

## Lessons Learned from CRPs Facilitating Customized Employment Outcomes: Strategies for Maintaining Relationships

When individuals with disabilities make the move to a job in the community, Community Rehabilitation Programs (CRPs) need to consider how friendships from facility-based programs can be maintained. These relationships can be an ongoing source of support that helps an individual succeed in customized employment. In addition, as more individuals become employed, the group members can serve as supports for each other as well as role models for individuals thinking about community employment. One reason that has been given for people staying in sheltered employment is that they fear the loss of their friends. This perhaps is not so different from any individual who leaves one job for another.

The Coastal Center for Developmental Services, Inc. in Savannah, GA has developed a plan so that individuals who enter community jobs have opportunities to socialize with peers and staff. This Center is one of the agencies receiving intensive training and technical assistance support from T-TAP. Staff members have used a number of strategies to keep people connected. These strategies follow in this brief on lessons learned.

### **Case Study Strategies**

The goal of Coastal Center has been not only to assist individuals in finding customized jobs but also to help them maintain established relationships and participate in integrated social activities in the community. Staff began by creating a newsletter for those individuals interested in or already participating in community employment. These monthly newsletters highlight individuals who find jobs during the month as well as their pictures. In addition, an employer is included in each issue with the new employee's success story. The newsletter currently goes out to consumers, staff, and employers including those actively involved in the program and those being targeted. There is a long-term plan of educating families on the success and benefits of community employment through this, or some other form of publication.

The newsletters also cover "what's happening in the community". This section contains a list of community events for the next month, such as the Savannah Film Festival, the Coastal Empire Fair and the upcoming Community Employment Services Social. Each month Coastal Center's Community Employment Services staff facilitate a social event for anyone involved in community employment. The first meeting was a potluck supper held at the agency, and the agenda was to plan activities for the upcoming months. All activities since then have been in the community, and staff are committed to facilitating social integration. To date, the group has gone to the movies and ice-skating. Individuals meet at the site for the social, such as the movie theater.

Staff realized that some individuals may have difficulty getting to the various locations and have assisted by mapping out bus routes and in extreme situations providing rides. A few individuals who drive have provided transportation for their peers. All the socials

are held in the early evening to ensure that as many individuals as possible can attend without having a conflict with work.

The social group has been a tremendous success. Individuals look forward to the opportunity to see old friends and make new ones. In addition, group members act as a peer support to each other, helping to answer questions and concerns about community employment. Lastly, social outings provide an opportunity for the staff to reconnect with individuals who are independent on their jobs and have faded from intensive supports to ongoing supports.

### **Summary and Recommendations**

CRPs must build opportunities for individuals to continue connecting with staff and friends after they leave the facility for competitive jobs. Strategies can include individual supports that assist a person to connect with friends informally over lunch or after work. Or, as this example describes, agencies can use an organized group approach for facilitating connections.

A supported program for social opportunities provides connections for those working in the community. The program sends a message to those considering competitive employment that opportunities will be available to interact with their facility friends after they become employed. This may reduce individuals declining competitive employment solely for the reason of leaving their friends. Providing social opportunities also may prevent social isolation for those who are in community jobs or prevent them from choosing to return to the facility.