

Connect-Ability Infrastructure Change Highlights: 2010

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Background

- Connect-Ability began in 2005 when Connecticut received a Medicaid Infrastructure Grant (MIG) from the Centers for Medicare and Medicaid Services to improve the State's employment and disabilities services infrastructure, identify employment barriers for residents with disabilities, and implement long-term solutions.
- Connect-Ability is organized around a comprehensive strategic plan developed with input from a broad range of stakeholders in Connecticut including employers, people with disabilities, education professionals, community providers, parents of youth with disabilities, and government agencies.
- The strategic plan focuses on policy and practice changes in four priority areas: stakeholder education, recruitment/employment/promotion, transportation, and youth in transition from school to work.
- Since 2007, project evaluators from the University of Connecticut Health Center have interviewed key informants periodically to capture detailed information about infrastructure changes occurring in the state that affect the employment of people with disabilities.
- Key changes from 2007-2009 are summarized in detailed yearly reports and in the 2007-2009 Executive Summary all of which can be accessed at www.connect-ability.com/.
- This report highlights significant continuing and new infrastructure changes occurring during 2010.

Key Infrastructure Changes

Connect-Ability continues to bring about systemic change and progress in furthering the employment of people with disabilities in Connecticut in numerous ways. These changes include continued development of a Technical Assistance Center (TAC), an ongoing Marketing Campaign, expansion of its Partnership Model, and the offering of new resources that increase flexibility and choice and enable a more diverse workforce in the state.

Technical Assistance Center

The TAC has become Connecticut's primary source of information and a single point of entry to inform employers, employees, service providers and job seekers about employment issues and people with disabilities. The TAC serves employers, people with disabilities who seek new or different employment, families, employment service providers, school systems, and career counselors, and includes a toll free number (1-866-844-1903) and interactive website (www.connect-ability.com) to access information and technical assistance.

Source of information and outreach:

- Through Connect-Ability and partnerships with state agencies, the Connecticut Community Rehabilitation Provider Searchable Database for youth in transition and adults with disabilities was developed. The database assists people in finding independent living and workforce supports and services and can be accessed on the Connect-Ability and Bureau of Rehabilitation Services (BRS) websites.
- Connect-Ability held informational transportation workshops for consumers throughout 2010 and executed a contract for additional workshops in 2011.
- Connect-Ability added information to its website about the Connecticut Tech Act Project (CTTAP) and how to access assistive technology.
- Connect-Ability did outreach for and promoted Prep Rallies, which provided resources to help people with disabilities prepare for career fairs. A total of 320 consumers attended 6 sessions. These were a huge success and more Prep Rallies will be held throughout the state in 2011.

Serves employers, employment services providers, and consumers:

- Connect-Ability developed and posted the SmartGuide: Answers in Human Services on its website and the BRS website to provide useful connections to help people with disabilities with issues around employment, independent living, support services, and benefits.

Serves school systems:

- As part of a grant funded by Connect-Ability, the Advancing Connecticut's Transition Services (ACTS) project is providing information on transition and serving as a catalyst to improve Connecticut's transition services.

Toll free number and website:

- The TAC received a total of 388 calls during 2010, a significant increase from the 221 calls received at the TAC in 2009.
- The Connect-Ability website had a total of 11,594 unique visitors during 2010, compared to a total of 10,530 in 2009.

Marketing Campaign

The marketing campaign, coordinated by Mintz and Hoke and launched in 2007, continues to be successful in disseminating information about Connect-Ability to create a greater awareness about the ability of people with disabilities in the workplace and the value of building relationships between different agencies and organizations to further employment opportunities for people with disabilities.

- The marketing campaign released new television, radio, and print messages during 2010 and achieved the goal of driving traffic to the Connect-Ability website. The marketing messages are intended to influence people's perceptions of one another and encourage Connecticut employers to hire qualified job seekers with disabilities.
- Banner ads were created to promote the Connect-Ability newsletter, *Spotlights*, and Disability Mentoring Day. This included a focus on the *Special Edition October 2010 Spotlights* underscoring National Disability Employment Awareness Month.
- The Connect-Ability partnership with 2-1-1, Connecticut's free information and referral service, has been positive and helps increase awareness of Connect-Ability's resources. A total of 82 calls were sent to Connect-Ability by the 2-1-1/Info line between April and December 2010.
- Connect-Ability joined nearly 30 other MIG states to promote Think Beyond the Label, a national media campaign directed toward employers to raise awareness about hiring people with disabilities. The campaign is enhancing systems that provide employment opportunities for people with disabilities.

Partnership Model

The partnership model Connect-Ability created brings state agencies, service providers and businesses together in a common system and is furthering progress in increased communications, networking, and collaborations across and within state agencies and with other (non-state agency) organizations to help remove employment barriers and ensure a useful, accessible infrastructure.

- Connect-Ability has been instrumental in helping the Board of Education and Services for the Blind (BESB) increase agency training of Community Rehabilitation Providers to make them more aware of the blindness and sensitivity training they offer and to help them further identify client needs.
- A partnership between Connect-Ability and Connecticut's Aging and Disability Resource Centers (ADRCs) is providing information on employment through the dissemination of brochures to ADRC clients, direct referral to Vocational Rehabilitation Counseling services administered by the Bureau of Rehabilitation Services, and Benefits Counseling services available through Connect-Ability's partners in the Work Incentives Planning and Assistance (WIPA) program.
- Connect-Ability is working in partnership with the Department of Developmental Services (DDS) and the Department of Mental Health and Addiction Services (DMHAS) in support of their efforts to infuse employment in everyday practices with case managers.
- The HomeWORK project, a collaboration between Connect-Ability and DMHAS, is building a strong integrated career development infrastructure that leverages the employment services and supports of numerous agencies. The project is assisting supportive housing tenants in obtaining and retaining employment with the ultimate goal of moving off Social Security benefits. It has developed peer networks that will stay in place after the grant is over to provide recovery education and support opportunities.
- A memorandum of agreement (MOA) between Connect-Ability and DMHAS to support the Employment Practice Improvement Collaborative (EPIC) is helping consumers attain meaningful employment by building improved systems to train providers and stakeholders participating in their care.
- Collaboration between Connect-Ability and the BRS Employment Division resulted in the creation of new marketing materials for an On-the-Job Training video that has been distributed to employers, Community Rehabilitation Providers and consumers.

New and Expanded Resources

- The annual Connecticut Employment Summit, begun in 2006, continues to showcase new and expanded resources to help break down employment barriers and achieve workplace productivity. At the 2010 Summit, employers shared best practices for recruitment and hiring. New ideas and achievements were also shared and celebrated.
- Connect-Ability continues its partnership with the CT Business Leadership Network (CTBLN), a growing coalition of Connecticut employers working to expand employment opportunities for people with disabilities. They worked together to create successful Disability Mentoring Day activities in October and identify and coordinate mentee participation. Participation included 74 mentees and 34 employers.
- Connect-Ability and the CTBLN hosted a Job Fair/Employment Conference at Manchester Community College in May. In addition to job seeker and employer workshops, keynote speaker Joyce Bender spoke on competitive employment opportunities for people with disabilities.
- Funding from Connect-Ability enabled the CTBLN to experience numerous positive changes within its organization including joining the Metro Chamber Alliance and increasing membership over the past several years from 8 members to 178 with 88 businesses represented.
- CTBLN produced its first quarterly issue of *Networked*, an electronic newsletter. *Networked* is an important resource for CTBLN members on local and national best practices for recruiting and retaining people with disabilities as well as national disability news.
- Connect-Ability started working with African, Caribbean, and American Parents of Children with Disabilities (AFCAMP) to increase awareness about Connect-Ability, provide training on transition, and assist them in being better able to provide resources to the population it serves.
- With funding from Connect-Ability, the EPIC project is offering KeyTrain®, a training resource, in all regions of the state for eligible women with disabilities. KeyTrain® is an interactive training system that provides a comprehensive learning system for basic workplace skills and leads to the National Workforce Readiness credential.
- Connect-Ability supported the development of a third “Employment Idol” video. DDS will use the third video to continue to promote the employment of people with intellectual disabilities in Connecticut.
- DDS is working on three Institute for Community Inclusion (ICI) projects that are directly funded by Connect-Ability. These projects are important employment resources for people with disabilities and include: Job Developer and Training Assistance (as a result of trainings, 27 people with disabilities have new or better jobs outcomes); Group to Individual Employment (this infrastructure change is resulting in an additional 36 people having better job outcomes); and the Financial Literacy and Assets Management project (helps people work more than 20 hours).
- Connect-Ability funding is enabling DDS to hire a person who will be dedicated to improving relationships between BRS, the State Department of Education, and Department of Labor and help make significant infrastructure changes to better accomplish the work.

A more complete description of 2010-2011 statewide infrastructure changes related to Connect-Ability will be disseminated in a report and executive summary at the end of 2011.

Annual Connect-Ability Infrastructure Change reports, containing detailed information on all infrastructure changes occurring in each period, can be downloaded from the Research Papers page of the Connect-Ability website (www.connect-ability.com/)