

## Resources to Build Relationships with Employers and to Support the Agencies

Now in its third year, The Rhode Island Cross Disability Coalition, and Rhode Island Developmental Disabilities Council (RIDDC) have collaborated on projects under the Transformation Grant awarded by the State of Rhode Island's Department of Behavioral Healthcare, Developmental Disabilities & Hospitals (BHDDH) to create relationships with employers which then creates opportunities to enhance the personal futures of people with disabilities either in wage jobs or potential business-within-a-business connections. At the same time, we have worked to enhance the practical business skills and nurture the relationships with prospective employers. The progress of educating and changing perspectives steadily continues to evolve.

The "RI WINS—Workforce Investment and New Solutions" newsletter offers an opportunity to share that process and the progress.

In this issue, we invite prospective employers to take advantage of the Employer And Assistance resource Network on Disability's Small Business Toolkit <https://askearn.org/page/small-business-toolkit>. The toolkit attests to the strengths of hiring people with disabilities, documenting and reinforcing the same benefits that our agencies share with businesses. For a closer look at the values and advantages to small businesses, please check out this resource.

In keeping with the project's mission, the RIDDC serves as a resource for agencies...

## Why Disability Agencies Should Join a Chamber of Commerce

### *And How to Make the Most of It*

Over the past year, several agencies participated in training programs to learn how to more effectively connect with businesses, to gain insight about how to help them and their bottom line while also helping their job seekers land a job – creating a mutually beneficial relationship. Joining a Chamber of Commerce



Lauren Slocum, Executive Director of the RICOC

creates an additional avenue for developing business relationships, also for mutual benefit.

Lauren Slocum, Executive Director of the RI Central Chamber of Commerce, explained not only the benefits of membership, but also the importance of the prospective selecting the right match for his or her goals, and how agencies can maximize the return on their investment.

Why Join A Chamber? Her first message was succinct and clear: "With any business, but especially one people don't truly understand - having someone in your corner matters." For DD agencies, that support can make a measurable difference.

How that happens was integral to the training session, as many may recall. Clearly, that message resonates throughout her organization, starting at the top.

## *Start With Your Goals*

Before joining any chamber, agencies should ask one key question: "If we sat down in 12 months and said, 'Was this worth it?' what would that look like?". She answered as quickly as she asked the question: Some agencies may want:

- *Business connections for employment placements*
- *New vendor relationships*
- *Increased visibility*
- *Fundraising support*
- *Community education opportunities*

Logically, Chamber membership works best when you are clear about what you hope to achieve.

She continued: “Don’t just tell me what you do. Tell me how what you do benefits your customers and clients. Why is it important? Why does it matter?” These business basics - familiar and not-to-be-forgotten - apply at Chamber meetings, too. Recall that shift - from describing services to describing impact - is where meaningful business relationships begin.

### *Speak the Language of Business*

One of the biggest barriers agencies face is positioning. Keenly aware of industry-specific parlance, she noted, “If you aren’t speaking the same language, they’re not going to understand what you can really bring to the table.” She is also aware of the issues agencies and job developers confront.

“Instead of leading with limitations, lead with strengths.” Business acumen and first-hand experience indicated that she knows of what she speaks. “Don’t tell me you have a disabled individual who can help my company. Tell me you have someone who’s great at data entry and just needs a magnifier on their screen. It’s all in the positioning.”

Businesses respond to solutions: reliability, productivity, morale, skills - not diagnoses.

Her comments made clear that Chamber participation provides a safe space to practice that positioning, refine messaging, and gain confidence – demonstrating another practical benefit.

### *The Power of Direct Connection*

In addition to the Why Join a Chamber, Lauren suggested some of the best practices. “If an agency can only attend one chamber event per month, the recommendation is clear: “Come to Leads Lunch. It’s speed dating for business.”

She also reinforced what makes a productive Chamber membership, less daunting to the uninitiated. Those familiar with Crandell training or not, the concepts are familiar.

In a structured setting, agencies can:

- *Ask employers what skills they need*
- *Share training initiatives*
- *Practice concise messaging*
- *Build warm contacts instead of making cold calls*

“If I was smiling and said hi and gave them a good, warm, fuzzy feeling because I shook their hand, there’s a different relationship than driving by a billboard.” Her demeanor and sense of humor would make any newbie to networking feel at ease.

Joining an association or an organization may seem to require that additional time to be carved out of already busy and demanding schedules. She decompressed that concern, and added that there is great value in the member organization inviting other members – creating growth and opportunities for others responsible for relationship building. Relationships turn cold outreach into warm follow-up



### *You Don’t Have to Do It Alone*

Many chambers assign an Ambassador to new members - a volunteer business leader who helps them navigate events and introductions. “Just like agencies offer a support system, that business has a support system within the chamber.”

Ambassadors can:

- *Meet you at your first event*
- *Help you prepare a 60-second introduction*
- *Introduce you to key contacts*
- *Suggest which events fit your goals*

And here's an important reminder: "It doesn't have to be the executive director who attends. Send whoever understands your mission best and can make strong connections."

In fact, often the most effective representative is the person who:

- *Interacts directly with employers*
- *Understands workforce development goals*
- *Is eager to build relationships*

Chamber membership belongs to the organization - not just one individual.

### ***Beyond Placements: Hidden Returns***

Return on investment isn't always immediate funding, but it is a well-known business metric. "We see people that don't necessarily get customers - but they secure vendors, make key contacts, and strengthen relationships," all of which contribute to business goals, in both the for-profit and non-profit sectors.

Nonprofits have gained:

- Volunteer mentors
- In-kind donations
- Board prospects
- Strategic partners
- Professional services
- Business counseling through resources like SCORE and Small Business Development Center

Sometimes the value is access to the right conversation at the right time.

### ***A Win - Win Approach***

Chambers exist to strengthen business and grow community - together. "You've got to build community and strengthen business at the same time," she explains. Focusing on disability agencies, that means:

- *Helping businesses understand inclusion*
- *Learning what employers truly need*
- *Positioning individuals as solutions*
- *Building confidence in workplace partnerships*

And perhaps most importantly, "How do I make

your life better? Take away a pain point. Make it more productive," Lauren speaks the language of the membership as fluently as she does the of the agencies who provide service to our I/DD community.

During the conversation, Lauren was clearly an ambassador for Chambers statewide. She also stated that it was important for people to find the right fit for their own organization. Not all organizations offer the same benefits - or project the same "personality." (For example, not all chambers offer an ambassador.)

When agencies frame their work in those terms, doors open. Opening doors is the purpose of this new relationship with the RI Central Chamber of Commerce. Particularly noteworthy and not surprisingly, in the conversation, Lauren demonstrated her interest in learning about the agencies, their needs and goals, just as the previous training had taught our own participants. Energized and ready to help, she also provided helpful tips proven to make the first experience positive, and future meeting experiences more productive. Check the next issue for more...

### **Employer Engagement: Shifting from Charity to True Business Partnership**



Jennifer White - CEO of Able Opportunities Inc.

On December 10, 2025 the RI Cross Disability Coalition and RIDDC organized a statewide training program with Jennifer White for 20 staff from DD community agencies on the topic of "Employer Engagement Successful Innovative Business Model Tools." Jennifer discussed tools agency employment staff can utilize to strengthen their supports to connect with employers

and identify the best match possible for potential job openings within a business. She also covered business model tools that meet the bottom line for a business and why it's beneficial to hire people with disabilities.

### *What Is Employer Engagement?*

What does meaningful employer engagement really look like, and how can it transform opportunities for people with disabilities? During a recent visit to the RIDDC quarterly meeting, Jennifer White, CEO of Able Opportunities Inc., which focuses on "Business Minded Employer Engagement" briefly shared valuable insights - and key takeaways.

During that conversation, she challenged a long-standing assumption head-on: "We think the barrier to employment is ignorance of the employer or the discriminatory practice of the employer. But when we ask employers, they say, 'I want to do it, but I just don't have the time or the money.'"

That insight reframes the entire conversation. The issue isn't willingness - it's alignment.

### *From "Helping" to Partnering*

For too long, disability employment efforts have approached businesses with a charitable mindset. But that framing can actually create barriers, according to Jennifer. "We're not here to help. Our job now is to really understand how to be a business partner."

Instead of asking employers to "do good," this approach focuses on helping them solve real operational challenges, such as improving efficiency, reducing costs, and strengthening their workforce.

### *Speaking the Language of Business*

A key theme that emerged is the importance of how agencies present themselves. "We're really not marketing ourselves as business-minded people." How different the conversation with a prospective employer becomes, for example, when she positions it as: "We need 15 minutes, and we bring in cost analysis for each of the positions and production charts from the people using the app that we invented that show the productivity levels, and they study them and ask us to do more."

Employer engagement requires more than relationship-building; it requires fluency in business needs. That includes:

- *Understanding workflow and productivity gaps*
- *Identifying where companies are "bleeding money"*
- *Offering clear, data-driven solutions*

As she continued: "We go in as new manufacturing specialists - what comes in, what comes out, where are you bleeding money and where can we help?" This basic concept is often presented to agencies in training sessions; Jennifer offers her take on it.

### *Using Data to "Break the Myth"*

One of the most powerful tools in engaging employers is data. "We use math to break the myth that hiring people with disabilities is only a charitable act instead of a sound business decision," she says with a knowing smile. By presenting cost analyses and productivity data, employers can clearly see the value. In one example, a hospital partnership revealed measurable impact: "Right now, we save the hospital \$87,000 a quarter by restructuring tasks and roles." That kind of outcome shifts the narrative from accommodation as a cost to inclusion as a business advantage.

"Employers feel like they can only do it in times of ease, when they're flush, not when they're growing, not when there's a crisis. In fact, that was when we

Return on Investment Calculations

Differed Costs	#Hires	1 month	3 months	6 months	9 months	1 year
48% Less Turnover	10	\$11,520	\$11,520	\$11,520	\$11,520	\$11,520
Work Opportunity Tax Credit (WOTC)	10	\$24,000	\$24,000	\$24,000	\$24,000	\$24,000
On-the-Job Training Contract	5	\$13,650	\$40,950	\$40,950	\$40,950	\$40,950
Ticket to Work (TTW)	5	\$1,500	\$4,500	\$9,000	\$13,500	\$18,000
Cost Analysis of Customized Jobs	10	\$24,925	\$74,776	\$149,552	\$224,328	\$299,104
<b>Totals</b>		<b>\$75,595</b>	<b>\$155,746</b>	<b>\$235,022</b>	<b>\$314,298</b>	<b>\$393,574</b>

- ▶ Employees with disabilities average a 48% lower turnover rate, saving approximately \$2400 (Walgreens Model, JEC 2011, see tab).
- ▶ Work Opportunity Tax Credit (WOTC) = \$2,400 per hire  
<https://www.doleta.gov/business/incentives/opptax/>
- ▶ On-the-Job Training (OJT) contract with local vocational rehab agency for new hires with an open VR case Average contract, 3 months of wages at 50% coverage at hourly rate (\$15.75 used in this calculation) to compensate for extended learning curve (employer/employee)  
<https://www.dol.gov/owcp/dfec/regs/compliance/DFECfolio/RCHB/part5.htm>
- ▶ Ticket-To-Work (TTW) = Average \$300 per hire per month (50% eligible - long term revenue source, will last up to 5 years per hire)  
<https://www.ssa.gov/work/>

\* NOTE- calculated at 50% OJT and 50% TTW

can help the most.” That’s when Jennifer reported the very significant total savings. She describes this type of employment project a “Business lab” - it’s consistent with her objective, fact-based, data gathering approach. Valid and reliable. Also, with successful results

### *Rethinking Roles and Value*

The work also challenges assumptions about job design. Tasks often assigned to highly trained staff, especially repetitive or process-driven work, can be restructured.

This creates a win-win for employers and employees:

- *Employees with disabilities gain meaningful, skilled roles*
- *Employers free up specialized staff for higher-value work*

Hearing directly from an employer about the productivity impact of restructuring work, she announced, “It was a lightbulb moment - the financial cost of having highly trained people doing repetitive tasks.”

### *Building Direct Employer–Employee Connections*



Another critical shift is moving away from over-mediated support models. Backed by experience, she adds, “The two things that change motivation and production more than anything else are understanding what you’re earning, and direct access to your employer.” Empowering individuals with tools such as visual systems, self-advocacy videos, and communication supports helps them:

- *Navigate their roles independently*
- *Communicate directly with supervisors*

- *Build confidence and ownership*

This reduces reliance on job coaches as intermediaries and strengthens workplace integration. The result is a better employee for the business.

### *A Call to the Field*

For agencies and workforce professionals, the takeaway is clear: employer engagement must evolve.

It’s *not* about:

- *Making a friend at a company*
- *Leading with a mission-driven pitch*
- *Or positioning employment as a favor*

It is about:

- *Bringing solutions*
- *Demonstrating value*
- *Following through as a reliable partner*

Practical, sensible and realistic. “We’re here to help the company partner. And because of it, we see people really become themselves: gain skills, earn real wages, and access better opportunities.”

When employer engagement is done right, it doesn’t just open doors, it builds sustainable, mutually beneficial relationships that work for everyone. There is the return on investment ROI that businesses value. P.S. A recurring theme is the value of partnership. This approach was evident in the interview with Lauren Slocum from the Chamber of Commerce. Efforts such as chamber partnerships and targeted trainings are also helping bridge this gap, equipping agencies to better communicate with employers and understand their needs.

### **From Opportunity to Action: Agencies Join Chambers**

To introduce this initiative, the team, led by Sue Babin, explained the background and developed an application to help determine the needs and readiness of agencies to participate. The RIDDC and RI Cross Disability Coalition offered an opportunity for 6 adult

DD Agencies to be selected to receive a paid one-year membership to one of RI's Chambers of Commerce. Chambers are established to support and connect local businesses with each other through networking events, advocate for their needs, share best practice and foster new opportunities. They were interested in helping agencies connect with Chamber staff and their members to build new relationships and ultimately secure potential job leads for adults with disabilities in RI. This work is part of their Employer Engagement activities under the DD Transformation Grant.

When the Rhode Island Cross Disability Coalition (RICDC) funded Chamber of Commerce memberships for developmental disability agencies, the goal was simple: create stronger, more direct connections between agencies and the business community. Two additional DD agencies, Spurwink and Project Friends, also submitted applications and have recently joined the Central RI Chamber of Commerce. Two applications from two other DD agencies are currently pending.

Now, as those memberships begin, agencies like The Fogarty Center and Life Inc. are turning that opportunity into intentional action. Our initial interviews were with Kiernan O'Donnell, Director of Day, Youth in Transition and Employment Services - The Fogarty Center, President - RIAPSE, APSE - National Board of Directors, ESPCC Liaison (for accreditation), and Liz Wiedenhofer, Executive Director, LIFE INC.(Living in Fulfilling Environments), based in Bristol, and expanding into Pawtucket and Central Falls.

Prior to joining, Liz had filled out the RICDC/RIDDC Chamber of Commerce Connections form, and



Liz Wiedenhofer and Kiernan O'Donnell

indicated that joining the Northern RI Chamber of Commerce would help LIFE INC expand their service connections into new areas of the state, specifically in relation to their new move to Pawtucket.

Similarly, Kie noted that the northern chamber is uniquely positioned with industries that are typically not found in areas of the state that are of interest to some of the job seekers that they serve.

### *How the Initiative Came Together*

The memberships were made possible through the RICDC's Transformation Grant supportive funding, with coordination through the Rhode Island Developmental Disabilities Council. Rather than leaving agencies to navigate access on their own, the Coalition removed a key barrier - cost - and opened the door.

As Kie explained: "The opportunity came across... as a grant we could apply for. When it came back around, we didn't want to waste any time, but we also didn't want to just join. We wanted to be intentional about how we use it." That intentionality is a defining theme for both agencies.

### *A Strategy - Not Just a Membership*

For Kie and his team, chamber participation is directly tied to strengthening employment outcomes. "This is really to assist our supported employment services:

How can we engage businesses, form relationships, and take our employment services to the next step?"

Rather than relying solely on traditional outreach, the chamber provides something different: access to a concentrated network of businesses - and decision-makers. "If you can find a resource that helps bridge the gap - where you're seen as a resource like any other business - that's where you get the chance to make connections."

At Life Inc., Liz sees the chamber as a critical tool for expansion into new communities: "We're new to this (northern RI) area. The chamber is such a good opportunity for us to really get connected, get our name out there, and learn about the community in a way we haven't been able to before."

## *Building Employer Connections - With Purpose*

Both agencies are approaching membership with clear structure and internal planning.

Kie's organization is engaging multiple levels of staff: "We're being very intentional about pairing the right opportunities with the right people, from job developers to leadership - so we can really maximize what this offers."

Similarly, Liz's team is embedding chamber participation into staff roles and growth: "One of our managers is taking the lead - both on expanding services in the area and on building those chamber connections."

The focus is not just attendance - it's alignment.

## *Moving Beyond Traditional Outreach*

Historically, outreach to employers has often been fragmented or one-directional. Chamber membership offers a different model, one rooted in relationship-building. Liz described the contrast clearly: "We've always built connections in the community, but this gives us a concentrated group of businesses where we can go, meet people, and really understand the area."

Kie added that the value goes even deeper: "Our hope isn't that this is the one thing - it's that it becomes another resource we can leverage."

That includes:

- *Identifying workforce needs directly from employers*
- *Creating job shadowing and exploration opportunities*
- *Developing customized employment pathways*
- *Informing training programs based on real business input*

A key theme that emerged from both conversations is that this initiative is not just about what agencies gain - it's about what businesses gain as well.

Kie emphasized: "It's really a two-way street. Businesses have access to our workforce, our services, and our networks - just as we're learning from them."

Liz reinforced the importance of visibility and shared understanding: "Just being at the table, having conversations - that's how we start to break down barriers and build real partnerships."

## *Changing Perceptions, Creating Opportunity*

Both leaders also spoke to a broader goal: shifting how businesses view individuals with disabilities. Liz shared a powerful reflection from her early career: "We have to be stigma busters. People not only deserve the right to work - they can be your absolute best employee."

Through consistent, face-to-face interaction, chambers provide a natural environment to:

- *Challenge misconceptions*
- *Highlight strengths and capabilities*
- *Demonstrate real success stories*
- *Build employer confidence*

## *Looking Ahead*

While these memberships are just beginning, both agencies are already thinking long-term, not only about their own outcomes, but about what this could mean for the field as a whole.

Kie captured that vision: "We really shouldn't approach this in a silo. The goal is to learn what's working, share it, and hopefully scale it so more providers can benefit." This initiative represents more than a new opportunity - it's a shift in approach.

By stepping into business spaces, building relationships, and learning directly from employers, agencies are creating stronger pathways to employment, and stronger connections between Rhode Island's disability community and its business community.

As of this writing, Spurwink and Project Friends also have also received Chamber memberships through this initiative.