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To: Employment First stakeholders

From: Acacia McGuire Anderson, Interim Employment First Coordinator

Re: [Employment First](#): Q&A with Opportunity Foundation

(Please forward to your local partners & stakeholders)

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In recent months, we have heard concerns from stakeholders and family members as many sheltered workshops transform to provide community-based employment and day services. In some cases, this has resulted in rumors that providers are closing, when in fact many are still open for business, but doing business in a completely different way.

In addition to the 25 facility-based providers that are part of the Department of Human Services (DHS) transformation grants, many other providers have decided to change their business models on their own. Due to shifting federal and state policies, many providers are seeing community-based employment services as a more-financially viable option, as well as the way the entire system is evolving.

[Opportunity Foundation](#) is a large employer in central Oregon and a recipient of a DHS transformation grant. In 2014, the organization made the decision to start transitioning its sheltered workshop services into other services. Now Opportunity Foundation provides day services, residential services, supported employment (integrated community employment), supported living and in-home supports, and employment path-community services.

Executive Director Seth Johnson agreed to answer questions on what transformation looks like for a large provider like Opportunity Foundation. According to Johnson, of the 240 people in residential and/or vocational services at Opportunity Foundation, there are 70 people now in integrated, community-based employment services. His answers have been edited for clarity and length.

If other facility-based providers that are in the process of transforming would like to share their story as part of our weekly message, please email employment.first@state.or.us. We want to help get the word out about providers that are transforming to community-based services!

Question: Tell us about the recent changes to Opportunity Foundation's services.

Seth: Over the past three years we have worked diligently to adapt our services to focus on our mission of “Empowering People of Diverse Abilities.” As part of this journey we have moved out of the provision of facility-based employment path services, sometimes called sheltered work. Our firm commitment has been that no one we support desiring services is left behind. We have changed the menu of services we offer, but worked to replace any “lost” service with new options. As part of this we have adapted and expanded our day services, offering daily opportunities in the community for recreation, volunteerism and employment tours. We are continuing to work with the state to ensure that Community Employment Path services remain available at our three thrift stores to all those who seek them. Our supported employment program has grown by leaps and bounds in parallel with these other agency adaptations.

Question: What has been the most difficult part about changing your business model?

Seth: The most difficult part of changing our business model has been finding creative and person-centered ways to support everyone, support people, families, staff and our board of directors through the many changes. Finding ways to guarantee that we can continue to implement our mission through financial fluctuations in rates, tiers and agency changes has also been challenging. Adapting to more community-based services has also required us to significantly expand our vehicle fleet and the associated fuel, maintenance, insurance and staff drive time costs. Staff recruitment and retention is an ongoing issue as we seek to provide excellent, empowering and consistently reliable supports through myriad federal and state changes. The multiple levels of change, along with enhanced expectations and standards for those processes, adds up to significant headwinds for those of us seeking sustainable success in implementing our missions.

Question: What has been the most rewarding part about changing your business model?

Seth: The most rewarding part of our journey so far has been the creativity, passion and dedication of our team and the new successes found by the people we support. The people we support never cease to amaze us and teach us that they are ready for any challenge, change or opportunity. Often, they are more ready and willing to adapt and find new successes than we are as staff and management. We find inspiration and learning in our partnership every day.

Question: Why is offering community-based employment services important for your clients and your community?

Seth: Community employment is important to the people we support because if a person has the dream of a job, our mission is to empower the achievement of that dream. The pursuit of dreams, potential and independence is a human pursuit that we all share. Employment is a part of that pursuit for many, and when it is, it is our privilege to work alongside the people we support. Our society is richer when everyone participates in community life, employment, recreation, volunteerism, and in every aspect of our shared community experience. “No dreamer is ever too small. No dream ever too big.” – from “Finding Heroes” by Dr. Jon Carnegie and Jim Stynes.

If you have comments or other questions, please email them to employment.first@state.or.us

~ Acacia