BACKGROUND...

A meaningful job truly can make a real difference in the lives of youth and young adults with disabilities. Yet, opportunities for these young people to share their strengths and talents in the workplace are far too limited. The TennesseeWorks Partnership is a systems-change project funded through the Administration on Intellectual and Developmental Disabilities. The goal of the project is increase the availability and quality of employment opportunities for youth and young adults with intellectual and developmental disabilities in every corner of our state.

We are partnering with communities across Tennessee to host a series of “Community Conversations” focused on how best to provide young people with disabilities the aspirations, preparation, opportunities, and supports they need to access competitive, integrated work in their community. In June 2013, the first event of these events was held in Jackson, Tennessee. The local planning committee included local disability service providers, educators, university staff members, and family members.

We shared invitations widely throughout the Jackson community to gather a diverse group people who care about making their community more inclusive of people with disabilities. Family members, local employers, disability service providers, educators, faith community members, community organizations, and civic leaders were all invited to the event.
THE JACKSON COMMUNITY CONVERSATION

A community conversation is a creative, fun, and powerful way of identifying how diverse members of a community might work together in compelling ways to solve an important challenge. The focus of this event was on generating ideas, sharing resources, and making connections with other community members to enhance employment and community involvement for young people with disabilities and, ultimately, to strengthen the Jackson community.

The Jackson community conversation was held at the STAR Center. This evening event took place on June 25 and involved more than 90 members of the community. Daryll McGuire, Vice President of the STAR Center, served as the facilitator for the evening. He opened the event by sharing an employment success story about a young man who used his love of farming to become a self-entrepreneur, buying and selling farm equipment locally. Using the World Café model, the group next began a series of “coffee-house” conversations—first at small tables and then as a whole group—in which they shared their best ideas related to three questions:

- What can we do as a community to increase meaningful employment opportunities for people with intellectual disability?
- How might we work together in compelling ways to make these ideas happen here in Jackson?
- What are the most promising ideas you have heard this evening? Where should we go next to launch meaningful change here?

At the end of the event, attendees completed a short feedback form and indicated whether they would like to be involved in future efforts to promote employment for young people with disabilities in their community.

After the event, all of the notes taken at each of the individual tables and during the whole group discussion were compiled and organized. A full report of ideas across all six conversations will be available later in the year. A sampling of ideas and next steps is included on the next page.

AGENDA

- 6:10-6:15 Greeting
- 6:15-6:25 Opening Remarks
- 6:25-6:30 World Café Process
- 6:30-6:50 Round 1 Discussion
- 6:50-7:10 Round 2 Discussion
- 7:10-7:30 Round 3 Discussion
- 7:30-7:50 Harvesting of Best Ideas
- 7:50-8:00 Closing Remarks
A SAMPLING OF IDEAS TO INCREASE EMPLOYMENT SHARED DURING THE EVENT

Ideas for Families

- Involve your child in community activities and early work experiences while they are in middle and high school.
- Talk regularly with your child about work and foster high expectations for a future career.
- Because myths abound, find out how your child’s benefits are actually impacted by working.
- Learn about local agencies and organizations that can support your child in the workplace.
- Highlight the strengths and talents of your child when talking with potential employers.

Ideas for Disability Service Providers

- Explore new collaborations with other agencies who share your goal of improving employment outcomes.
- Host job fairs that connect employers with young people with disabilities.
- Share with employers the many benefits of hiring people with disabilities.
- Meet with employers—individually or at Chamber meetings—to address myths about the liabilities of hiring people with disabilities.
- Dispel myths among families about how finding work impacts benefits.
- Build relationships with the human resource departments of larger employers.
- Showcase the successes and contributions of people with disabilities using local media.
- Make connecting people with disabilities to community jobs the expectation throughout your agency.

Ideas for Community Leaders

- Engage local civic groups in working toward the goal of expanding employment outcomes.
- Partner with local schools to expand the availability of community-based training sites.
- Support local postsecondary programs to become more inclusive of people with intellectual disability.
- Develop a map of community resources that young people with disabilities can draw upon.

Ideas for Employers and Business Networks

- Showcase employers who are already hiring young people with disabilities.
- Compile a list of employers who are eager to hire people with disabilities.
- Remember that hiring people with disabilities is not about “doing good” but about finding excellent employees.
- Utilize the Job Accommodation Network for ideas about workplace accommodations.
- Find out about financial incentives and agency supports related to hiring people with disabilities.
A sampling of ideas to increase employment shared during the event

Ideas for Faith Communities

• Advocate on behalf of people with disabilities and their families.
• Link interested youth and young adults with disabilities with mentors.
• Connect people with disabilities to the network of businesses and organizations represented by members of the congregation.

Ideas for Educators

• Share information with families about the importance of work and strategies for encouraging early work experiences.
• Engage students in multiple work-based experiences during school and in the summers.
• Ensure students receive strong transition services that prepare them for future careers.
• Offer career-related learning opportunities to students, such as mock interviews, vocational skills training, and job search assistance.
• Teach work-related social skills that will promote employment success.
• Connect with local business members and develop mentorships for your students.
• Start transition planning early and remain focused.

Ideas for Young People with Disabilities

• Find jobs openings that align with or build upon your strengths.
• Get involved in summer employment and youth development programs in your community.
• Pair up with a mentor who can help you learn about the world of work.

Ideas for Our Entire Community

• Develop a website that brings together in one place information and resources related to employment in our community.
• Launch community-wide awareness efforts that focus on the strengths and contributions people with disabilities can bring to the workplace.
• Organize a community job fair that connects employers with young people with disabilities.
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<tr>
<th><strong>RESOURCES ON EMPLOYMENT</strong></th>
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<td><strong>TennesseeWorks</strong></td>
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<td><em>Numerous state and national resources focused on improving employment outcomes</em></td>
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<td><strong>Pathfinder</strong></td>
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<td><em>Comprehensive, multilingual disability clearinghouse of information, referral resources, and support services to and for people with disabilities and their families in Tennessee</em></td>
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<td><strong>Job Accommodation Network</strong></td>
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<td><strong>National Collaborative on Workforce and Disability</strong></td>
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<td><strong>National Secondary Transition Technical Assistance Center</strong></td>
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<td><strong>Resources for hiring people with disabilities</strong></td>
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WHAT ATTENDEES SAID ABOUT THE COMMUNITY CONVERSATION

Below is a summary of responses from evaluations completed by attendees regarding their views on their community and the event.

I am leaving this conversation with specific steps I plan to do to increase employment opportunities for people with disabilities

The conversation tonight improved my views of the capacity of our community to improve employment opportunities for people with disabilities

Follow-up events or actions on this issue are needed in our community

Members of our community need help learning how to support people with disabilities in meaningful jobs

Strong partnerships between employers, community agencies, and families currently exist in my community

Our community currently has the capacity to support people with disabilities in meaningful jobs

People in our community are generally receptive to employing people with disabilities

I would invite someone I know to attend another event like this one in the future

I was able to identify things I could do to enhance employment outcomes for people with disabilities from this conversation

This conversation will contribute to increased employment opportunities for people with disabilities in our community

I learned about resources, opportunities, or connections in my community that I previously did not know about

This conversation was a good investment of my time
The TennesseeWorks Partnership was first funded in October 2012 with the purpose of equipping (a) youth with significant disabilities to aspire toward competitive work from an early age, (b) families to demand competitive work for their children with disabilities, (c) educators to prepare their students for competitive work across the grade-span, and (d) state systems to support competitive work in every part of the state. More than 25 agencies and organizations have collaborated with the University Center for Excellence in Developmental Disabilities at the Vanderbilt Kennedy Center to form this collaborative. State partners include Tennessee Department of Intellectual and Developmental Disabilities, Tennessee Department of Education, Tennessee Department of Human Services Division of Rehabilitation Services, Tennessee Department of Labor and Workforce Development, Tennessee Council on Developmental Disabilities, and Tennessee Higher Education Commission.

For more information, see www.tennesseeworks.org or contact Sarah Harvey at (615) 322-4999, tennesseeworks@gmail.com

Funding for this project is provided by the Administration on Intellectual and Developmental Disabilities

ABOUT TENNESSEWORKS

If you are interested in hosting your own community conversation on employment, download this free guidebook (“Launching Inclusive Efforts Through Community Conversations: A Practical Guide for Families, Service Providers, and Communities”) from www.waisman.wisc.edu/naturalsupports/pdfs/Community_Conversation_Guide.pdf