relationships, including with family.** People with ASD may have limited expression but they do develop meaningful relations and deep connections with others.

Myth: **ASD is an emotional or mental health disorder.** ASD is a neurobiological condition that affects the brain's growth and development and cannot be adequately understood as simply an emotional or mental health disorder.

Myth: **You can tell someone has ASD by looking at them.** This spectrum disorder is often "invisible" and cannot be reliably distinguished simply by looking at someone.

Myth: **Certain vaccines cause ASD.** This research has been largely discredited.

Myth: **Individuals with ASD cannot or do not communicate.** Individuals with ASD can and do communicate, often far greater than initially or superficially perceived. With appropriate accommodations communication can be significantly augmented, especially in the area of visual supports. Visual technology is increasingly important in improving communication limitations.

Myth: **Understanding ASD is the most important key to helping individuals with ASD get and keep work.** Experience has shown that understanding a person's unique characteristics, skills, strengths and most importantly interests is the primary key to success in getting and keeping employment.

### ***Attitudinal Barriers***

Persons with ASD experience significant attitudinal barriers to employment and these barriers may be most prevalent and/or most impeding within rehabilitation and employment service systems. Experience reveals that many individuals with ASD find the traditional vocational rehabilitation experience distressing and ineffectual. The negative impact of systemic resource (time and money) management on quality programming development and assurance processes, in addition to other business, legal and personal administrative factors, are likely more disparaging than will ever be sufficiently revealed or acknowledged.

Service providers, including all relevant rehabilitation specialists and employment service workers, bring strongly influential attitudinal barriers to bear in the process of serving people with ASD. Effective service delivery requires genuine positive regard for the population and nurtured understanding of ASD beyond assumptions based on past experience and "old school" knowledge. These staff must actively engage in educating and advocating in public and private sectors and among employers to dispel stereotypical myths and unfounded notions and values regarding the efficacy of positive employment outcomes for persons with ASD.

Service providers and employers demonstrate and express fear and uncertainties regarding the abilities of people with ASD. Common misperceptions include beliefs and initial impressions that people with ASD lack communication skills and abilities to perform work duties. Many assume low expectations and

unknowingly impede people with ASD from reaching their full potential. A nice resource for understanding this potential can be found in the TACE Southeast webinar archives at <http://tacesoutheast.org/webinars/2011/070611/index.php#content>. This webinar is part one of an "Autism 101" primer and part two is at <http://tacesoutheast.org/webinars/2011/072711/index.php#content>.

## ***Funding Issues***

Existing service systems may offer inadequately funded evaluation hours. While the Discovery process can easily extend beyond the limits and definitions of funded assessment, existing programmatic resources are often under utilized or insufficient for ensuring positive outcomes. State rules and practices vary in implementation of Federal guidelines and emphasis on issues about vocational program productivity easily distract from adherence to a person-centered planning process. Increased emphasis and consistency across programs for the Discovery process for individuals with ASD will lead to more and better placements.

Incentives for employers to hire people with ASD should increase. It is a wiser use of the public dollar to invest in creating effective supports for job seekers with ASD who can potentially pay back into the system as they become employed in the workforce.

We need more coalitions of community agencies, working as teams to support employment goals.

Funding is directly impacted by the stereotypical myths and attitudinal barriers referenced in this project, demonstrating the need for more focus on fiscal best practices for service success.

## ***Supported Employment Fidelity***

Employment Specialists are historically and significantly overworked and underpaid. Nurturing genuine, caring and effectual compassion among Employment Specialists must be a priority as current systems predominantly fail individuals with ASD due to high turnover and inadequate training for front line workers and inconsistently funded and managed programming.

The old adage "the program doesn't work, you must work the program" holds true for supported employment programs while persons with ASD lack adequate capacity to advocate for themselves without concerted support efforts from family, friends and professionals.

The developed and accepted resources for establishing and maintaining effective supported employment fidelity need to be embraced and required for all rehabilitation programs everywhere without excuse. A simple internet search for supported employment fidelity will identify significant resources toward this objective and the link for the Supported Employment Toolkit containing the fidelity instrumentation and provider handbook is <http://store.samhsa.gov/product/SMA08-4365>.

## ***The Discovery Process***

Discovery is a person-centered process where information is gathered about a person's strengths, needs, abilities, preferences, resources, priorities, and informed choice, not exclusively but ultimately regarding work related activity. The information includes the types of

environments and activities in which a person performs at their best, the supports that are most effective and existing skills in natural life activities.

Understanding, developing and requiring a thorough Discovery process (not just a Work Evaluation, Supplemental Evaluation or Community Based Assessment) has been increasingly and repeatedly demonstrated as an effective best practice, while research shows that traditional vocational rehabilitation practice applied to individuals with ASD only results in a 15% successful employment outcome. Traditional information gathering typically leads to either success or failure while the Discovery process seeks to understand an individual's unique skills, language, learning style, strengths and genuine career interests. Further information on the Discovery process is archived in a webinar training located at <http://tacesoutheast.org/webinars/2009/102109/index.php#content>.

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