

Signature Employment Grant 2013: Putting Faith to Work

Introduction

Begun in 2014, Putting Faith to Work (PFTW) replicated and scaled-up a Kessler Foundation Community Employment pilot in Minnesota. PFTW brought together four University Centers for Excellence in Developmental Disabilities (Kentucky, Minnesota, Tennessee, and Texas) who are members of the National Collaborative on Faith and Disability to collaborate with local faith-based communities in each state. The project strengthened the ability of 27 congregations to connect members with disabilities to employment and provide individualized support. “The Putting Faith to Work (PFTW) project empowers faith communities to support people with disabilities as they find and maintain employment aligned with their gifts, passions, and skills. This pathway to work is forged by tapping into the personal network, creativity, and commitment existing within any congregation.”¹ The premise of PFTW resonates with clergy and members, who see alignment with tenets of their faith tradition and expression of their community’s faith in the world.

Employment programs are often disconnected from individuals’ organic support networks fueling the perception that only specialists can support people with disabilities searching for employment. PFTW debunked that perception. Erik Carter, Ph.D., professor of Special Education and principal investigator of PFTW noted that the model recognizes “most jobs are obtained through personal connections, including jobs that

traditional job developers are unlikely to know about.” By the end of the project, PFTW supported 39 individuals with disabilities to find employment and provided job search assistance to 72 individuals with disabilities.

Perhaps more importantly, the project has developed and shared an innovative, accessible and customized model for how congregations and faith-based communities can help people with disabilities successfully enter the workforce. The model is grounded with person-centered planning, support for resume writing and interview skills and implemented through identification of job opportunities and community support for the job seeker. For some congregations, emotional and spiritual support

was the primary focus. In other congregations, it was connections to employers. For others, it meant providing temporary wraparound services, such as money for uniforms or transportation, until the job seekers could afford it on their own.

PFTW provides congregations a way to customize and replicate employment support for people with disabilities working alone or in concert with local service providers/disability providers. While some staff members were paid, many were unpaid and the most important factor for success was the level of commitment from congregational leadership and religious leaders, not salaried staff. In many locales, PFTW complemented ongoing efforts and/or organizations already engaged with employment for

Project at-a-glance

Grantee Organization:

Vanderbilt University Kennedy Center
(Nashville, TN)

Grant Amount:

\$449,961

Geographic focus:

Four program sites in Kentucky,
Minnesota, Tennessee, and Texas

Description:

Using local, faith-based job clubs at 27 congregations across four States, the project delivered workforce development services and individualized employment assistance to people with disabilities.

Impact:

In addition to helping people with disabilities find employment, the project strengthened the capacity of congregation- and faith-based programs to support job seekers with disabilities in diverse ways.

¹ Up until the end of Kessler’s support in May 31, 2016, Capital One Human Capital Innovation Fund contributed approximately \$1.5 million and the Call of Duty Endowment contributed approximately \$280,000.

people with disabilities or general disability-inclusion. For example, in Texas, PFTW collaborated with the Texas Council for Developmental Disabilities, which was already coordinating symposia to strengthen inclusion of people with disabilities in faith-based communities.

Key elements of success

While the idea of working with congregations of faith to strengthen the employment opportunities for people with disabilities is unique in and of itself, several elements of the project structure fueled success and provide lessons for other employment initiatives for people with disabilities.

A person-centered approach

PFTW provides a flexible model for congregations to approach employment for people with disabilities, but an individualized, person-centered approach is central to the way all partners supported job seekers, regardless of the type of support provided. Congregations were committed to individualized service, particularly the planning meeting, which involved the job seekers, family members, and other important support people in the job seeker's life. One staff member described it as "Getting to the bottom of who they are and what they can and want to do, and getting them to visualize themselves in the world of work, was most important."

Rather than having a bank of jobs to fill, congregations sought out the best job match for members with disabilities. As one participant noted, "My disability is no longer at the forefront of my employment plan.... I am not "someone with a disability who is looking for employment," but rather "someone looking for employment who happens to have a noticeable disability."

Focus on the job seekers' strengths and interests, rather than deficits

Linked to the person-centered approach, PFTW supported congregations to identify the best job match for each participant given their strengths and passions. Congregations could then use their social networks to identify job opportunities or other supports for job seekers. Courtney Evans Taylor, site coordinator of the Tennessee location, noted that, "Members with disabilities are being introduced to their congregation in ways that focus on their strengths instead of their deficits. They are becoming better known in their own communities, and families have a support system that they can count on." Critical to using a strength-based approach, however, was also changing attitudes.

Addressing misperceptions and attitudes about people with disabilities

The PFTW team noted that staff and congregations spent significant time and energy shifting attitudes about people with disabilities. It was important to address the low expectations that communities and people with disabilities had about employment prospects. The project often needed to challenge assumptions about what was desirable and possible, shifting expectations from sheltered and segregated work settings to a wider set of job opportunities within the community. Many congregations expressed the realization that people with disabilities can have fulfilling, successful employment experiences and that even as "non-experts" their natural networks and talents have a valuable role to play in this process. As congregations began to think more broadly and creatively about their resources and connections, the potential for positive employment outcomes increased. Parents also expressed a greater awareness about the employment and post-secondary educational opportunities for their children with disabilities. Overall, congregations were struck by the ways in which this was much more than just getting people jobs, but also about helping people discover and share their gifts, experience belonging, and develop new relationships. Fundamentally, the project helped shift attitudes from "we should help" these members find employment to a fundamental valuing of the contributions that people with disabilities can make in employment and faith communities.

PFTW documented a model for replication in congregations around the country

PFTW developed “Putting Faith to Work: A Guide for Congregations and Communities on Connecting Job Seekers with Disabilities to Meaningful Employment”. The comprehensive guide has the potential to meaningfully affect how local faith-based communities can support individuals with disabilities in seeking employment and strengthen community connections – even those outside the scope of the project. Importantly, it demonstrates how the PFTW model can be flexible and customized not only to job seekers with disabilities but to each congregation. For example, the work in Kentucky required relatively more time to address negative attitudes about people with disabilities and advocate for ministries that did not segregate people with disabilities.

The manual provides step-by-step instructions for gathering a team, holding person-centered conversations to assess strengths and skills, and reaching out through the members of the congregation and beyond to find an employer in the community who is seeking those strengths and skills. The guide is practical with conversation guides, worksheets for planning, guidance on how to assemble a congregational team, illustrative examples and honest reflections. Since it is a self-directed technical assistance guide, faith-based communities can draw upon the relevant sections to assist members with disabilities in their own ways but grounded in a proven model. The manual is available upon request at: <http://faithanddisability.org/projects/putting-faith-to-work/the-pftw-model>

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Kessler Foundation's fundamental strategy is to link science and grantsmanship so that people with disabilities can lead more productive, independent, and fulfilling lives. Kessler Foundation Research Center conducts research that improves quality of life for persons with injuries of the spinal cord and brain, stroke, multiple sclerosis, and other chronic neurological and orthopedic conditions. Although individuals living with disabilities represent the largest minority group seeking employment in today's marketplace, they are often not considered an integral component of corporate diversity programs. Through its strategic focus on employment, Kessler Foundation has invested more than \$41.5 million since 2004 in organizations that work to create job opportunities through development, placement employer education, and social enterprise. This funding has enabled people with disabilities to overcome the obstacles that often face them and meet the workforce needs of American business. Innovative grantmaking has introduced creative solutions to help eliminate some of the barriers that prevent people with disabilities from working.



Learn more about the Kessler Foundation at <http://www.kesslerfoundation.org>.

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