

# The Iowa Navigator Program

## *A Concept Paper*

### **History –**

The Iowa navigator program is one of several tools and strategies developed collaboratively by seven state agencies for the purpose of increasing the inclusion of lowans with disabilities in the industry of their community. This collaborative approach began in 1998, the same year the WIA vision was established in Iowa, building upon our state's already established commitment to simplify the labor exchange and employment services for both our job seeking and our business customers. State agencies came together in the same spirit to explore how this same vision could be made to include people with disabilities.

Iowa Workforce Development (IWD) was part of a team of agencies, led by Iowa Vocational Rehabilitation Services in a successful application for a Rehabilitation Services Administration (RSA) grant to explore local collaborative practices in addressing community barriers for lowans with disabilities. IWD was also a member of another team of agencies led by Iowa Department of Human Services in a successful application of a grant with the Social Security Administration (SSA) which piloted making SSA benefits planning services available through workforce centers in Mason City and Cedar Rapids.

In 2000, the team involved in the RSA grant grew from 5 state agencies to 7 state agencies in their application for a Department of Labor (DOL) grant to increase the effectiveness for One-Stop Workforce Centers in achieving employment outcomes for people with disabilities. This collaborative state agency group now includes:

- Iowa Vocational Rehabilitation Services
- Iowa Department for the Blind
- Iowa Department of Human Services
- Iowa Department of Education
- Iowa Division of Persons with Disabilities
- Iowa Governor's Developmental Disabilities Council
- Iowa Workforce Development

This grant application was for the Work Incentive Grant, and Iowa Workforce Development administered this initiative on behalf of the collaborative. This implementation mirrored the approach developed in the RSA grant. Smaller grants were awarded to Iowa communities who wished to learn, in partnership with these state agencies, how systemic barriers manifested themselves for lowans with disabilities who wished to work. These communities worked with state agencies to use grant funds to change how services are available to citizens with disabilities in their communities and develop new approaches to providing services.

### **Lessons Learned**

In the course of these grants, hundreds of focus groups were conducted among people with disabilities, staff of One-Stops and other employment programs, and community business leaders. Among people with disabilities, we learned that customer service is the main barrier for job seekers.

Not in terms of people being mean or rude to them, but in terms of how complicated the service system presents itself to them. While efforts have been made to bring employment services together under one roof, the fact remains that these services are provided through different funding streams and all have their own separate performance measures. When it comes down to how each staff or program is evaluated, it is based upon how we do with the people we touch in our own program and not how all programs serve the community in aggregation. Together, the agencies have passed the complexity of the system on to the customers to figure out rather than work behind the scenes to make this simpler for the job seeker. Return on investment is reviewed only on a program by program basis, rather than how we all impact the community together. We have learned that our separate funding streams do not reward efforts to "share" customers. We need to resolve this together at the state and local levels. We have also learned that with this maze of services, the last thing our job seekers with disabilities need is one more service program. What is needed is the means to support those services that are available to all Iowans to become more responsive to Iowans with disabilities.

In these initiatives, we have taken several steps from what was learned:

- We discovered the value of sharing customers between our TANF employment program, PROMISE JOBS, and Vocational Rehabilitation Services. This pilot demonstrated how identifying hidden disabilities and engaging individuals quickly in work experience with the benefit of assistance in "managing" their disability greatly increased outcomes. After several years of planning, the opportunity finally presented itself to the state collaboration in integrating what was learned through this into Iowa's TANF services.
- Through a transition initiative, three school to work "prototypes" were developed in Iowa communities, and all are being sustained and replicated in other communities as this grant ends at the end of September, 2007.
- Iowa's state agencies are collaborating to develop a unified approach to support Iowa's businesses in successfully employing people with disabilities. The "Employers Disability Resource Network" is about to launch web based resources in Iowa, and become integrated in and promoted through the other tools and initiatives developed by this collaborative.
- Iowa's state agencies have worked collaboratively with SSA to make SSA benefits planning assistance available to Iowa's SSA beneficiaries. These individuals assist SSA beneficiaries in using SSA work incentives effectively with other Iowa employment services in supporting their career growth and decreasing dependency on SSA benefits. This program is funded in Iowa as the Iowa Work Incentive Planning and Assistance program, administered by IWD on behalf of the state agency collaborative, and is integrated effectively into the fabric of Iowa's employment services network so that people who will benefit from these services are likely to become identified.
- Iowa's state workforce partners have been designated as an "Employment Network" by the Social Security Administration. This designation will allow Iowa's workforce regions to generate funding based on milestone payments from SSA on an individual by individual basis as people move to independence on SSA benefits. Iowa and SSA hope to demonstrate, with the passage of new regulations this coming January, how navigators and other service improvements can be supported through funds generated by these outcomes.
- Iowa's Medicaid buy-in program, "Medicaid for Employed People with Disabilities" (MEPD) is one more tool supported through the state collaboration and promoted and

expanded through the Medicaid Infrastructure Grant (MIG), administered by the Iowa Department of Human Services on behalf of the state partnership effectively removes the danger of lost health benefits because a person with a disability advances in their career.

These developments and others are the result of this collaborative effort. Each are tools available through Iowa One-Stop workforce centers, effectively utilized to support Iowans with disabilities as they pursue their careers. The "Navigator" is one additional tool that enhances the accessibility and usefulness of each of these tools for all Iowa employment services so they may be successful in including people with disabilities in their services and achieving desired employment outcomes. **In Iowa One-Stop Centers now, there is no other entity that operates outside of their own agency's funding stream and performance measures to present an aggregate service to system to job seekers and businesses – but the navigator.** Reduced funding levels for many service programs have resulted in a negative effect of causing them to "circle the wagons".

### ***The Iowa Navigator Program***

The overall goal of the state agency collaborative is to effectively include Iowans with disabilities in employment. We have learned that there are many tools needed to support this. Iowa's program is based upon the lessons learned in previous initiatives. This focus is intended to support already existing services to become more successful in including people with disabilities. This has made it difficult to evaluate the program in Iowa, because navigators do not place people in jobs, or provide training to people with disabilities. Their efforts are dedicated to supporting existing programs in doing this effectively for people with disabilities. This has been a difficult concept for many of our One-Stop service programs, given the traditional emphasis on accountability and performance measures.

As Iowa's work incentive grant was coming to an end, the Department of Labor approached us, and asked if Iowa would care to be one of 17 states to pilot the Navigator program. We reviewed the promising practices demonstrated in the previous grants relevant to staff training and support, community outreach, business development and accessibility review. Meetings were held with Regional Workforce Investment Boards and regional service partner groups around the state of Iowa to check the interest of piloting this program. Iowa requested an opportunity to employ 6 Navigators in 6 Iowa regions based upon the interest expressed. The DOL and SSA (this was a jointly funded initiative) agreed, and Iowa hired 6 Navigators with the understanding that they had at least 9 months to work with regional One-Stop systems to support their responsiveness to Iowans with disabilities.

This program was very successfully received, and the state of Iowa requested 16 Navigators the second year, when the opportunity made itself available again, so that each Iowa region could have a navigator. This request was approved. We are now beginning our 5<sup>th</sup> year of implementation, and the amount of funding has decreased to Iowa, as there are now 45 states implementing the navigator program, and increased expectation for state match has been demanded. At the high water mark, the Iowa Navigator program operated on a budget of \$1.2 million, and is currently operating at \$880,000. While Iowa's program is recognized as a leader nationally, we have also been very fortunate in receiving a generous share of funding in the pilot when considering the per capita investment by the Department of Labor. This has been a successful investment however, as Iowa's Employment Service system is beginning to show increasing numbers of customers starting to disclose disability, stronger outcomes for Iowans with disabilities in our WIA programs, and increased resources for Iowans with disabilities in the TANF program. Through the facilitation by Iowa

navigators in One-Stop systems, more lowans with SSA disabilities will become connected with assistance in managing their benefits effectively while pursuing a career through the Iowa WIPA program, and there is more encouragement throughout the system for them to pursue employment. A decision by any lowan on Social Security disability to not work and risk losing benefits is generally a decision to remain on a poverty level income. In each region, the navigator facilitates the process through which local direction is generated. This process creates in each region, an integrated team of agencies focused on the aggregate outcomes of their services on job seekers with disabilities in their communities.

Even though Navigators are not case managers or direct service providers, through their outreach into communities they do become a valued point of contact for the One-Stop workforce center system for people with disabilities. One of the values attributed to navigators is the fact that they represent all community employment service entities, and are not invested in the success of one program over others. Job seekers see them as a neutral entity. In addition, because of the inherent complexities of the systems within the One-Stop, there is often the need to know how to ask the right questions to become connected with the right services. Since most customers do not know how to ask the right questions, it is often helpful to talk to the navigator to make this connection. This has become a valuable element, and it makes sense that all of our customers might benefit by having a navigator.

One indication of Iowa's success in implementation is the fact that Iowa's Lead Navigator and Program Coordinator have been requested to participate in the training of state leads in rounds 2 and 3 of the national implementation. The Program Coordinator and Lead Navigator have also facilitated an Iowa team in participating in a brain-storming session with officials from DOL and SSA in Washington DC last winter in determining how One-Stop employment systems can be effective as Employment Networks in their Ticket to Work legislation. This has resulted in the state of Iowa's application to become an Employment Network, and SSA's interest in supporting the State of Iowa in this effort – and demonstrate that this investment can be made to effectively support the continuation of the navigator role in One-Stops with diminished federal funding from other sources.

### ***Iowa's Future with the Navigator Program***

In light of the Governor's initiative to address the growing worker shortage in the state of Iowa, it makes sense to continue this collaborative effort to increase the inclusion of people with disabilities in employment. This effort will improve service access beyond people with disabilities as well. SSA has identified more than 88,000 lowans that are SSA disability beneficiaries targeted for employment support through their Ticket to Work program. In addition, there are many other lowans with disabilities who are not on Social Security disability. Focus groups have indicated that there are many lowans with disabilities who do not recognize the workforce center system as a resource to them. The emphasis of the navigator program is designed to address this service perception and access.

At this point in Iowa's implementation of the Navigator program, we currently have 10 navigators covering the state. The Lead Navigator works in Support of the Navigators, while the Program Coordinator supports the State Partners and local leadership in providing direction to the navigators. In order to provide statewide coverage, navigators provide assistance in more than one region and compliment the efforts of other newly developed tools, such as the disability employment specialists that have become part of the PROMISE JOBS system, and the Community Work Incentive Coordinators available through WIPA. Funding has been made available through the Department of Labor (with a 10% match through other sources) through the end of June, 2008.