BACKGROUND...

A meaningful job truly can make a real difference in the lives of people with disabilities. Yet, opportunities for individuals to share their strengths and talents in the workplace are far too limited. The TennesseeWorks Partnership is a systems-change project funded through the Administration on Intellectual and Developmental Disabilities. Our goal is to increase the availability and quality of employment opportunities for people with intellectual and developmental disabilities in every corner of our state.

Through funding provided by the Disability Employment Initiative, we are partnering with the Tennessee Department of Labor to host two “Community Conversations” focused on how best to equip employers to hire and effectively support people with disabilities in integrated, competitive jobs. Our first event was a joint conversation with Hickman and Dickson Counties. Together with the Department of Labor and local Tennessee Career Centers, we formed a planning committee of employers, providers, and community leaders.

We shared invitations widely throughout Hickman and Dickson Counties to gather a diverse group of people who care about making their community more inclusive of people with disabilities. Family members, local employers, disability service providers, educators, faith community members, community organizations, and civic leaders were all invited to the event.
A community conversation is a creative, fun, and powerful way of identifying how diverse members of a community might work together in compelling ways to solve an important challenge. The focus of this event was on generating ideas, sharing resources, and making connections with other community members to enhance employment and community involvement for people with disabilities and, ultimately, to strengthen the community.

The Hickman & Dickson community conversation was held at the East Hickman Community Center. This evening event took place on February 24 and involved 58 members of the community. To kick off the evening, community leader Rob Mitchell and self-advocate Philip Farinato shared Philip’s employment journey and his recent work at a local company Sole Supports. Using the World Café model, the group next began a series of “coffee-house” conversations—first at small tables and then as a whole group—in which they shared their best ideas related to three questions:

- How can we encourage more employers in our community to hire people with disabilities?
- How can we work together to support these employers (and their employees) well?
- What are the most promising ideas you have heard this evening? Where should we go next to launch meaningful change here?

At the end of the event, attendees completed a short feedback form and indicated whether they would like to be involved in future efforts to promote employment for people with disabilities in their community.

After the event, all of the notes taken at each of the individual tables and during the whole group discussion were compiled and organized. A sampling of ideas and next steps is included on the next two pages.

AGENDA

- 5:30-5:45 Greeting
- 5:45-6:00 Opening Remarks
- 6:00-6:05 World Café Process
- 6:05-6:25 Round 1 Discussion
- 6:25-6:45 Round 2 Discussion
- 6:45-7:05 Round 3 Discussion
- 7:05-7:20 Harvesting of Best Ideas
- 7:20-7:30 Closing Remarks
A SAMPLING OF IDEAS TO ENCOURAGE AND SUPPORT EMPLOYERS IN HIRING PEOPLE WITH DISABILITIES SHARED DURING THE EVENT

**Ideas for Families**

- **Make a connection with the employers you visit regularly.** Speak with them about your work expectations for your son or daughter. Ask about bringing your child in for a tour of the facilities or to learn more about the kinds of jobs available in their industry. Improve your child’s career awareness and establish relationships simultaneously.

- **Share your story.** Talk to other parents about your journey, struggles, and successes. Try starting a local meetup or monthly social event for families in your neighborhood or faith community. Create a network of support to lean on as your child enters the world of work.

**Ideas for Disability Service Providers & Community Organizations**

- **Get involved in service clubs or local business organizations.** Attend meetings and events side by side with employers to build relationships and trust. Offer to host training events and informational sessions on the benefits of hiring people with disabilities.

- **Identify need.** Meet with employers one-on-one to learn what tasks keep their employees from critical job functions, what positions have the highest turnover rates, and future expansion opportunities. Use this knowledge to drive your recruitment and placement strategies.

**Ideas for Civic Leaders**

- **Create a task force.** Implement a local employment initiative and advocacy group to spearhead a strategic plan regarding increasing employment of people with disabilities in the county.

- **Celebrate the commitment.** Create a public way for local businesses to identify themselves as committed to the employment of persons with disabilities, such as a storefront sticker or other public acknowledgment.

**Ideas for People with Disabilities**

- **Speak up.** Share your vision of the future with family members, friends, and school staff. Set early employment goals to add to your IEP transition plan, and make sure you know the educational experiences and skills necessary to make your goal a reality. Don’t be afraid to ask for help along the way.

- **Seek opportunities to gain hands-on work experiences** that could help you learn about your strengths and interests. Check out internships and summer work. Ask friends, neighbors, and mentors to help you land that first job.
A SAMPLING OF IDEAS TO ENCOURAGE AND SUPPORT EMPLOYERS IN HIRING PEOPLE WITH DISABILITIES SHARED DURING THE EVENT

Ideas for Educators

- **Prepare your students.** Provide graduating students a written summary or portfolio of their strengths, interests, skills, needs, and preferences. The IEP summary of progress is a great starting point. Share these with potential employers to highlight the abilities of your students and a secure job placement before graduation.
- **Host a job fair** with local employers to connect them to job-seeking youth with disabilities. Make sure to invite employers who have made a commitment to hiring people with disabilities and provide a forum for them to share their experiences. Involve civic and community leaders to recognize employers at the event.

Ideas for Faith Communities

- **Foster awareness** of the employment-related needs of people with disabilities through churches and other places of worship, a natural network of community members. Develop ministries to assist with job coaching, interview preparation, and skill building.
- **Contribute resources.** Explore avenues for employing accessible vans and buses used for church events to meet the transportation needs of people with disabilities to get to and from work.

Ideas for Employers

- **Offer interview and application alternatives** to support people with disabilities throughout the hiring process. Focus on learning about their strengths and the ways they can contribute to your business.
- **Share your experiences.** If you’ve already made the commitment to hiring people with disabilities in your business, speak with other employers about potential obstacles you overcame, what you learned through the process, and how your company has benefited. Beyond one-on-one meetings, broadcast your success story through local media, at career fairs, or with the chamber of commerce.

Ideas for Our Entire Community

- **Shop at and support local businesses that hire people with disabilities.** Let them know you value their commitment to diversity and inclusion. Make your voice heard.
- **Start a grass roots campaign to improve employment outcomes in your community.** Raise funds to create a billboard highlighting employment statistics. Celebrate and share success stories with local newspapers, television and radio stations. Involve media in your community’s disability-focused events.
## RESOURCES ON EMPLOYMENT

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<tr>
<th>Resource</th>
<th>Website/Link</th>
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<tr>
<td>TennesseeWorks</td>
<td><a href="http://www.tennesseeworks.org">www.tennesseeworks.org</a></td>
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<tr>
<td>Tennessee Disability Pathfinder*</td>
<td><a href="http://www.kc.vanderbilt.edu/pathfinder">www.kc.vanderbilt.edu/pathfinder</a></td>
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<tr>
<td>National Collaborative on Workforce and Disability*</td>
<td><a href="http://www.ncwd-youth.info">www.ncwd-youth.info</a></td>
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<td>National Secondary Transition Technical Assistance Center</td>
<td><a href="http://www.nsttac.org">www.nsttac.org</a></td>
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<tr>
<td>Campaign for Disability Employment*</td>
<td><a href="http://www.whatcanyoudocampaign.org">www.whatcanyoudocampaign.org</a></td>
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<tr>
<td>Resources for hiring people with disabilities</td>
<td><a href="http://www.thinkbeyondthelabel.com">www.thinkbeyondthelabel.com</a></td>
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<td>Employment &amp; Training Administration’s Disability Program*</td>
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<td>Office of Disability Employment Policy*</td>
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<td>Disability &amp; Employment</td>
<td><a href="http://www.disability.workforce3one.org">www.disability.workforce3one.org</a></td>
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<td>Learn about Ticket to Work*</td>
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<td>Jobs for Tennessee Online*</td>
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<td>STEP: Free Support &amp; Training for Parents*</td>
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<td>Tennessee Vocational Rehabilitation*</td>
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<tr>
<td>Tennessee Career Centers</td>
<td><a href="http://www.tennessee.gov/labor-wfd/cc">www.tennessee.gov/labor-wfd/cc</a></td>
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* Resources and information available in Spanish
WHAT ATTENDEES SAID ABOUT THE COMMUNITY CONVERSATION

Below is a summary of responses from evaluations completed by attendees regarding their views on their community and the event.

I am leaving this conversation with specific steps I plan to do to increase employment opportunities for people with disabilities.

The conversation tonight improved my views of the capacity of our community to improve employment opportunities for people with disabilities.

Follow-up events or actions on this issue are needed in our community.

Employers in our community need help learning how to hire and support people with disabilities in community jobs.

Strong partnerships between employers, community agencies, and families currently exist in my community.

Our community currently has the capacity to support employers to hire people with disabilities.

Employers in our community are generally receptive to hiring people with disabilities.

I would invite someone I know to attend another event like this one in the future.

I was able to identify things I could do to encourage employers in my community to hire people with disabilities.

This conversation will contribute to increased employment opportunities for people with disabilities in our community.

I learned about resources, opportunities, or connections in my community that I previously did not know about.

This conversation was a good investment of my time.
The TennesseeWorks Partnership was first funded in October 2012 with the purpose of equipping (a) youth with significant disabilities to aspire toward competitive work from an early age, (b) families to demand competitive work for their children with disabilities, (c) educators to prepare their students for competitive work across the grade-span, and (d) state systems to support competitive work in every part of the state. More than 40 agencies and organizations have collaborated with the University Center for Excellence in Developmental Disabilities at the Vanderbilt Kennedy Center to form this collaborative. State partners include Tennessee Department of Intellectual and Developmental Disabilities, Tennessee Department of Education, Tennessee Department of Human Services Division of Rehabilitation Services, Tennessee Department of Labor and Workforce Development, Tennessee Council on Developmental Disabilities, and Tennessee Higher Education Commission.

For more information, contact us:

phone: 615-322-4999
email: tennesseeworks@vanderbilt.edu
website: www.tennesseeworks.org

If you are interested in hosting your own community conversation on employment, download this free guidebook “Launching Inclusive Efforts Through Community Conversations: A Practical Guide for Families, Service Providers, and Communities” from

www.waisman.wisc.edu/naturalsupports/pdfs/CommunityConversation_Guide.pdf