

PROMISING PRACTICES IN HOME AND COMMUNITY-BASED SERVICES

Massachusetts -- Recruiting Direct Service Professionals in a Competitive Environment

Issue: State and Provider Cooperation in Recruitment Efforts for Direct Support Professionals

Summary

The Massachusetts Department of Mental Retardation (DMR) and independent provider agencies joined forces to recruit direct support professionals for people with developmental disabilities. DMR and the agencies hired a marketing firm to develop a collaborative recruitment effort among agencies. The recruitment model started in the Boston area, and Massachusetts expanded it to other areas in the state. Since its start, the campaign has identified over 10,000 prospects. Agencies have hired nearly 600 of these people.

Introduction

As more people with developmental disabilities live independently, the demand for direct support professionals, supervisors, and managers is increasing. Meanwhile the number of appropriately skilled people applying for positions decreased in recent years. Massachusetts, like many states, will continue to face a shortage of available workers due to significant demographic changes.

The number of people applying for direct support positions is decreasing.

This report briefly describes a recruitment effort lead by the Metro Region of the Massachusetts Department of Mental Retardation (DMR), which includes Boston. DMR and provider agencies, in collaboration with a communications company, conducted a marketing campaign to recruit direct support professionals. This document is written by a former regional director of DMR and is based on his experiences working on the initiative.

Background

DMR's Metro Region provides supports to 9,000 individuals and their families in the greater Boston area. From the start, DMR had two overarching goals for the recruitment campaign. First and foremost was to recruit direct support professionals. Second, and over the longer term,

DMR wanted to increase public awareness of the successful integration of people with developmental disabilities into their communities, and of the positive contributions made by these people working in the field. DMR sought to create a greater understanding, both among the general community as well as among the staff themselves, that direct support is a very valued profession. DMR believed greater understanding of these messages would make future recruiting efforts easier.

Intervention

In early 1999, DMR convened a meeting with about 50 agencies that provided services to people with developmental disabilities, asking them if they would like to jointly develop new approaches to recruiting direct support professionals. DMR supported the effort with professional staff assistance and funding. Each participating provider agency contributed additional funding. Shortly thereafter, about 25 agencies joined the initiative. These agencies already had recruitment efforts in place; the pilot program was meant to augment those efforts. As neither the agencies nor DMR were marketing professionals, they hired a communications company that had successfully worked with non-

Each participating provider agency contributed additional funding.

profit human service agencies that deliver supports to people with developmental disabilities.

First, the communications company assessed the situation at that time. The company surveyed agencies to identify what recruitment methods worked and did not work in the past. This generated valuable benchmark information, which helped shape the subsequent campaign. As importantly, it gave the agencies a chance to learn from each other.

The communications company also conducted extensive interviews with direct support professionals who had remained in the field. It was critical to understand what motivated direct support professionals to stay with their work, since the agencies wanted to attract more of these people.

A consistent story emerged. People who continued to work as direct support professionals had discovered something very important: this was work where they could make a difference and where their efforts were deeply and sincerely appreciated by people with disabilities, families, supervisors, and co-workers. For many, it was the first work situation in which they felt genuinely appreciated. The campaign's theme—*Some people are lucky enough to love their work*—emerged directly from this research.

The campaign's theme -- "Some people are lucky enough to love their work".

After this initial research involving the agencies and direct support professionals, DMR, the agencies, and the communications company developed an initial recruitment plan. To focus attention on the effort, an official launch date for the recruitment campaign was set for May 1999 with a kick-off event at the State House. A well-known local radio personality was the master of ceremonies. Agency administrators honored outstanding staff, who shared their stories. Television, radio, and newspaper coverage helped publicize the launch. The communications company also produced an informational brochure and posters.

In the following months, providers sent posters and other materials to libraries, job centers, churches, senior centers, and other distribution points. DMR, the agencies, and the communications company initiated direct mail campaigns, gave radio interviews, and developed news stories profiling direct support professionals that appeared in local newspapers. Advertisements were placed in regional and local newspapers and in selected college newspapers. DMR and the agencies also held a job fair. Although it featured the participating agencies, the job fair also included non-participating agencies in the region.

A web site (www.rewardingwork.org) was created to support the campaign. This site became especially important because agencies recruit outside Massachusetts. The web site efficiently reaches prospective workers and provides a way for Internet-savvy people to learn about the need for staff. A 24-hour-a-day, seven-day-a-week, toll-free number (888-444-1616) was set up to track all calls.

Implementation

Several elements of the recruitment campaign contributed to its success. Key factors were the cooperation among provider agencies; letting the agencies control the initiative; follow-up with job applicants; tracking results; and using professional marketing assistance.

Provider cooperation is necessary. Agencies shared ideas and tips to help each other. They frequently referred a prospective worker to other agencies if the fit was not right for them, knowing that the favor would be, and often was, returned.

Autonomy is critical. From the beginning, DMR said it would support the effort, but that it was up to the agencies to share and direct the campaign. The agency representatives, who themselves are strapped for time, indicated the campaign's value by their willingness to continue devoting time to it.

Approximately 200 people were hired in the first 18 months.

Follow-up is essential. People who call in response to ads or other promotions need a quick response. To improve follow-up, DMR and

the agencies adjusted their procedures and hired a coordinator to handle inquiries. In the end, it is up to the agencies to screen, interview, and hire prospects. Some agencies are more aggressive about this than others, and the more aggressive ones tended to hire more people and feel more positively about the campaign.

Tracking results is key. The campaign has carefully monitored responses from all of its outreach efforts. This tracking enabled program participants to make informed judgments about next steps as they went along, and provided an ongoing benchmark against which to evaluate success.

Professional assistance is vital. Expert marketing assistance increased the campaign's effectiveness. Importantly, the communications company combined expertise in planning and executing marketing campaigns with an understanding of the aspirations of people with developmental disabilities, and the agencies' and DMR's needs.

Discussion Questions:

How can the recruitment campaign be adapted to recruit independent providers to work for people who hire their own caregiver?

What additional benefits and constraints would apply if a similar recruitment campaign were used for all people with disabilities or long-term illnesses?

Impact

During its first full year, the recruitment campaign generated about 2,000 inquiries from people interested in working with adults with developmental disabilities. Approximately 200 of these people were hired in the first eighteen months. The cost, including DMR and provider contributions, for the first year was \$100,000, including initial start-up costs that were not necessary in subsequent years.

After the initiative demonstrated success, DMR expanded the campaign to other areas in the state. During 2001 and 2002, the campaign received inquiries from nearly 8,000 job candidates. Providers hired approximately 400 of these people.

Contact Information

For more information about this initiative to recruit direct support professionals, please email Jeff Keilson at jeff.keilson@dmr.state.ma.us. More information about the initiative can be found online at www.rewardingwork.org.

This report was written by Jeff Keilson, a former DMR Regional Director and now an independent consultant. It is one of a series of reports by Medstat for the U.S. Centers for Medicare & Medicaid Services (CMS) highlighting promising practices in home and community-based services. The entire series is available online at CMS' web site, <http://www.cms.gov>. This report is intended to share information about different approaches to offering home and community-based services. This report is not an endorsement of any practice.