

Signature Employment Grant 2011: Operation Hope

Introduction

Through a program dubbed “Operation Hope”, Hudson Community Enterprises (HCE) sought to expand its profitable Enterprise Content Management (ECM) business and employ people with disabilities. Operation Hope is built on a social enterprise business model originally launched by HCE for a document and scanning business with previous support from Kessler Foundation. HCE’s overall goal is to move people with disabilities away from sheltered workshops into market-driven positions with benefits and opportunities for advancement. Operation Hope’s model includes a training program as well as a robust employee assistance program to support workers’ lives both inside and outside of work. HCE employs people with a range of disabilities, some with multiple disabilities, though Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder, Asperger’s Syndrome, Autism Spectrum Disorders, and learning disabilities are most common.

HCE was able to launch the program after winning three contracts with New Jersey state government agencies, including a contract with the New Jersey Judiciary Department for scanning the state’s court records, and two contracts with the New Jersey Motor Vehicle Commission. Operation Hope’s success with clients helped HCE win other contracts with New Jersey state agencies and branch out into work for private-sector enterprises that service car dealers and law firms.

Operation Hope consists of employee recruitment, a training program and on-going support for employees. HCE provides a nine-week training program that includes computer skills, soft skills training, remedial education, counseling services, and job shadowing. Once hired, counselors support employees’ performance improvement plans, which are designed to help individuals meeting work targets. One survey of employees found that half of respondents reported improving their self-esteem and interpersonal skills.

Like many employers, HCE offers an Employee Assistance Program (EAP) so that workers (both with and without disabilities) have access to a counselor, who meets at least once a month with employees. An important focus of the EAP is to foster stability for those with mental health and substance abuse issues. While direct supervisors may not be aware of specific disabilities, counselors know employees’ disabilities, strengths and weaknesses and can offer tailored coaching. As the EAP has evolved, the counseling and production staff have working more closely together, destigmatizing counseling and leading to a more cohesive environment. The counselors also make referrals to other agencies that can help with housing and eviction issues, benefits issues, and psychiatric services.

Project at-a-glance

Grantee Organization:

Hudson Community Enterprises
(Jersey City, NJ)

Grant Amount:

\$250,000

Geographic focus:

Northern New Jersey

Description:

Hudson Community Enterprises sought to expand a viable social enterprises business focused on enterprise content management (ECM) and employing people with disabilities

Impact:

During the Kessler grant, HCE hired almost 50 people with disabilities and successfully expanded its ECM business

Key elements of success

HCE's inclusive model and disability cultural competence

HCE's mission is to provide individuals with disabilities with the skills and support they need to have successful work experiences. HCE's businesses employ close to 400 individuals, 70% of whom have disabilities. This provides HCE and Operation Hope with strategic advantages, including an engrained commitment to disability inclusion, and an understanding of what employees with disabilities need to succeed in the workplace. HCE has created new job opportunities for people with disabilities and has cultivated a culture to support employee growth.

At the same time, employees find that they have the support to succeed in their new jobs. Jared serves as a Data Entry Specialist and has proven to be a valuable employee. Before working for HCE, he had a difficult college experience while grappling with undiagnosed ADD. His testimony highlights the importance of HCE's culture within a viable social enterprise. "On the emotional side, there is an informal culture of acceptance, which I found profoundly refreshing and freeing. Not once have I felt any anxiety about my disability. On the practical side, I was able to receive feedback on my work on a regular basis and was given the opportunity to improve my work habits and encouraged to take on more responsibilities."

For example, according to New Jersey Division of Vocational Rehabilitation Services (DVRS), its partnership with HCE to find employment opportunities for its clients has been "almost transformational" by providing the opportunity for people with disabilities to work in a more corporate, professional job setting compared to alternative situations such as bench work assembly. "The jobs offer a good transition from sheltered workshop employment for people who have the aptitude for the lower- and mid-level skills needed," noted the representative.

A robust Employee Assistance Program provides critical services and deters stigma

The role of counselors at HCE provides employees with robust support through a range of wraparound services. Louise's experience underscores the difference this support can make. Given new work that required security clearances, HCE required fingerprinting. Louise's counselor was able to help her expunge an old criminal charge that could have threatened her job at any other business. At the same time, HCE has developed relationships with a range of partners to attract job seekers. These new partners are sharing other wrap-around resources that have been incorporated into HCE's EAP efforts. Lastly, the integration of EAP services for all workers provides an important signal that counseling is integral to workers' success regardless of disability status.

HCE's leadership supports a philosophy of continuous improvement and innovation

As Operation Hope developed, HCE's leadership remained open to changes in its model to ensure success. For example, HCE reached out to new agencies for recruitment, modified its training programs to reflect changing skill needs, and enriched the counseling and EAP offerings to support its employees and reduce turnover. This culture of continuous improvement along with HCE's "metamorphosis into a social enterprise has become a model for other such facilities to follow," noted a DVRS representative who worked closely with the program.

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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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