

## **Resources to Build Relationships with Employers and to Support the Agencies** *Speakers Bureau Expands Outreach & Offerings*

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.

The RI Cross Disability Coalition in collaboration with the RI Developmental Disabilities Council (RIDDC) is implementing a Transformation Grant project funded by the State Division of Developmental Disabilities (DD) to schedule and conduct an anonymous in-person survey with RI employers who have hired people with developmental disabilities. The purpose is to determine the economic impact hiring individuals with disabilities has on their business organization, their employees, the workplace environment and provide an opportunity for their feedback to other employers in RI. Employers who have participated in this were also asked if they would be interested in a more in-depth interview for our RI WINS Newsletter so we can share their hiring experience statewide. A number of them gladly said yes! This article is the first one and it is with Alison Bologna, Business Owner of SHRI Studio & Service Corps.

### **Creating Opportunity Through Inclusion:** *How Shri is Redefining Employment for People with Developmental Disabilities*

"Beyond doing something good that feels good, will it help your operations get a job done?" That simple question changed everything for Alison Bologna, founder of Shri Studio & Service Corps (SHRI) in Pawtucket.

Today, Shri Yoga has become much more than a yoga studio. It has evolved into a thriving community where adults with intellectual and developmental disabilities (I/DD) are not only participants - they are teachers, employees, leaders, and valued members of a growing social enterprise.

For employers wondering whether hiring individuals with developmental disabilities can work in a business setting, Alison's answer is clear: "Many of our best hires to date have been adults with disabilities. They come to Shri with the same enthusiasm that I bring to this work, and that's why I'll continue hiring and supporting this community."



Alison Bologna, Business Owner of SHRI Studio & Service Corps.

## From Student to Employee

One of Shri Yoga's most innovative initiatives is its Adaptive Yoga Teacher Training Program.

Students who demonstrate commitment and passion are invited to complete the same rigorous 80-hour adaptive yoga teacher training as other instructors, with modifications that allow them to build on their strengths. After completing classroom instruction, apprenticeships, written reflections, and supervised teaching experiences, graduates become paid yoga instructors.

What began with one graduate has grown steadily.

Today, eight adaptive yoga students have become paid teachers, with more currently completing apprenticeships through partnerships with agencies including AccessPoint RI, LIFE Inc., Flying Shuttles Art Studio, and others. There are five certified adaptive teachers now with three more nearing certification, which will bring SHRI to 8 total by the fall.

"We serve adults with disabilities, but we also train adults with disabilities who have a commitment to the practice to become paid yoga teachers."

The training is intentionally inclusive. Participants begin alongside every other teacher trainee before moving into person-centered experiences that provide hands-on practice teaching adaptive classes. "The class is the class. The first weekend everyone trains together. The approach may be a little different afterward, but I expect the same 80-hour commitment from everyone."



## Building Careers Beyond the Classroom

Employment opportunities at Shri extend well beyond yoga instruction. Adults with developmental disabilities currently serve as:

- Adaptive yoga instructors
- Studio assistants
- Head of housekeeping
- Event support staff
- Board members
- Members of the events committee

Employees help open the studio, greet participants, prepare classrooms, clean and restock facilities, assist instructors, organize community events, and increasingly take on leadership responsibilities.

Alison envisions an even bigger future. "My succession plan is that someday capable, skilled, enthusiastic students will take over many of these roles, including some administrative responsibilities."

## The Power of the Right Partnerships

Alison is quick to credit the organizations that make successful employment possible.

One of those key partnerships has been with The Fogarty Center, where employment specialist Kie O'Donnell helped Shri develop a thoughtful hiring process that benefits both employer and employee.

Rather than simply filling positions, the process focused on understanding the needs of both sides. "Kie really pushed me not to settle, but to define exactly what Shri needed. He reminded me that this has to work for Shri just as much as it works for the employee."

That guidance included:

- Developing clear job descriptions
- Matching candidates based on interests and strengths
- Providing job coaches
- Coordinating transportation
- Creating shadowing opportunities before hiring
- Supporting employees after they began working

Describing Kie as more than a partner, she notes, “I almost consider Kie a mentor. He helped me advocate for what the business needed while making sure it worked for everyone.”

She believes that collaborative approach is one of the biggest reasons the program has succeeded. “It really is a team effort. Every employee has someone from Shri and someone from their agency supporting them. In addition to onboarding with Kie at The Fogarty Center, Kristin McManus helps us with all weekly operations overseeing the job coaches, which is invaluable.”

### **Matching Strengths to Jobs**

One lesson Alison hopes other employers learn is that successful hiring begins with understanding the actual work that needs to be done. When Shri needed housekeeping support, The Fogarty Center helped identify an employee who preferred working independently in a quiet environment.

The result? A perfect match. “When Pa Yang is on vacation, the studio isn’t as clean. Bottom line: we really miss Pa when she’s gone. Nobody else does the job that Pa does.”



Pa Yang at SHRI Studio & Service Corps.

Rather than lowering expectations, The Fogarty encouraged Alison to define them clearly. “The Fogarty Center helped me fine-tune the job description. They told me not to be shy about what Shri needed. It became a mutually beneficial relationship.”

### **Dependability That Employers Notice**

One of the biggest surprises has been the remarkable consistency and reliability of Shri’s employees with disabilities. Adaptive yoga instructors submit attendance records and teaching notes - essential for payroll - more consistently than almost anyone else. “Their attendance and class notes are typically in before anybody else’s.”

They rarely miss shifts and require very few substitutes. They arrive enthusiastic and ready to work. “Very dependable, super enthusiastic, happy to serve, grateful for the opportunity - and that goes both ways.”

### **Person-Centered Supports Make Success Possible**

Shri also demonstrates how simple accommodations can make a tremendous difference.

Examples include:

- Adaptive cleaning equipment selected for an employee with physical disabilities
- Supplies positioned at accessible heights
- Communication signs placed on doors for employee safety
- Digital lesson binders developed with DSP support
- iPads programmed by participants to lead portions of yoga classes independently

These accommodations are individualized, but not complicated. As Alison explains, “It’s very person-centered. We take the time to understand each person’s strengths and what supports help them succeed.”

### **More Than Employment**

For Alison, hiring adults with developmental disabilities isn’t simply about filling jobs. It’s about

building community. Shri includes affordable housing, partnerships with community organizations, an on-site café operated by LIFE Inc., Flying Shuttles Art Studio, community arts programming, and countless opportunities for leadership and social connection. “It’s not just an apartment building,” Alison says. “It’s a community.”

### A Message to Other Employers

Many employers assume hiring people with developmental disabilities will require significant additional effort. Alison’s experience has been exactly the opposite. “People think it’s more work. That has not been my experience at all because of how the program is built - with job coaches, shadowing, agency partnerships, and clear expectations.”

In fact, she is so confident in the model that she welcomes other employers to visit Shri Yoga and see it firsthand. “If employers want to learn how we do it, I’d be happy to invite them in. Come meet our employees. Talk with The Fogarty Center. See what’s possible.”

Her advice is simple:

- Start with relationships.
- Partner with organizations that understand both business and disability supports.
- Clearly define your needs.
- Be willing to see potential instead of limitations.

The results may surprise you. As Alison puts it, “Teaching yoga, cleaning the studio, helping with events - these are all jobs that I do. They’re also jobs

that adults with developmental disabilities can do extremely well.”

For Shri Yoga, inclusive employment isn’t just good for the community. It’s good for business.



St Patrick's Day Dating 101

### Speakers Bureau Expands Outreach and Offerings

The Speakers Bureau is expanding its outreach and placements as well as its presentations. Added this year are: Dating 101, which has already had a strong turnout.”Internet Safety” and Self-Direction Services presentations are complete and scheduling is an ongoing process.

For additional information, check the website: <https://www.ricrossdisability.org/speakers-bureau> or to schedule a free presentation for your business or organization, please contact Tanja: [Tanja@riddc.org](mailto:Tanja@riddc.org).



**Internet Safety**

Presented By the RI Cross Disability Coalition  
Speakers Bureau



“Internet Safety” was the featured topic at the Warwick Public Library for the West Bay Residential Agency.

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### What Is Internet Safety?

- Internet safety is:
  - Protecting personal information (using strong passwords, 2-factor authentication, and being cautious of sharing sensitive data)
  - Security measures – making sure devices are updated, and safeguarding devices from viruses and malware
  - Identifying Phishing scams and false websites