



# University of Connecticut Health Center

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## Pathways to Success Final Report

*The stories of real people  
and employment*

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## A. Introduction, History and Methodology

This report is the last in a series that chronicles the journeys of 32 people with disabilities in Connecticut as they seek to improve their employment situations. This is the final report of a four-year qualitative research study, known as “Pathways to Employment.” The project is under the auspices of the Connecticut Department of Social Services (DSS) and “Connect-Ability,” Connecticut’s technical assistance center that brings together employers and people with disabilities by removing barriers to employment.

### 1. Background: Connect-Ability

Funded by the Centers for Medicare and Medicaid Services (CMS), the Medicaid Infrastructure Grant, now known as Connect-Ability, was awarded to DSS in 2006. The grant is designed to enhance and support competitive employment for people with disabilities. The Medicaid Infrastructure Grant Needs Assessment Final Report, published by the University of Connecticut Health Center (UCHC), Center on Aging, describes the purpose of the grant:

*The grant is intended to facilitate enhancements to the state Medicaid program and services, to promote linkages between Medicaid and other employment-related service agencies and to develop a comprehensive system of employment supports for people with disabilities (Robison, Gruman, Porter, Kellett & Reed, 2006, p. i).*

Connect-Ability included, as one of its first components, a needs assessment survey sent out to people with disabilities throughout the state of Connecticut in 2006. A second round of surveys was sent out in 2011 to Connecticut citizens who are participating in any of the Medicaid waiver programs designated for people with disabilities, the Medicaid Buy-In program, and other Medicaid recipients. The original survey included both quantitative and qualitative (open-ended) questions about their experiences, expectations and needs regarding work and personal assistance. In addition, separate surveys were sent to employers throughout the state to obtain information regarding their attitudes and practices in relation to hiring people with disabilities.

The results of the 2006 Connecticut citizen survey, in addition to providing information about living situation, ratings of overall health, transportation and neighborhoods, yielded a sequence of challenges or barriers to working as expressed in an open-ended question. The most frequently mentioned barriers or challenges faced by workers included physical health problems or physical disability; transportation; lack of personal assistance either at work or at home; intellectual or cognitive disability; emotional difficulties or mental illness; work place accommodations; training or education; assistance in finding a job; lack of jobs with benefits or good pay; concerns about loss of benefits; and older age (Robison, et al., 2006). Preliminary results from the 2011 surveys identify similar barriers or challenges for respondents.

In addition to the survey, more complex, qualitative information was derived from focus group and key informant interviews which also took place in 2006. Representing the voices of 320 stakeholders, including people with disabilities, family members, service providers, state agencies, and employers, these in-depth interviews revealed several themes. These groups highlighted the fact that many Connecticut residents with disabilities are still struggling to gain employment. Participants also discussed their perceptions and experiences with discrimination in many employment practices.

## 2. 2008: The Birth of the *Pathways* Project

Results of the 2006 surveys, focus groups and key informant interviews provided significant information about the employment barriers and challenges faced by people with disabilities. The Connect-Ability team sought to enhance that information with more in-depth insight into the journeys of individuals, over time, in their struggles to find meaningful, competitive employment. The *Pathways to Success* project was initiated in early 2008 to follow a group of individuals with disabilities through periodic in-person interviews in which they share their employment stories, including their aspirations, successes and failures. This qualitative research was designed as a way of describing the personal experiences of this specific group of people with disabilities in their pursuit of employment.

Interview participants for the *Pathways* project were recruited from the pool of callers to Connect-Ability's toll-free assistance number, which was set up to provide a common point of information for both employers and job seekers. Several hundred calls were made to the toll-free number during 2007 and 2008 as a result of Connect-Ability's wide-ranging public information campaign. The early calls came overwhelmingly from people with disabilities seeking competitive employment.

One question asked of those who called the Connect-Ability toll-free number was designed to recruit individual callers who might be willing to participate in the *Pathways* study. During 2008, the first year of the *Pathways* study, nineteen men and women agreed to participate in an initial interview and follow-up interviews at regular six-month intervals. Since participants were chosen on the basis of their willingness to participate, the sample is not necessarily representative of those who called in; neither is it representative of people with disabilities who have a desire to work. The majority of first-year respondents were men (n=15) and the respondents represented a wide variety of disabilities including back injuries, stroke, spinal cord injuries, traumatic brain injuries, visual impairments, cognitive impairments, and mental illness. In two cases, a proxy related to that person answered the questions. In another case, both the participant and his mother contributed to the interview. The ages of the 2008 group ranged from 21 to 61.

### Interview tools and process

For all initial interviews, information was gathered by the researcher through a guided interview approved by the UCHC Institutional Review Board (Appendix A). The research evaluation team at UCHC received significant input into the development of the survey from members of the Connect-Ability Steering Committee. The interview assesses the current employment status of each person; satisfaction with services rendered by private and public agencies; and barriers encountered in the search for employment, such as transportation, attitudes or biases, accessibility or lack of accommodations.

At the time the participant agreed to be part of the research, a date and time were set to conduct the initial interview. In each case, participants were assured of the confidentiality of the information that they were about to disclose. The interviews were tape recorded and subsequently transcribed. Each interview lasted approximately 45-60 minutes. Finally, each person agreed to follow-up interviews at six-month intervals for the duration of the study.

The follow-up interviews included several additional questions (Appendix B). These questions were designed to continue the story of the person's employment journey, specifically directed toward finding out what progress the individuals had made in finding a job, what help or support they received along the way, and what barriers they encountered.

### 3. 2009: Pathways in Year 2

Fourteen of the original 19 interviewees continued their participation in *Pathways* in 2009, the second year of the project. There were 31 total interviews completed during 2009, including 10 first interviews of new participants. Five original interviewees, 3 male and 2 female, did not continue their *Pathways* participation in year two.

The 10 new individuals added to the study in 2009 were again selected from people who called in to the Connect-Ability toll-free assistance number. As the first group had been primarily male, the researcher attempted to increase the number of females interviewed. In the 2009 group, ages ranged from 16 to the 50s, half were male and half were female, and the majority (70%) were not working. Two of the ten were aided by a parent in answering the questions.

### 4. 2010: Pathways in Year 3

Two new participants joined the study in 2010: a man and a woman, both with developmental disabilities. In addition, participants recruited in prior years completed one second interview, six third interviews, two fourth interviews, and two fifth interviews.

Some previous participants could not be reached to set up their follow-up interviews because of disconnected numbers or lack of response. Others refused to continue participation for various reasons including discouragement about the economy in general or their own job progress in particular, or perceived lack of assistance from Connect-Ability or other sources of assistance. Despite the interviewer's clear explanation of his role as a researcher and not a service provider, some still maintained an expectation that the interviews would lead to a job, and dropped out of the study in disappointment when no job materialized. Still others had moved out of state. Recruitment of new participants may also have been hampered by discouragement and concerns about the economy. In addition, callers to the toll-free assistance line are frequently drawn by Connect-Ability advertising, which in 2008 and 2009 often featured males with physical disabilities. During 2010 the advertisements, and the callers, included a broader range of people and disabilities, including those with mental illness. Callers with mental illness may have been reluctant to meet personally with an interviewer, whether in their homes or in another public place. Some women may also have been reluctant to meet with a male interviewer.

In-depth results of the first three years of the *Pathways* study have been compiled in research reports available from UCHC (Reed, Shugrue, Robison & Ducharme 2009; Reed, Shugrue, Robison & Ducharme, 2010; Reed, Shugrue, Robison & Ducharme March, 2011).

### 5. 2011: Pathways in Year 4

During the fourth year, one new woman in her fifties with a physical disability was interviewed once, and many previous interviewees continued their participation. Table 1 presents a demographic summary of the 32 study participants from all years.

Table 1 - Demographics of participants

Type of disability	N (%)	Age (at time of enrollment)	N (%)	Working status (at time of enrollment)	N (%)	Gender	N (%)
Physical	21 (65)	Under 21	1 (3)	Full time	3 (9)	Male	21 (66)
Mental Health	4 (13)	21 - 30	8 (25)	Part time	4 (13)	Female	11 (34)
Cognitive	4 (13)	31 - 40	5 (16)	Not working	22 (69)		
Vision	3 (9)	41 - 50	8 (25)	Self-employed	3 (9)		
		51 - 60	9 (28)				
		Over 60	1 (3)				

Throughout the four years of interviews, 12 interviewees had only one interview and 20 participants completed at least two interviews, for a total of 32 interviewees, 21 male and 11 female. The total number of interviews over the four-year period was 83 (61 male and 22 female).

Table 2. Number of interviews

Number of Interviews Completed	Male	Female	Total
1	7	5	12
2	2	4	6
3	3	0	3
4	6	1	7
5	1	1	2
6	2	0	2
<b>Total # of interviews</b>	<b>61</b>	<b>22</b>	<b>83</b>

### Proxies

Six study participants were either represented or assisted by a family member in answering some of the interview questions. In almost all of these cases, the participant was either under 30 years old or was in the process of transitioning from school to work. One young man with a developmental disability was not too involved in the interview process at the beginning of the interview process, but once he had successfully transitioned into two part time jobs, he was more involved in answering the questions of the interviewer and more confident of his answers. This also occurred for a young man with a physical disability who allowed his mother to answer the questions initially, but then was very outspoken at the final interview.

### 6. Analysis

All of the interview transcripts were entered into Atlas.ti 5.2. This program is designed exclusively for qualitative (open-ended responses) information. Content from each open-ended question was analyzed using standard qualitative analysis techniques (McCracken, 1988). Transcripts were analyzed line by line in order to identify and interpret each individual's responses. Major concepts or areas of interest supported by direct quotations were organized into common themes using the constant comparative technique (Glaser & Strauss, 1967).

Additional themes were included until no new topics were identified. Like statements were then explored and compared to refine each theme and ensure a fuller understanding of each.

First, we present four case examples of participants who have navigated their pathways to employment with success, over the course of four years. Second, we present the themes that have characterized the Pathways interviews from the beginning, highlighting issues from the 2011 interviews and identifying overarching themes.

## **B. Pathways to Success**

Although not everyone in the Pathways study had achieved their employment goals by the time of their final interviews, some individuals were making significant progress. Four years of interviews demonstrate that real success is not marked simply by a person finding a job, but additionally by the progression of building self-esteem and confidence to the point where a job becomes attainable. Raymond's<sup>1</sup> evolution over the course of his Pathways interviews illustrates this progression.

### **1. Raymond**

Raymond had a long journey from his prior work as a truck driver to his current position as a freight broker. He worked with the state Board of Education and Services for the Blind (BESB) along the way, although he said that the progress was far too slow. First Raymond worked with BESB on vocational rehabilitation, from re-learning the activities of daily living to becoming computer literate. BESB was instrumental in helping him to obtain specific software, such as speech-to-text software, so that he would be able to move from blue collar work to a technological position. He had this to say about the trainer.

*The gal that comes here to teach me computer skills and house training, she's excellent. Also in the same exact situation, lost her eyesight umpteen years ago but she trains ... They really explain in detail, but still let you make your own mistakes, so they do a great job.*

Raymond himself did the research on-line through the internet to find out about opportunities that would allow him to be able to work out of his home. He explained why being able to work from home was so important.

*... [T]ransportation is a difficult thing because there are so many normal life things that have to be taken care of that I need to use people for. That's the key reason why I would want to work from home. Otherwise I would definitely want to be out of the house all day in a building interacting with people, but transportation is key. That's mostly everything I pretty much have overcome except for transportation.*

BESB also helped with funding for a training that took place out of state. At the time of his final interview in 2011, Raymond was working in an internship capacity as a freight broker. He explained that basically he is a "middle man to get a product from one location to another via truck." He had been working in this position for four months. The internship was provided by a long-time friend who owns a carrier broker business right in the same town. The owner of the business has arranged to pick Raymond up for work and bring him home again, which has

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<sup>1</sup> The names have been changed to protect confidentiality



temporarily solved the transportation problem. But Raymond has begun looking into alternatives for his particular town.

## 2. Jack

Jack is a young man with a developmental disability who was in the process of transitioning out of the school system. The interviewer spoke almost exclusively with his parents in 2008, 2009 and 2010, but Jack participated himself in 2011, at which point he was working at two part-time jobs. Although both parents worked, they were instrumental in helping Jack to have every opportunity in life and have a chance to succeed. They even moved from one school district to another to take advantage of the fact that the second school system had more to offer in the way of transition services. A job fair sponsored by one of Connecticut's regional education service centers put Jack in contact with places like Goodwill Industries. Even though Jack would probably have made more money working for Goodwill, Jack commented on how this was not his ideal work environment.

*[I]t's more like bench work than being out in the field. Not enough social activities. Not enough challenge for me. it would be the same 10 people. Whereas, I was trying to look for my age group, not the same as everybody else. Once I started working at both of my jobs, I felt like everybody else because they treated me with a lot of respect.*

In addition to his parents, Jack had help from a woman who worked for a job placement program where Jack received assistance during the last four years of his schooling. It was this woman who recommended a program that normally only gives one job per person. However, since both parents work, they felt more comfortable if Jack could be out every day of the week, and so they arranged for him to work at two separate part-time jobs, one at a for-profit business and one at a local non-profit. Transportation for this program is provided by his job coach and Jack is very happy with the arrangement. In the final interview he commented:

*I think that if you really want a job and you really want to succeed, you have to go dig deep, go far and be the strongest that you can be, and do the best that you can, because it's hard to be the best when you are not your best. Some days you have good days and some days you have not-so-good days. That's how it is sometimes at work. And you might meet people that you are not too fond of, or you might find somebody that you are really close to because, you know there's a lot of different personalities, and a lot of different disabilities and non-disabilities, it's just a whole mix of things, really.*

## 3. Fred

Fred had two interviews, the first in 2009 and the second in 2011. When first interviewed, he had called the Connect-Ability number and did connect with one of the counselors there. He spoke very highly of her at the time of the first interview.

*... [she was] there as a resource and someone who I can talk with at some point depending on how things go. I would like to go up and meet her and you know talk further and be able to connect a name and a face but she's been very, she's been terrific.*

By the time the interviewer caught up with Fred in 2011 he had already been successfully employed at a Connecticut state agency for 14 months. He explained his situation in depth.

*Well I retired in the Fall of 2008 as a school counselor. I had some medical issues and it took me about seven to nine months to sort of get stabilized and I really began to really yearn to get back to work, and I didn't have much success in finding work on my own. ... And then shortly after that, I saw a Connect-Ability advertisement in the [name of newspaper] that was pitched toward employers, but I looked it up on the website and it sort of certainly directed to employers to an extent, but it was also talked about how they are trying to connect disabled individuals with employment. So I took it upon myself to contact [name of counselor], talked and talked and talked, and [another counselor] provided some leads from which nothing materialized, but then she shared that [the agency] was hiring and would I consider that. And after some reluctance, because I am not trained as a counselor, and she explained this assistant counselor role and I applied for it in December 2009 and about a month later I was offered a position.*

As a person with a disability, Fred felt that he might be able to offer a lot to any of the individuals that he would be counseling.

*Being disabled, it's satisfying to feel I'm in a position to ... hopefully be making a difference and providing a service to people who I have an interest and perhaps ... integrate some of my own experience with them as a way to communicate to them that I understand. I may not understand their individual disability, but I understand what being disabled entails and it's a different branch of counseling.*

As expressed by many of the participants, having a job is a boost to one's self confidence. Fred commented:

*it's also gives me sort of a Renaissance of self confidence in that ... When I retired I went through a period of depression and I was not sure what I was going to do or if I would ever work again and here I am gainfully employed and making money and having benefits.*

Fred was realistic about his luck in getting his job, and, from his perspective, his positive approach to the situation was also instrumental.

*... a lot of it is about motivation. There are a lot of resources out there, to really help, and I don't mean help in an enabling way, but to walk with people or to collaborate with them in terms of what their goals are ... I know that Connect-Ability is out there to raise awareness for a lot of things, but I have a feeling I was pretty lucky in that I came in as the person looking for work ... I've been extremely lucky that things developed the way that they did. I mean, I'm pretty sure that I would not be here if it hadn't been for Connect-Ability.*

#### 4. Claire

Claire is a 38 year-old woman with multiple sclerosis. When first interviewed she was working as a volunteer at a large for-profit business, but was interested in finding a job that would help her pay some of her bills. She is able to drive and that has allowed her to be flexible in her choices. However, when her uncle offered her a job in his business, this provided the opportunity for Claire to hold a position and make her own accommodations because she is working for a family member. She also has an eleven year-old daughter. She enjoys her job in the office because she really likes to organize files and other similar activities.

*I work Monday to Friday – sometimes I have appointments. And I use Mondays for those appointments. And I can also work on Saturdays sometimes and work about four hours.*

By the time of the third interview, Claire continued to work with her uncle, but also had obtained another job working for her aunt in her home. Once again doing the thing that she loves to do, organizing her files, she is now working both for her uncle and her aunt as separate jobs.

*I am also working for my aunt. Manager of her papers. I do it in her house. I like organizing her papers as she asks me.*

By the time of the fifth interview, Claire was still working successfully and loving her jobs, for her uncle's business and for her aunt.

*I file papers, I write invoices and got to separate them into the ones who pay for cash, the ones who pay for credit card, for cards, the checks, and the charges to people who owes money. And at the end of the month, we send the amount of how much they owe. And they will receive during the week or the month we receive the quantity what they have to pay. And I love to do that!*

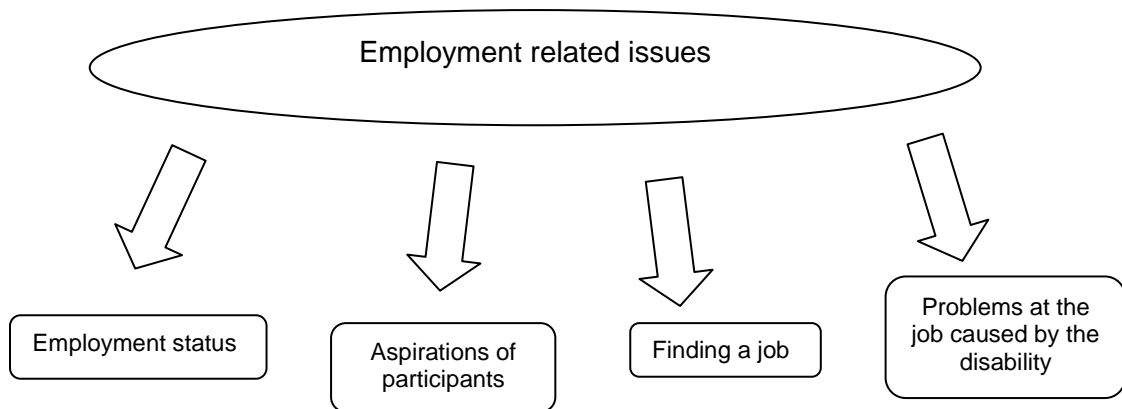
### **C. Themes**

The process of elucidating the themes was accomplished during the first year almost exclusively. During the second and third years of the study, themes were remarkably similar to those from the original group. The proxy interviews or those interviews done with assistance from a parent shed light on a new theme, youth in transition. As the years unfolded, more and more participants were enrolled who fell into that category or had recently experienced the transition from school to work. Both parents and students had insights to offer regarding the transition process. In 2011, because of the length of the study, certain overarching themes emerged which may not have been apparent along the way, but only surfaced by scrutinizing the results over time. Those overarching themes included the consistency of the participants over the years, in terms of their attitudes and whether or not they worked with an agency. The other overarching theme was the fact that, whether or not a person worked through an agency, almost every participant had someone who helped them, be it family member, friend or counselor, and that most participants who had attained jobs had some form of help from that other person.

Some of the original themes were emphasized in different ways by the new participants. Those main themes included the following: employment related issues, external sources providing help, barriers or challenges, and attitudes. The findings described below outline the original themes and highlight new information gleaned in the 2011 interviews. More in-depth analysis of the themes can be found in the previous Pathways reports (Reed et al., 2008; 2009; 2010).

1. Employment related issues

Figure 1. – Themes of the interviews – Employment related issues



Employment status

Employment status refers to whether or not an individual is working at any time point throughout the study period. Table 3 shows a compilation of the employment status over time of all the participants.

Table 3 – Employment Histories

ID	Gender	Disability	Age	2008	2009	2010	2011	comments
1	Male	Blind	54	2 part time janitorial jobs	2 part time janitorial jobs	2 part time janitorial jobs	2 part time janitorial jobs	Looking to get back into his field of manufacturing
2	Male	Physical	55	Self-employed	Self-employed	Self-employed	Self-employed	Looking for job with benefits
3	Female	Physical	65	Not working – going to school	Not working – going to school	Not working – going to school	Volunteering	Thinking about opening a gallery – while continuing volunteer work
4	Male	Physical	53	Unemployed	Working part time	Working part time	unemployed	Trying to find something in data entry
5	Female	Physical	58	Unemployed				
6	Male	Physical	50	Unemployed				
7	Male	Blind	48	Self employed	Employed part time	Employed full time	Employed part time	Received help from BESB to find job
8	Male	Physical	29	Unemployed	Starting up a business	Self-employed		
9	Male	Physical	49	Unemployed				
10	Male	Physical	55	Unemployed	Unemployed	Unemployed	Unemployed	Former truck driver still looking
11	Male	Physical	49	Unemployed	Unemployed	Unemployed	Unemployed	Former truck driver still looking
12	Male	Physical	28	Employed full time	Employed full time	Unemployed	Unemployed	Has just applied for a job in his field, which is media
13	Male	Intellectual	20	In school	In school	Working part time	Working 2 part time jobs	He is very happy about working – this is through Volunteers of America Program
14	Female	Physical	40	Unemployed				

ID	Gender	Disability	Age	2008	2009	2010	2011	comments
15	Female	Mental Health	30s	Employed part time	Unemployed			
16	Male	Blind	39	Unemployed	Unemployed	Planning on school to learn skill	Full time job internship	Worked with BESB to attain training to become a freight broker.
17	Male	Physical	38	Unemployed				
18	Male	Physical	40	Employed full time	Unemployed	Employed part time	Employed part time	Still looking for other jobs
19	Male	Physical	45	Unemployed	Unemployed	Unemployed	Unemployed	Looking into starting a business
20	Female	Physical	40s		Unemployed			
21	Male	Physical	59		Working free-lance as a writer			
22	Male	Physical	60		Unemployed	Working full time	Working full time	He called C-A and got a job at a state agency
23	Male	Mental Health	55		Working full time			
24	Male	Intellectual	24		Working part time			
25	Female	Physical/ Intellectual	16		In school	In school	Work experiences through her school	She would like to work with children
26	Female	Physical	36		Working part time	Volunteering	Working 2 part-time jobs	Got the jobs from her aunt and uncle doing office work
27	Male	Intellectual/ Mental health	21		In school	Joins the National Guard	Training for truck driving	Once certified, he hopes to obtain a job through D.O.T.

<b>ID</b>	<b>Gender</b>	<b>Disability</b>	<b>Age</b>	<b>2008</b>	<b>2009</b>	<b>2010</b>	<b>2011</b>	<b>comments</b>
28	Female	Physical	24		Unemployed			
29	Female	Mental Health	30		Unemployed	Volunteering		
30	Male	Intellectual	20s			Unemployed		
31	Female	Intellectual	27			Working part time		
32	Female	Physical	54				Unemployed	

### Aspirations of participants

With very few exceptions, participants shared a strong desire to work which is why they contacted the Connect-Ability number originally. However, some participants became discouraged along the way because finding a job was difficult.

### Finding a job

Regarding finding a job, a couple of the 2011 participants commented on the impracticality of having to apply for most jobs on line.

*I tell you what I hate is that you have to apply for every single job on line ... It's awful. You never know if your resume gets to anybody, you never know if it actually got sent. And there is no contact information, so I can't follow up ...*

*When it comes to someone with a disability, you know, everything is labeled, and when somebody looks at you and you get in front of them, and they actually see you doing something, like me walking in, they don't know that I'm an amputee because I have my pants on, but in a resume or application, you have to put that down. So they know that right off the bat.*

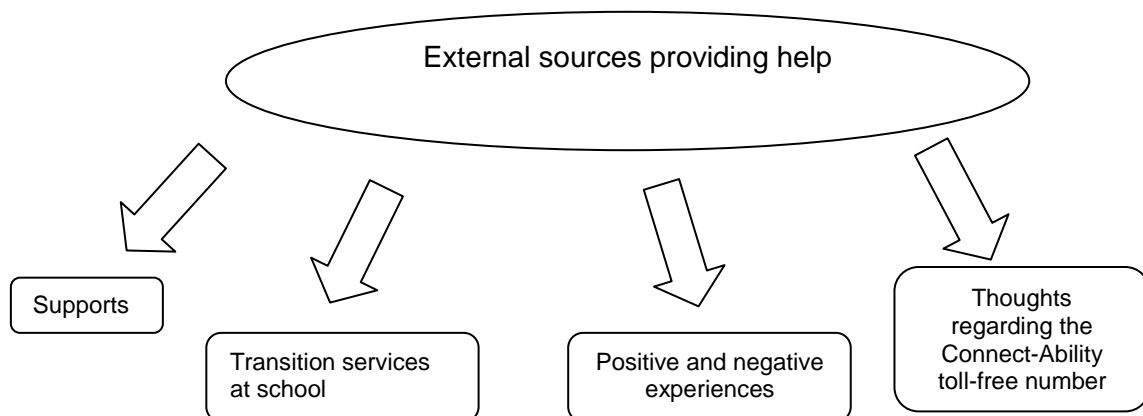
### Problems at the job caused by the disability

One participant offered her perspective on the fact that having a disability or side effects from medication sometimes make it difficult to work.

*I just decided that I didn't feel that I was reliable. I have a degree in teaching music in schools, but I did not feel that I could go to work every day and count on feeling well enough to work. And also, my medication was an issue because I felt that - this is not easy for me to say - I felt like I couldn't always think clearly.*

## 2. External sources providing help

Figure 2. – Themes of the interviews – External sources providing help





### Supports

One of the overarching themes that emerged throughout the four years of interviews was individual consistency over time. People with a positive outlook maintained that stature while people who had viewed their progress negatively remained pessimistic. Those who relied on support from others, such as agencies, continued to benefit from the relationships they had established to find jobs, whereas those who had worked exclusively without any external help continued in their similar modes.

### Youth in transition

Many of the parents who had helped their child with the *Pathways* interviews felt that transition services should have started earlier in the structure of the school system. This concern reinforces evidence from a previous Connect-Ability evaluation report on youth in transition (Reed, Shugrue, Robison, 2010). Results of that report suggest that transition services should start prior to high school. Independent living skills in the areas of communication, budgeting, banking, along with resume writing and applying for jobs should be as important as academics for students with disabilities. The need for this training was evident in the statement of the mother of a young woman who had both physical limitations and a learning disability.

*I think more time spent on applying for jobs, interviewing skills, resume writing, just building her confidence about her physical and learning disabilities and how that doesn't have to be a barrier. But pulling out her strengths within herself and then just focusing on those areas as opposed to all the things I can't do for what I can do. ... And that's going to take time with experience. And being able to work with somebody who's going to kind of build her confidence as she goes along.*

### Positive and negative experiences

A few individuals had extremely positive things to say about the counselors and the help that they received from organizations like the Bureau of Rehabilitation Services (BRS).

*There are a lot of resources out there, to really help, and I don't mean help in an enabling way, but to walk with people or to collaborate with them in terms of what their goals are ... I know that Connect-Ability is out there to raise awareness for a lot of things,*

Some participants expressed ongoing dissatisfaction with agencies such as BRS.

*But you know getting anything accomplished has been, in my experience, since I became disabled, is like pulling teeth.*

*They [BRS] said that I am on too many medications, but to cover their butt, they said that I refused help. I went to them for a whole year. They couldn't find me anything. And then they finally decided after talking to me for a whole year, they finally said, "You can't be employed."*

Another participant who was having trouble getting help had this to say about BRS.

*And you know when people who have worked 30 or 40 years get hurt and they can't get any help that's pretty [darn] sad. There are a lot of agencies out there that are funded by the government that are supposed to help handicapped people find work, and they don't.*

Certain participants were specially trained in certain fields, like music or media, and they felt that the only way BRS can help a person is if that person is willing to take another type of job, One young man with a physical disability who had a job in radio said it all came down to the counselor he had. At first he had a good counselor and then

*... I went back to having an awful one [counselor] ... They're not too good at finding jobs in my field. I'm working in media and their first reaction, "Can you do something else? Because we have no idea what to do for that. ... You want to work for Stop and Shop, you want to work at Wal-Mart, we can help you there."*

Other individuals were able to stay in the business that they were previously in, but with definite modifications. One participant who spoke at the last interview about going to a specialized school to learn how to become a freight broker had accomplished this task. He attributed a lot of his success to BESB. A legally blind individual, he had this to say.

*Basically I'm a middle man to get a product from one location to another via truck. ... Being a truck driver, I wanted to stay in the industry. I went for [an] education program in Arizona for seven days in October 2010. Graduated from the class, came home and sort of just kind of stumbled into it. Yeah, pretty much it's been BESB, that's it straight up, all the way along the way. That has been the extent. I mean transportation is still an obvious huge issue here in [name of town] for me. Other than that, most of the other research has been done either by BESB or for myself.*

Some of the organizations which were considered most helpful included BESB and the STRIVE program which is part of the transition services in certain school districts. In the last report, a man who had obtained a full-time job had help from BESB and continued to work at his job, although this year his job became part time again due to budget constraints.

#### Connect-Ability toll-free number

The people who contacted Connect-Ability were definitely looking to be able to connect with employers who might be willing to hire someone with a disability. For the majority of participants the idea of Connect-Ability was to make this pathway clearer. Many, however, felt this was not the case. One of the participants said,

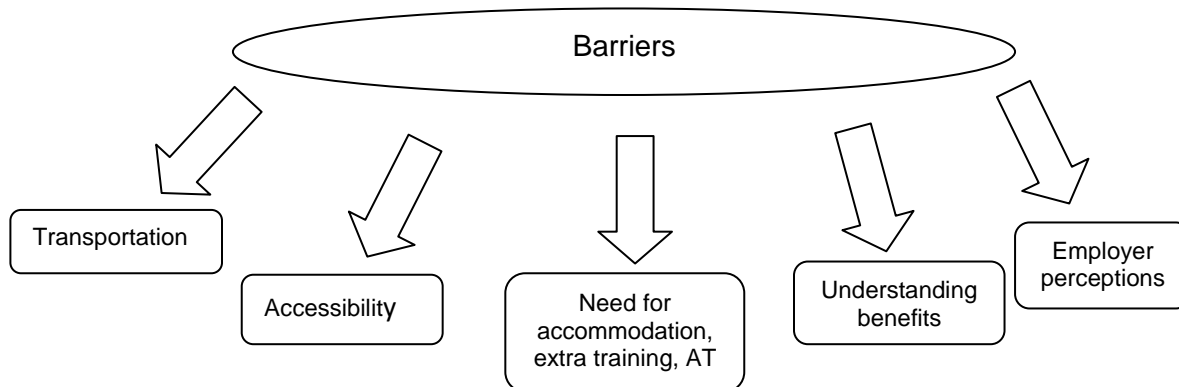
*Frustrating, you know, because there hasn't really been any type of program that – I know that there is some kind of program that sets up with employers with people with disabilities, but I think that they need to make it a much clearer path so that when someone has a disability they can list out all of their abilities and hopefully the program can match, as close as possible, with a company who is willing to hire someone with those abilities.*

Others had very complimentary things to say about Connect-Ability and the website.

*I know that on the Connect-Ability website, they are making great efforts to make it easier ... to connect people with services that have to do with jobs and then are asking industries or businesses to sort of indicate that they are "friendly" towards hiring people with disabilities. That's one of the things that we are finding – is the fear of people with disabilities to sort of venture out, having been rejected so many times. There is that effort and it has been answered slowly but wonderfully – so that there are some businesses that are saying, "Tell folks that we are looking for workers with disabilities." So then people feel more comfortable to go to these places. So that is all through Connect-Ability through their website ...*

### 3. Barriers

Figure 3. – Themes of the interviews - Barriers



#### Transportation

Transportation continues to be a major barrier for many of the participants. For example the gentleman who is legally blind who worked with BESB to get training for his position as a freight broker explained his situation.

*You know, as far as in my condition, you know, me, myself there's really not too many things other than transportation that stop me from doing anything. Most of it is just, I guess, a personal goal more than anything else.*

#### Accessibility

For a person using a wheelchair, the notion of accessibility is critical. One woman in her sixties who is completing her degree said,

*The biggest handicap is, of course, the ladies' room. One is getting in, and two is the grab bar to help me rise up off the toilet. And the assumption is that you will be able to get into the building, first of all.*

#### Accommodations

For other individuals, accommodations included time limitations and the need for extra training, certain kinds of assistive technology, or even more structure to accomplish the tasks at hand. A participant with physical disabilities explained it this way:

*The biggest barrier for me is the time restraint, because I can't work for a long period of time. And also because of my seizures. If I am on site somewhere and having seizures, I can't do anything. So you know, if I have to go somewhere to work, then they have to have a facility that would enable me to be able to get up from work and be able to go somewhere where I can work my way through.*

Not receiving the proper help from various agencies or through transition services within school, the mother and her son with a learning disability and mental illness collectively made a huge decision to get the necessary accommodations to help him get a job and secure a future. The

accommodation that was vital for him to succeed was having structure. The community college where he was enrolled let him “fall between the cracks” because there was no definite structure for him to rely on. The mother explained how he had made the decision to join the National Guard to gain that structure that he needed in order to succeed.

*Right now he wants to go in and do a full-time. He wants to do a full blown Army and, you know, he stopped taking his medications and everything to go into the National Guard Army because you can't be on [any] of that stuff. And to get discipline and structure for what he needs. It has helped out a great deal for him. Actually, he went to OK [Oklahoma] for his boot camp training. He passed all of that, he graduated. And right now he's in Missouri doing his student training for trucking, driving heavy equipment. And hopefully, he will pass that too. But what's good about that is that it is structured for about maybe anywhere between 20 people in a class, maybe 30, whatever, but everybody has to learn the same thing. Everybody has the same structure; everybody has the same structure of getting up in the morning. The difficulty for him in school, regular school, or regular college, that's where he starts falling through the cracks and everything and he loses focus, and so him being away and doing this, everything has been really good.*

Several participants had turned to self-employment as a solution to the accommodation issue. This allows the person to work at his or her own pace and make allowances for any limitations caused by the disability. A woman in her sixties who was just finishing up her degree at a community college thought of opening an art gallery as a way of being able to make her own accommodations.

*I have several ideas for work, but I haven't actually got a job. Every time I think I've zeroed in on a specific job, I come to a road block. And because of my limitations and my handicap, I may have to start a business to give myself a job.*

For the time being, she has involved herself in the Human Resources Council in the town where she lives, where she hopes to make a difference not only for herself but for other town residents with disabilities.

#### Understanding benefits

Not understanding one's benefits can also pose a barrier to working as illustrated by one participant's experience. While he was working he continued to receive benefits, even though he advised Social Security about his job. When he lost his job, his Social Security benefits stopped coming and now he owes them money.

*I wish that I hadn't taken them when I was 18 and they came to my high school ... It's been one big mess ever since. Right now, I owe the state \$3200 because they overpaid ... They overpaid me \$3200, but they didn't tell me until after I lost my job. And they didn't give me my benefits back for another six months after that.*

A man with a physical disability spoke about his experience regarding benefits. He had worked on and off at different jobs. He explained how the system worked in his case.

*Medicare will stay with me up to a year post-employment. But after that point, if I don't have medical insurance, I will have nothing to fall back on. And then if something catastrophic comes up, I'll be right back in the same boat. You know, get rid of assets, get back down into poverty level.*

A self-employed man in the interior design business had this to say about enrolling for Social Security Disability Insurance (SSDI).

*I have had many people telling me that I should go on disability, but I know that that throws you into a whole new spectrum of life. And the instant that you are labeled a person that is on disability, lots of doors close. And I would rather keep the game that I know now going rather than open that whole new Pandora's Box.*

#### Employer perceptions

Negative employer biases about people with disabilities serve as another obstacle to employment. Several participants believed that they had been discriminated against by potential employers.

*... [T]hat wish is the number one obstacle. And that is revealing your disability. And I had tried while I was in the job search, and you know I was very qualified for some of these jobs. And my heart was broken because of the fact that I had to explain how the hell I got there and how the hell did I expect to get there every day on time and it's like ... "I'm here for my interview!"*

One participant who has his own business selling upscale interior design items also felt that same discrimination from some of his potential clients.

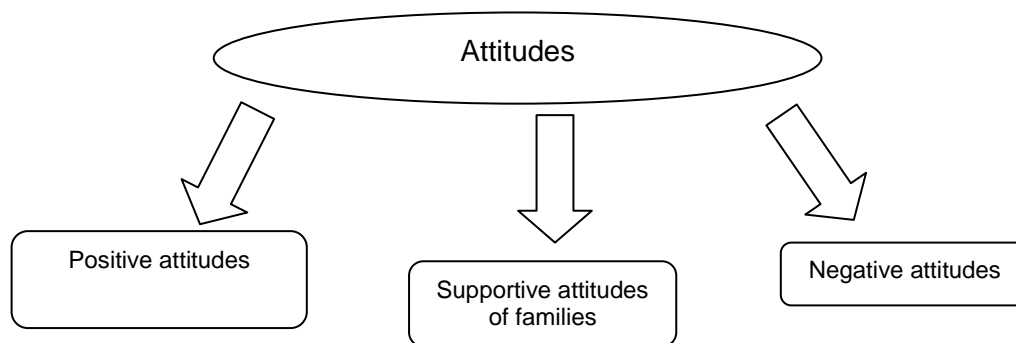
*They [customers] are far more apprehensive, and you know, quite frankly, are not comfortable around the handicapped and especially when it comes to new construction where you have to go to a job site where there is construction going on... They're nervous because of the legal liabilities and safety issues. ...People go "oooooh" and they are really uncomfortable with it. And rather than accept the fact that they are uncomfortable with it, they just choose not to have contact instead.*

A former truck driver who had been out of work for some time admitted that he could use some new training. He said that he had no success in attempting to find any kind of work.

*[B]etween my physical conditions, my background, they don't even call me back. I feel like the most discriminated person on the planet – middle-aged, white male, no employment record – they don't call back.*

#### 4. Attitudes

Figure 4. – Themes of the interviews - Attitudes



##### Positive and negative attitudes

The previous Pathways reports detail the impact of participants' positive and negative attitudes in gaining employment.

A participant who had worked full time at the time of the first interview became unemployed but remained positive and was always seeking new opportunities. He made an impression on people because of his positive outlook and enthusiasm. As a result, he was able to get himself a part-time job.

*Because, [name of person] already knew who I was. He knew what kind of person I was, how reliable I was and this and that from going to practices and being on time for everything. So he took it upon himself, got me involved and brought me in, so ... but that is purely me, to be honest with you. Nobody else did anything for me. ... Oh yeah. I don't like sitting around. I would rather work and make money. I don't care how many hours, or where or when. Where I gotta go, any of that. ... I use my leg, I use crutches. I mean I get around any way I can get around. I mean I come here with crutches, I drive with a leg on, so – it doesn't stop me. Not too much stops me. You need help over here. I helped people do other things just to stay busy, 'cuz when you are helping that person, then you might run into another person. My wheelchair, one arm, one leg, two legs, whatever. Just gotta do it.*

Certain participants were determined to find their way on their own without any help from another person or an agency. One man who is self employed in the interior design business had this to say about personal motivation.

*So it's all about personal motivation and going out and getting things for yourself. I find that it's detrimental, in most cases, to have expectations that somebody else is going to lay out the path for you. ... Wanting to be self-sufficient. Oh, absolutely. If I can't be a contributor towards society and be self-sufficient, I really don't want to be a part of this game. That's my attitude.*

Beyond the individuals' own attitudes, the way they are treated by others, particularly family members and employers, clearly affects their abilities to find and keep a job. A young man with a developmental disability said,

*Once I started working at both of my jobs, I felt like everybody else because they treated me with a lot of respect. There are a lot of staff that really respects me and they joke around with me, so it's like a big family wherever I'm working at.*

## 5. Overarching themes

### Consistency

Individual participants showed tremendous consistency throughout the four years of interviews. Participants who doubted from the outset that any agency could help them neglected to utilize any agency services in their search for employment. Other participants were helped by a particular agency and then continued to rely on the agency over time. Participant attitudes showed similar consistency. Those with very negative attitudes were not able to gain employment, and remained pessimistic. Alternatively, people with positive attitudes remained optimistic and often received reinforcing positive support from family members or agency staff. Although not everyone found a job, the more optimistic participants continued to search and come up with creative ideas to try.

### Key support person

Many participants had either a personal contact or a counselor who helped them maintain a positive outlook and continually reinforced the individual along their pathway to employment.

For one young man in transition from high school, this key support person came from the STRIVE agency that works with the school systems in the transition process. This counselor connected him to Volunteers of America through which he now works at two part-time jobs.

Another participant had been an advisor in a high school but left that job because of illness. He thought about returning to work when he saw the ad for Connect-Ability in the newspaper. The Connect-Ability staff person he contacted encouraged him and told him about positions opening up at BRS for counselors.

*[The counselor] asked if I would consider that. And after some reluctance, because I am not trained as a counselor, and she explained this assistant counselor role and I applied for it in December 2009 and about a month later I was offered a position. ,... Technically I am an assistant vocational rehab counselor because I need a couple of courses to be certified. ... So I have a full case load like anybody else and I am learning the process and enjoying the work.*

## **D. Limitations to the study**

Due to the recruitment design, the study sample is not representative of the population of people with disabilities who desire jobs. The sample includes only people who called in to the Connect-Ability toll-free number and those who agreed to be part of the interview process. People with disabilities who were already successfully working with a BRS counselor or already competitively employed would be less likely to call the number. The goal of the study, however, was to provide in-depth case studies to illustrate a range of individual pathways in seeking employment and was therefore not intended to fully represent the population of all people with disabilities looking for work.

Because the initial ad campaign featured a truck driver who called the Connect-Ability toll-free number and was supported by Connect-Ability in regaining employment, the first year of interviewees included several male truck drivers. Over the years, the interviewer was able to achieve a better mix of gender and types of disabilities among the participants.

Of the 32 interviewees, only 20 could be followed longitudinally. The study is also limited due to the economic downturn that occurred during this four year period. Jobs for everyone have been scarce during this time period and competition for jobs is at an all-time high, which unfortunately coincided with the time frame of this project.

Nevertheless, this study was designed as a means of capturing the “voice of the consumer” by exploring in depth the experiences, attitudes, hopes and fears of these individuals with disabilities in their search for meaningful employment.

## **E. Conclusions**

The individuals involved in this project have in common a strong desire to work, but each has encountered different hurdles along the way, and many described multiple barriers encountered in their search for appropriate employment. Some of the original participants continue to search for employment with no success. Several have been pursuing employment without assistance from any state agency or other employment service provider. Many *Pathways* participants found that their disabilities interfered with their ability to obtain or maintain a job. Difficulties encountered in the process of finding or keeping a job were often attributed at least in part to the person’s disability, but mainly it is others’ reaction to the disability that continues to hinder the person’s success. While not everyone is capable of starting or maintaining a business, self-employment has served several participants as a way to eliminate the need for employer accommodations.

Transportation continues to be one of the largest barriers to employment for many of the participants.

Though not necessarily evident in the early years of the project, two overarching themes became clear over time. First, each individual showed consistency in how they approach issues, how they deal with the employment search, and in their attitudes. Positive attitudes did not necessarily lead to finding a job; nevertheless, these individuals continued to be engaged and optimistic. As one participant found, the more often he communicated with others, the more often he connected with the right people, which led to a job for him.

At first, the interviews focused on the agencies that people worked with to determine whether the agencies were instrumental in helping to find employment. Over time, however, it became clear that connections beyond just service providers were important. One unemployed participant met another person who invited him to join a wheelchair basketball league, which led to meeting a sponsor, who offered him a job as a driver. Other participants connected successfully with an agency staff person who made a particular effort on their behalf. These associations are meaningful for the participant and can bolster confidence, provide encouragement and emphasize the special skills a person may have to offer.

There does appear to be a disconnect between callers’ expectations that Connect-Ability will serve as a direct link to job opportunities, and the reality of Connect-Ability as a technical assistance center helping individuals to overcome barriers to employment.

The pathways described in this and previous reports help put faces on the journeys people with disabilities take while seeking employment. These stories and the themes running across these



multiple experiences illustrate the barriers encountered and the strategies engaged along these journeys. Although disabilities can make the search for employment more difficult, the attitudes of families, service providers and employers play an even larger role.

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Appendix A

**PATHWAYS TO SUCCESS: INITIAL INTERVIEW**

The stories of real people and employment

Name:

Address:

Phone Number:

E-mail Address:

.....

Thank you for agreeing to share the story of your job search with us. Your participation and the information you will share will help many people with disabilities become valuable, contributing members of the Connecticut workforce.

I have a few questions that will help us more completely understand how to support you and other people like you.

- 1) What is your work situation at this moment?
  
- 2) Are you employed? If yes, where? For how long?
  
- 3) Tell me what your experience was searching for and obtaining your current or most recent job.
  
- 4) If you are not employed, have you received help in finding a job?  
From whom?  
  
If no, why?  
  
Are you finding this help useful?  
  
What kind of a job do you want?
  
- 5) Are you satisfied with your current job or are you satisfied with your progress toward finding another job? (if yes or no, why?)

.....

**Please describe in more detail your journey toward a career/job of your choice.**

- a) What have been (were) the helpful/supportive elements of your job search (people/agencies/services/organizations)?**

**What have been (were) the barriers you encountered along the way?**

**\*Transportation?**

**\*Applying, interviewing, being hired, being promoted?**

**\*Attitudes----your own, of the employer, your family, your school or employment counselor, other?**

**\*Accessibility and Accommodations?**

**\*Understanding your benefits?**

- b) What supports, services and accommodations will help (were helpful) in your job search?**

- c) Are there any other comments or suggestions you wish to make to fill out your story?**

**Thank You for taking the time to speak with me. Your story and experiences will help so many more people with disabilities who are seeking satisfying employment.**

**I will be getting back to you in 6 months to continue the story. Thank You.**

**Appendix B**

**PATHWAYS TO SUCCESS: FOLLOW UP INTERVIEW**

**The stories of real people and employment**

**Name:**

**Address:**

**Phone Number:**

**Email Address:**

.....  
**Thank you for agreeing to share the story of your job search with us. Your participation and the information you will share will help many people with disabilities become valuable, contributing members of the Connecticut workforce.**

**I have a few questions that will help us more completely understand how to support you and other people like you.**

- 6) What is your work situation at this moment?**
  - a) Do you still have your job? (go to 5)**
  - b) Did you get a job since I interviewed you last (6 months ago)? (go to 2)**
  - c) Are you still unemployed? (go to 4)**
- 7) Are you employed? If yes, where? For how long?**
- 8) Tell me what your experience was searching for and obtaining your current or most recent job.**  
**(go to 5)**
- 9) If you are not employed, have you received help in finding a job?**  
**From whom?**  
**If no, why?**  
**Are you finding this help useful?**  
**What kind of a job do you want?**  
**(go to 5)**
- 10) Are you satisfied with your current job or are you satisfied with your progress toward finding another job? (if yes or no, why?)**

**Ask all – specifically about the past 6 months**  
.....

**Please describe in more detail your journey toward a career/job of your choice.**

**d) What have been (were) the helpful/supportive elements of your job search (people/agencies/services/organizations)?**

**For those who are currently unemployed and looking for work ask specifically about the past 6 months**

**What people or agencies or services or organizations did you utilize in your job search over the past 6 months?**

**e) What have been (were) the barriers you encountered along the way?**

**\*Transportation?**

**For those not currently working, ask about transportation over the past 6 months as a barrier to finding work.**

**\*Applying, interviewing, being hired, being promoted?**

**Ask all – specifically regarding the past 6 months**

**\*Attitudes----your own, of the employer, your family, your school or employment counselor, other?**

**Ask all – specifically regarding the past 6 months**

**\*Accessibility and Accommodations?**

**Ask all – specifically regarding the past 6 months**

**\*Understanding your benefits?**

**Ask all – specifically regarding the past 6 months**

**f) What supports, services and accommodations will help (were helpful) in your job search?**

**Over the past 6 months which supports or accommodations were helpful in your job search.**

**g) Are there any other comments or suggestions you wish to make to fill out your story?**

.....

**Thank You for taking the time to speak with me. Your story and experiences will help so many more people with disabilities who are seeking satisfying employment.**

**I will be getting back to you in 6 months to continue the story. Thank You.**