

Connecticut Showcases Creative Jobs with “Employment Idol”

Background. In 2007, the State of Connecticut’s Department of Developmental Services (DDS) partnered with the self-advocacy group People First of Connecticut to develop Employment Idol, an innovative project for promoting employment as the preferred outcome for individuals with intellectual/developmental disabilities (ID/DD) in the state. Spinning off the concept of the popular television show *American Idol*, Connecticut’s Employment Idol showcases the employment success stories of a select group of individuals with ID/DD.

Brainstorming the idea. Employment Idol emerged from the timely convergence of DDS’s involvement with the State Employment Leadership Network¹ to improve employment outcomes within the state, a partnership with People First of Connecticut to promote employment among individuals with ID/DD, and the receipt of a Medicaid Infrastructure Grant. The idea for Employment Idol surfaced after self-advocates from People First expressed enthusiasm about *American Idol* while brainstorming creative ways for promoting employment success stories. Similar to *American Idol*, Employment Idol involved the selection of a group of outstanding success stories from a pool of applicants to showcase. It was decided that Employment Idol could be a fun and effective way to promote successes in creative jobs.

Selecting Employment Idols. DDS utilized their collaboration with People First by choosing to host the first Employment Idol showcase at the annual statewide People First Self Advocacy Conference. Contest announcements were sent out to individuals on the People First mailing list and to all case managers within state-, department-, and provider-level agencies. The announcement asked all individuals interested in participating to fill out an application at the conference; this strategy also served to increase conference attendance. DDS continued promoting the contest at the conference to allow attendees who had not previously heard of it the chance to participate. The Idol selection process took place at the conference. Self-advocates and the DDS staff selected ten Employment Idols out of the applicant pool and invited them to be interviewed and videotaped. The Idols were then introduced at the conference and presented certificates. A videographer was present to record the Employment Idol interviews and launch the Employment Idol promotional video. Idol winners each received a copy of the video once they were completed.

Challenges of promoting Employment Idols. The project was met with several challenges. First, on-the-job video footage was hard to get for individuals who worked for larger corporations because the companies would not allow videotaping on their premises, a challenge they overcame by taking photographs of individuals on the job. Project coordinators also had difficulty balancing their respect for the rights of Idols to be portrayed positively in the video while making evident the on-the-job challenges each

¹ The SELN is a membership roundtable network of state agencies that support individuals with intellectual and developmental disabilities. Co-managed by the Institute for Community Inclusion and the National Association of State Directors of Developmental Disability Services, the network supports the development of policy and strategy that expands employment opportunities. For more information, visit www.seln.org.

Idol experienced. A broader challenge within the project was the limited number of noteworthy success stories within the applicant pool.

Improving the quality and diversity of the project. Regardless of its challenges, the first of what DDS hopes to become an annual series of Employment Idol showcases was a success. Work has already started for coordinating the second showcase. To improve the quality and diversity of the project, coordinators are now seeking applications specifically from individuals with significant employment-related barriers, such as those who use adaptive equipment. Another big change was scheduling the selection process, including interviews and taping, prior to the conference. In addition to introducing winners at the conference presentation, coordinators plan to show the promotional video highlighting the 2nd Annual Employment Idol winners.

Conclusion. DDS administrators of this project agree that collaboration among stakeholder groups and organizations enabled this project to succeed. This success reflects project members' creative thoughts about promoting messages and their identification of tools that are fun and effective for communicating with the larger community. Additionally, the administrators report that providers have expressed a more positive attitude towards community employment after watching the Employment Idol video. Individuals with ID/DD and their families have been motivated to think differently about employment after viewing the successes of other individuals within their own communities. Since publishing this practice on the Institute for Community Inclusion's Access to Integrated Employment website, www.communityinclusion.org/aie, the Connecticut DDS successfully hosted its second Employment Idol contest at the 2009 annual People First Conference, which had its largest turnout to date.

For more information on Connecticut's Employment Idol project, please contact Beth Aura Miller, CT DDS Self Determination Director, at bethaura.miller@ct.gov. For more information on additional promising practices at state agencies, please see http://communityinclusion.org/doc.php?doc_id=83&type=project&id=54 or contact Jaimie Timmons, Research Associate, Institute for Community Inclusion, University of Massachusetts Boston: jaimie.timmons@umb.edu or (941) 929-7115.