

Service Provider Promising Practice

YEAR OF PUBLICATION: 2020

**COVID-19
Resource**

TOPIC: Services and Service Innovation

The Institute for Community Inclusion's Employment Services Team (Massachusetts): Supplementing Individualized Supports with a Virtual Support Group for Those Not Working Due to COVID-19

Background

The Institute for Community Inclusion's Employment Services Team (EST) provides direct employment supports to roughly 50 individuals throughout the metro Boston area. A number of these individuals are currently not working because they have chosen to take time off or have been furloughed or laid off due to the COVID-19 outbreak.

The EST needed to quickly pivot to supporting individuals remotely, particularly those who abruptly lost employment. In addition, EST staffers needed to establish creative and innovative strategies for continuing the job search process.

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Implementation

EST staff began this process by establishing one clear goal: to provide the same level of high-quality supports while emphasizing the core value of individualization and maximum engagement. For those individuals who abruptly lost their jobs, EST team members considered each individual's goals, and determined what exactly they should be doing at home so that they can transition back to work when it is time, without having lost skills.

EST staffers used this time not only to revisit goals, but also to refine them. They also identified additional skills each individual *can build* to make them an even more desirable employee. EST staffers are actively involving each person's support network (family, friends, residential staff, etc.) to support the individual's skill building activities at home.

The pivot to remote supports began by creating plain language instructions for using the Zoom video conferencing platform. EST staffers then used Zoom to develop individuals' hard and soft skills based on individual goals. For one individual, this meant practicing sweeping. For another, it meant role-playing a customer service scenario. Staffers and individuals continued meeting individually on a weekly basis to maintain engagement.

At the same time, the EST team also recognized that they were in a unique situation of having a peer group of quarantined individuals. Staff decided to leverage this opportunity to explore the benefits of an online support group to complement the individual work. They began facilitating group meetings that covered topics such as social distancing, personal protective equipment and how to use it, and other resources for staying safe, healthy, and connected during the COVID-19 crisis.



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This support group also created a platform for sharing feelings of anxiety and fear about the pandemic and staying connected while being apart. The group ended each meeting with a wellness strategy such as deep breathing or a mindfulness meditation as a way of teaching strategies to cope when under stress.

Impact

Having a combination of individualized and group supports has been particularly useful to maintain continuity and connection in a time of social distancing. Several parents of individuals who participated in these supports reached out to EST staff to express their gratitude, explaining that it significantly reduced anxiety for their family member.

Staffers have delivered the first four group support sessions, which were focused on goal development and skill building at home. The next series of sessions will emphasize the job search process. Topics will include resume development, practicing interviewing virtually, using networking and career interest inventories, and providing virtual job tours.

Suggestions for Replication

- » Rely on core values inherent in the provision of high-quality supports, such as individualization and goal setting.
- » Make a deliberate effort to build the individual's skills, knowledge, and experience in order to benefit him or her in the future.
- » Leverage peer support groups to maintain connection, optimize engagement, and reduce anxiety.
- » Establish curriculum for group support sessions, and identify and support individual goals.

For more information:

www.communityinclusion.org/employmentservices/



**This promising practice was developed in collaboration
with the State Employment Leadership Network**

www.selnhub.org



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Promising Practices is an initiative of the Access to Integrated Employment Project, funded in part by the Administration on Intellectual and Developmental Disabilities, Administration on Community Living, US Department of Health and Human Services. Access to Integrated Employment is a project of ThinkWork! at the Institute for Community Inclusion at UMass Boston. ThinkWork! is a resource portal offering data, personal stories, and tools related to improving employment outcomes for people with intellectual and developmental disabilities.

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