

Opportunities for Ohioans with Disabilities, State of Ohio

Innovations in American Government Award Case Study

JANUARY 2022



HARVARD Kennedy School

ASH CENTER

for Democratic Governance
and Innovation

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About the Author

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Currently, Ms. Crispino serves as president and CEO of United Cerebral Palsy of Long Island (UCP of Long Island), where she oversees the nonprofit's education, employment, and residential services for children and adults with intellectual and developmental disabilities. Ms. Crispino has devoted much of her career to seeking equal employment opportunities for individuals with disabilities. Prior to joining UCP of Long Island, she led a National Business and Disability Council and developed a National Disability Entrepreneurship Center at The Viscardi Center.

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Foreword

The Innovations in American Government Awards program has a long history of recognizing innovative initiatives that seek to serve the most vulnerable populations. In planning for our 2020 awards competition, we specifically sought applicants that work to reduce inequality and alleviate poverty. It was through this competition that we learned of Ohioans with Disabilities, a program that seeks to address the disparity between the proportion of people with disabilities in the workforce and those without.

In 2013, the state of Ohio's vocational rehabilitation agency, Opportunities for Ohioans with Disabilities, established a business relations program to work throughout the state to raise awareness of the agency and its mission to work with employer partners to promote and support the hiring of individuals with disabilities. Through its network of employer partners, business relations specialists identify job opportunities that match job-seekers' skill sets and experience, and also provide services and resources that promote an inclusive and diverse work environment. By investing in services to business to increase access to in-demand jobs and support to promote a more inclusive workplace, the program is removing barriers to employment and equal access for Ohioans with disabilities.

We greatly appreciate Colleen Crispino for her thorough site visit as part of our Innovations in American Government competition and for her extensive report on the program, and we hope that other states will be able to learn from Ohio's successes.

–Stephen Goldsmith

Executive Summary

People with disabilities make up 26 percent of the population in the U.S. and represent the largest minority group.¹ Unemployment and underemployment are critical issues for this demographic and, as a result, many individuals with disabilities face major obstacles to achieving economic mobility and success. The U.S. Department of Labor reports that only 37 percent of people with disabilities of working age are employed as opposed to more than 77 percent of their non-disabled peers.² Despite 30 years of equal access legislation under the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA), there has been no significant change in these statistics. People with disabilities continue to face numerous barriers to employment, including discrimination, unconscious bias by employers, loss of disability-related entitlements, and a lack of skills due to inadequate education or training. It has been incredibly challenging for state agencies and service organizations to address these barriers, which are complex and require many solutions working in tandem for success.

Opportunities for Ohioans with Disabilities (OOD), Ohio's Vocational Rehabilitation (VR) agency, is responsible for providing employment-related services to eligible individuals in Ohio to help them achieve their employment goals. Their program model, designed to improve employment outcomes for youth and adults with disabilities, addresses some of the barriers that exist for these populations. Since 2013, their Business Relations team has partnered with more than 500 employers statewide to match skilled candidates to available jobs. As part of this service, OOD provides no-cost solutions for employers, including improved worksite accessibility and accommodations and training on disability etiquette and awareness. These strategies have resulted in increased hiring of VR participants by employer partners.³

As part of their innovative service system, OOD partners with large employers in the Columbus area to embed Ohio State VR staff in each employer's human resources department to quickly match qualified candidates with disabilities to open positions. OOD first tested this approach with one major employer in 2017, leading to the hiring of 60 individuals with disabilities in the first three years. They later expanded the program to include an additional major employer, in a different industry, with similarly positive results.

OOD has created a successful model that serves both individuals with disabilities and the agency's employer partners. Their focus on treating the employer as a customer has led to improved outcomes for both employees and employers. Employer partners who hired individuals through OOD's program increased their employee retention by 31 percent over six months compared with other VR placements. By engaging with these employers, hiring increased from 20 percent of all VR clients to 29 percent of all VR clients.⁴

OOD's coordinated program has achieved a level of success that can be seen in its many successful employment outcomes. The agency uses a continuous quality improvement process to review results and add elements to continuously enhance outcomes and overcome obstacles. Their model is replicable by other state VR agencies and is consistent with federal policy and funding guidelines.

Introduction

This review of an innovative employment program designed and implemented by Opportunities for Ohioans with Disabilities (OOD) is part of the Innovations in American Government Awards Program from the Ash Center at Harvard Kennedy School. This case study is designed to serve as a guide for replication by other government entities, including Vocational Rehabilitation (VR) agencies. OOD, the state of Ohio's Vocational Rehabilitation agency, aims to empower Ohioans with disabilities through employment, disability determinations, and independence.⁵ They accomplish this through contracting with public and private service providers, providing direct services for people with disabilities, and partnering with employers and employer associations.

Some examples of the positive outcomes achieved include:

- 65% increase in the hiring of people with disabilities at OSU in three years.
- 72% retention rate after 12 months at Giant Eagle
- 15% increase in average wages for all job seekers placed over the past five years.

About OOD's Employment Initiative

In 2013, the agency launched an employment initiative program to promote OOD as a workforce development resource for Ohio businesses, with the intention to facilitate successful employment for people with disabilities. To execute this initiative, OOD hired a Business Relations Manager as well as six Business Relations Specialists (BRS). These new roles were prompted by employer requests for qualified candidates with disabilities. Additionally, some employers expressed concern about the lack of a single point of contact at the agency. In response to these concerns, each OOD BRS was tasked with assisting employers with recruitment and retention of employees, providing no-cost disability etiquette and awareness training, and coordinating hiring events. When hiring for the Business Relations team, OOD sought people with sales and business experience. Team members treated each employer as a customer, with a focus on increasing profit and productivity.

Next, Talent Sourcing Coordinators (TSC) were introduced to help place individuals in the jobs identified by the Business Relations Specialists. TSC staff acted as liaisons between an employer partner and a job seeker or an external job developer supporting them. By facilitating and tracking applicants and hires, each TSC worked to identify qualified candidates and connect them to appropriate job openings.⁶

In 2017, OOD created a partnership with Ohio State University that included embedding a Talent Sourcing Coordinator from OOD in the University's human resources office to match qualified candidates with job openings in the University system. In 2019, they replicated this model with Giant Eagle, a supermarket chain. By embedding a TSC within a company, OOD allowed for greater collaboration and an increased focus on hiring people with disabilities. Today, OOD utilizes Business Relations Specialists and Talent Sourcing Coordinators across the entire state of Ohio, though the embedded staff are only in Columbus. Utilizing embedded staff has yielded dramatic results compared to prior initiatives.

At Ohio State University, 46 people were hired in the first 24 months, which represents a 65 percent increase in the hiring of candidates with disabilities by the University. Most of these candidates work 35 hours per week and make \$13.70 per hour⁷—64 percent above the minimum wage in Ohio.⁸ At Giant Eagle, 103 people were hired, with a retention rate of 72 percent over 12 months. While this number is above average, exact retention rates across all employee demographics were not available from the corporation.⁹ In general, retention rates are less than 50 percent for grocery stores.¹⁰

Although OOD utilizes many hiring practices that are commonplace throughout the country (e.g., job fairs and Business Relations Specialists), they pair these with no-cost training for employers, support for reasonable accommodations, and embedded Talent Sourcing Coordinators as part of an integrated system designed to improve the hiring and retention of people with disabilities. Another critical element unique to their program is the availability of a Worksite Accessibility Specialist. These licensed Occupational Therapists have extensive training in reasonable accommodations and assistive technology, and their services are provided to business partners at no cost. Understanding and managing reasonable accommodations is vital to people with disabilities' success in the workforce, and many companies do not know how to address these needs. Providing support in this area has the potential to increase an employer's willingness to hire those with disabilities.

OOD's program owes much of its initiative's success to offering employers a Talent Sourcing Coordinator and Accessibility Specialist as embedded resources. When reviewing OOD's program, four employers were interviewed, including Ohio State and Giant Eagle. All four employers referenced the value of the Accessibility Specialist to their hiring and retention efforts, citing the ability to increase workplace productivity for employees with disabilities. In addition, the two organizations with an embedded Talent Sourcing Coordinator credited the significant increase in successful employment outcomes to their TSC's integration with their human resource function.¹¹ Sample monthly partnership reports highlight the improved results accomplished including improved rates of interviews offered and hires with the use of the embedded Talent Sourcing Coordinator.

During the site visit, this reviewer had the opportunity to meet with Kevin Miller, Executive , Director OOD as well as the leadership team. They provided an overview of the program and an introduction to the history of the organization. OOD shared organizational chart, process maps and workflows, worksite accessibility reports, wage data, and samples of monthly partnership reports.

In addition to OOD staff, this reviewer met with representatives from four separate business partners: Giant Eagle, Ohio State University, Huntington National Bank, and Advance Auto Parts. Three of these meetings occurred on location at their headquarters, and one was via phone. In addition to meeting with company leadership, this reviewer spoke with at least one employee from each employer, all of whom had been assisted by OOD in their job search process. Additional interview subjects included at least one OOD staff member in each job title related to this program, including the Deputy Director, Business Relations Specialists, Talent Sourcing Coordinators, Vocational Rehabilitation Counselors, and Worksite Accessibility Specialists. During these interviews, it was evident that each team member's role had been clearly defined and communicated, yielding a unified commitment to the mission of the organization and the spirit of the program.

The program improved hiring and retention in both companies with embedded Talent Sourcing Coordinators and those that partnered with the OOD Business Relations team. This was verified through meetings with management at several companies that are currently participating in the program and using these services as well as monthly partnership reports that track applications, interviews, and hires. In addition, OOD provided data to show that average wages for their participants have increased by 15 percent in the past five years, showcasing the quality of the jobs being secured.¹²

Challenges and Solutions

Despite federal legislation and funding for supports and services, unemployment and underemployment rates for people with disabilities in the U.S. have not substantially improved over the years. While the reasons are complex, OOD's program clearly addresses several with positive results. First, employers often lack the knowledge to understand why they should hire people with disabilities and how

diversity will positively impact their overall business. The program addresses this by providing disability etiquette and awareness training along with consultation on worksite accessibility and accommodations. These supports assist employers in creating a workplace that is receptive to promoting the success of all its employees.

Second, many employers do not know where to find qualified candidates with disabilities. By utilizing Business Relations Specialists and Talent Sourcing Coordinators, the agency works directly with employers to assess the requirements of open positions and successfully match them with skilled candidates.

Program strengths include the commitment and engagement of the entire team, with buy-in from the Governor and the Director of OOD. By developing a system that is replicable and measurable, OOD has enhanced their ability to facilitate the hiring of people with disabilities and share what they do with others. The program focuses on using unique strategies to optimize effectiveness, such as embedding Talent Sourcing Coordinators and Worksite Accessibility Specialists.

OOD has focused on data collection and achieving key metrics since the onset of the program. Key measures of success include the number of employer partners engaged, the percentage of VR service recipients placed with employer partners, and the number of trainings and technical assistance services provided. In addition, each employer partner's Talent Sourcing Coordinator tracks monthly data, including applicants, interviews, and hires.

Despite OOD's success, they faced challenges while implementing this model. A major obstacle was the need to change the culture of the VR system in Ohio. Traditionally, the person with a disability has been the primary customer and was the focus of service delivery. Training was needed to inform the entire system about the value of a dual-customer approach, with equal weight given to people with disabilities and employer partners. Further, OOD needed to develop services and resources for employers to increase placements and support the retention of workers with disabilities.¹³

An additional challenge centered on the agency's relationship with public and private agencies that they fund to provide job development and placement services. These agencies viewed OOD's active role with employers as a threat and were concerned that their funding would be reduced or eliminated as OOD engaged with employers to a greater extent. OOD counteracted this by including them as members of the team and utilizing their talents to move the process forward. In addition, these agencies were able to see firsthand the benefits of the program, as individuals they supported were successfully hired by employer partners.¹⁴

Trends in the field indicate that developing partnerships between service organizations and employers is key to achieving increased employment for individuals with disabilities. The Workforce Innovation and Opportunity Act, federal legislation that authorizes Vocational Rehabilitation programs, identified service to business as an important focus in 2014.¹⁵ This opens the door for all state VR agencies to utilize funds to support employment outcomes via support to business. As a result, OOD's program could be used widely across the U.S. Funding could be re-allocated by other states to replicate OOD's success through similar initiatives. OOD also benefited from support from the Poses Family Foundation to create and hire the embedded Talent Sourcing Coordinator at Ohio State University. The use of private funds should be explored to supplement existing funding.

Conclusion

The unemployment and underemployment of youth and adults with disabilities is a national issue that has been the focus of federal legislation, federal funding, and state Vocational Rehabilitation agencies since the 1970s. Despite efforts by federal, state, and private partners, minimal progress has been made in preparing people with disabilities for the labor market and creating an accommodating work environment to the same degree as the general population.

State Vocational Rehabilitation organizations provide individualized services to people with disabilities who are interested in entering the workforce. How each state accomplishes this varies, as does their success. Opportunities for Ohioans with Disabilities (OOD), the Ohio State Vocational Rehabilitation agency, has created an innovative and effective model that has yielded several positive outcomes for the people they support. They are achieving their desired outcomes and facilitating the successful employment of people with disabilities across the state.

OOD's use of designated staff that understand business and can partner with local businesses to match qualified candidates with open positions have led to positive relationships and employment outcomes. This combination of Business Relations Specialists, who work directly with employers, and Talent Sourcing Coordinators, who bridge the gap between job seekers, those that support them, and employers, has significantly improved program outcomes.

As a result of these relationships, the agency has been able to identify other areas in which employers need assistance to create an inclusive workplace where people with disabilities can thrive. These gaps include disability awareness and etiquette training, which OOD now offers free of charge. They also identified workplace accommodation as a pain point for employers. Employers are often under the impression that accommodations are disruptive and costly, which is simply untrue. By providing businesses with free consultation on worksite accessibility and job accommodations, OOD provides employers with the necessary knowledge to hire and retain a diverse workforce..

Embedded Talent Sourcing Coordinators (TSC) are key to the program's success. As a proximate member of the employer's HR team, the TSC has the ability to learn the business from the inside and develop relationships with hiring managers. They then leverage this knowledge to ensure candidates with disabilities are considered in the hiring process. The model benefits OOD clients as well as employers.

While other VR agencies would benefit from replicating OOD's business model, identifying funding to designate Business Relations staff to partner directly with employers could pose a challenge. Additionally, other agencies may struggle to develop a system to select employers that have diverse job opportunities that match the skills of their job seekers. Although OOD has been successful with this approach, they have only utilized the model with two employers in the Columbus area, which limits participants to that area and those industries.

OOD demonstrates a deep commitment to maximizing employment outcomes for youth and adults with disabilities. By utilizing strong metrics and quality improvement processes, they have been successful in targeting specific barriers for people with disabilities and developing solutions to overcome them. The metrics include hiring rates, salaries, and retention rates. They consistently use data to measure their success and are open to ongoing quality improvement.

The OOD program has yielded significant positive outcomes for people with disabilities and employers through their initiative. They have combined common strategies with innovative tactics to create an integrated service system that appears to be working effectively. OOD has increased hiring rates at many employer partners while developing practices that lead to increased retention, higher salaries, and increased job satisfaction across the state. OOD staff are working effectively in clearly defined roles to ensure that more individuals with disabilities enter the workforce and stay there in the state of Ohio.

Notes

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