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## Using Braided Funding Strategies to Advance Employer Hiring Initiatives that Include People with Disabilities

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Over the past several years, a number of employers across the United States have established recruitment and hiring initiatives that explicitly include individuals with disabilities (e.g., Lengnick-Hall, 2007; Rutkowski, Daston, Van Kuiken, & Riehle, 2006; Boni-Saenz, Heinemann, Crown, & Emanuel, 2005; McMahon et al., 2004; Krepcio & Cooper, 2007). While this type of targeted recruitment, hiring, and retention is an exciting development for individuals with disabilities, employers continue to experience significant challenges both identifying employees with disabilities with the skills they need for the jobs available and finding service provider agencies that understand and can help businesses find qualified workers (e.g., Domzal, Houtenville, & Sharma, 2008; Kessler Foundation & National Organization on Disability, 2010).

There is a small but growing body of literature that describes promising model programs in which businesses recruit and hire people with disabilities in partnership with employment service providers that connect them with qualified workers with disabilities (e.g., Rutkowski, Daston, Van Kuiken, & Riehle, 2006; O'Day, 2009; Nicholas, Kauder, Baker, & Krepcio, 2011). These exceptional examples depend on many factors to make them successful, including: interested leadership from the employer(s), service providers that are knowledgeable about businesses and their workforce needs, the ability of provider/partner organizations to be able to access qualified candidates, and resources from a variety of funding streams and organizations to make the model work (e.g., Nicholas, Kauder, Baker, & Krepcio, 2011; O'Day, 2009).

Local program operators face many challenges in developing and making these employer response models successful, but a particular issue involves pulling together the resources (both partners and funding streams) necessary to implement and operate the model's services and supports. While there are numerous state and locally operated programs and services available to support individuals with disabilities in their efforts to become and remain employed, they are operated by different public and nonprofit agencies (e.g., the federal/state vocational rehabilitation system, the local school system, the One-Stop Career Center system, and many community-based employment service providers). These organizations are, in turn, supported by funding streams that have varying goals, priorities, outcome expectations, and requirements. In order to achieve job seeker employment goals and respond to employer hiring needs, it is often necessary to access funds from more than one program, agency, or funding stream. Program administrators and staff are faced with the challenge of developing effective strategies to braid funding and services from these different programs and funding sources to help individuals with disabilities prepare for, secure, and retain employment.<sup>1</sup>

## The Necessity for Braided Funding Strategies in Models that are Responsive to Employer Needs

As noted above, there is a complex array of programs, services, and public categorical funding streams that support individuals with disabilities to become and remain employed. Some funding streams and programs, such as Social Security disability benefits, vocational rehabilitation services, and special education, are targeted specifically to people with disabilities. Other programs serve a broader clientele, including people with disabilities, among others. Each program or service has its own eligibility criteria and application procedures, and programs are operated by different agencies and organizations. Frequently, individuals with disabilities might need the services or supports from multiple programs or systems in order to achieve their employment goals. For example, one program may be able to finance training and placement services while another may be able to provide transportation, assistive technology, or the services of a job coach. All may be needed for an individual to get and keep a job. A significant challenge in the disability and employment field is the will, skill, and ability of state and local program administrators and staff to develop effective strategies to braid funding and services from the different programs to achieve the job seekers' employment goals and to meet employer needs for qualified workers.

Braiding funding, for purposes of this report, means the access to and coordination of multiple sources of funding to provide services and supports needed by people with disabilities to obtain and retain a job. While there is literature that discusses both blending and braiding resources strategies for achieving integrated service delivery (National Collaborative on Workforce and Disability, 2006; Flynn & Hayes, 2003; CLASP, 2011), there is far more evidence in the literature of braided funded strategies being used, especially those involving local partnerships and collaborations to fund "to work" activities for individuals with disabilities. In braiding strategies, funding streams remain visible and are used in common to produce greater strength, efficiency, and/or effectiveness.

Undertaking braided funding strategies takes on an additional sense of urgency when employers would like to recruit and hire people with disabilities but find they must rely on one or several local employment service providers to assemble the services or funding needed, possibly from multiple sources. A recent study by the NTAR Leadership Center (Nicholas, Kauder, Baker, & Krepcio, 2011) describes several hiring and recruitment initiatives being undertaken by both major national employers and small businesses that have learned that it is good business to hire qualified workers with disabilities. While the profiles in the study note that people with disabilities represent an underused source of talent, typically these employers rely on partnerships with local service providers for assistance in outreach, recruitment, screening, training, and follow-along supports for employees with disabilities. These partnerships generally involve one entity coordinating the activities of the participating agencies and serving as a single point of contact for the employer. The employers have specific workforce needs, human resources processes, training requirements, and workplace protocols. As noted in the study, a significant challenge for the community partnerships, and specifically the single point of contact, is their ability to braid resources from multiple sources to respond to the employer's specific workforce needs.

To help local policymakers and administrators better understand the relationship between these model programs for hiring people with disabilities and braided funding strategies, this report profiles four employer-responsive models that have gained increasing national attention. These models have in common a number of factors:

1. The presence of an employer (or group of employers) that wants to recruit and hire individuals with disabilities;
2. A written or ad hoc partnership agreement between the employer(s) and one or more community organizations that provide valuable workforce supports and services to help the employer(s) meet their human resource needs; and
3. The use of braided funding strategies, which are essential to making the partnership and the model work.

While rigorous evaluations of these models have not been conducted, and outcome data are limited, the goal of this report is to identify and describe a few of the key nationally recognized employer-responsive models that are operating across the nation, outline the various forms they may take, as well as describe and explain the various funding sources and braiding strategies they are using to make the models work.

## The Lowe's Distribution Center (Pittston, Pennsylvania) Model

Lowe's is the second largest home improvement retailer worldwide and the seventh largest retailer in the United States. The company, which was #47 on the Fortune 500 List in 2010, has 1,725 stores in the United States, Canada, and Mexico, and 234,000 employees.<sup>2</sup> In 2008, when Lowe's was planning for the opening of its new regional distribution center in Pittston, Pennsylvania, the company sought to partner with community groups that support people with disabilities to assist with recruiting qualified applicants with disabilities. According to Stephen Szilagyi, Senior Vice President of Distribution, Lowe's was inspired by Walgreens' success in hiring people with disabilities through an outreach program in its distribution center system. The initiative is consistent with the company's strong community values. "It's not charity," he said. "We are looking for great employees" (personal communication with Stephen Szilagyi, August 19, 2010). Of critical importance to Lowe's was finding a knowledgeable community partner to help find and recruit qualified job candidates. In implementing the disability outreach effort, the company sought community partners "with our (e.g., the company's) goals in mind" (personal communication with Mike Kinger, August 25, 2010).

Lowe's established a relationship with the Arc of Luzerne County, Pennsylvania (the Arc), which is an advocacy organization for people with intellectual and developmental disabilities that does not provide direct services. The Arc assisted Lowe's in planning the initiative and provided technical assistance on disability issues. The Arc also assisted Lowe's in recruiting two additional community partners to provide various support services for future Lowe's employees with disabilities. According to the Arc's Executive Director, the agency sent out information community wide on the opportunity to partner with Lowe's. Of the 15 local service providers that expressed interest, Lowe's selected two: Step by Step and Keystone Community Resources. Step by Step is a contractor to both the Pennsylvania Office of Vocational Rehabilitation and the county Mental Health and Mental Retardation Board. Keystone Community Resources was a contractor for the County Mental Health and Mental Retardation Board and became an Office of Vocational Rehabilitation contractor after being selected as a partner in the Lowe's initiative (personal communication with Pamela Zotynia, September 3, 2010). The Arc of Luzerne County established the responsibilities of each partner through verbal agreement and serves as the single point of contact for Lowe's regarding the activities of the community partnership by communicating with and responding directly to local Lowe's management. The agency coordinates the response to any needs articulated by Lowe's (e.g., for recruits, about an issue or other matters) with Step by Step and Keystone either by telephone or in person. Table 1 shows the elements of the Lowe's Pittston model and the role of the partners.

**Table 1. Lowe's Pittston Model Partnerships**

Partner	Role
<b>Employer:</b>	
Lowe's (Pittston, Pennsylvania) Distribution Center	Recruits workforce. Supervises worker during trial period, determines his/her skills, and assesses need for on-the-job supports. Hires worker directly after a successful trial work period.
<b>Single Point of Contact:</b>	
The Arc of Luzerne County, Pennsylvania	Manages the relationship with Lowe's, coordinates all communication between partner agencies and Lowe's, handles service coordination and technical assistance.
<b>Community Service Providers:</b>	
Step by Step Keystone Community Resources	Conducts outreach and screening services for potential candidates, assists with adaptation of on-the-job training supports, provides job coaching and follow-along supports.
Luzerne Intermediate Unit 18 (regional education service agency)	Conducts outreach and provides job coaching for students in training.

Through the program, Lowe's has hired adults with a broad range of disabilities, including intellectual and developmental disabilities as well as visual and hearing impairments. Lowe's has established criteria for all of the employees that it hires. In addition, Lowe's has established criteria for its disability employment partners. For example, a core expectation for the partner agencies is that job coaches must be trained and certified by Lowe's for each job in the distribution center before they train and support an employee in the program.

In the Lowe's model, prospective employees undertake a paid trial work experience. The trial work experience typically lasts 45 days. A Lowe's supervisor oversees the trial work experience and the job seeker receives supports from a job coach from one of the community partner agencies. The trial work experience focuses initially on understanding the person's abilities, exploring the person's individual interests, and assessing the individual's need for supports. During the trial work period, the prospective employee is then trained for a specific job at the Lowe's distribution center.

The trial work experience period also provides job coaches from the partner agencies an opportunity to adapt an on-the-job-training strategy customized to each employee (for example, a sign language interpreter may be provided to support the training and development of a trainee with a hearing impairment) (personal communication with Fran Granahan, September 7, 2010). If the person successfully completes the training period, the individual is permanently placed within the facility. Employees with disabilities have every type of job and there are employees with disabilities in every department (personal communication with Mike Kinger, August 25, 2010). Once the employee is on the job at Lowe's, the two provider agency partners (Keystone and Step by Step) provide follow-along supports for the employees with disabilities at the distribution center. Keystone and Step by Step both have job coaches on site regularly.

In spring 2010, Lowe's began a partnership with Luzerne Intermediate Unit 18 (the area's regional education service agency) and its member school districts to provide placement for students with disabilities.<sup>3</sup> Students spend part of each day training for jobs at the distribution center with the support of a job coach employed by Luzerne Intermediate Unit 18. The program generally lasts for 45 days. If the student successfully completes the paid training, he/she is eligible to be hired by Lowe's after high school graduation.

As of October 2010, Lowe's had hired 48 people with disabilities at the Pittston distribution center through the company's outreach initiative. Lowe's reports that 158 individuals with disabilities have been hired at its distribution centers nationwide (personal communication with Stephen Szilagy, August 19, 2010).

### Lowe's Pittston Braided Funding Strategy

The model used by Lowe's outreach initiative at the Pittston distribution center relies on its community partners for supports, which are critical to its success. These supports include service coordination and technical assistance, outreach and screening, training for job seekers with disabilities, and follow-along supports. The following outlines the braided funding strategies used in the Lowe's Pittston model to provide these supports (illustrated in Table 2).

*Service Coordination and Technical Assistance.* Service coordination and technical assistance to Lowe's is provided by the Arc of Luzerne County. This agency receives no specific funding for these services. The Arc is an advocacy organization for people with disabilities funded through memberships and fundraising so the agency uses its own operating funds to serve in this role. According to Pamela Zotynia, the agency's Executive Director, the Arc views the Lowe's initiative as an extraordinary opportunity for independence and community inclusion for people with intellectual and developmental disabilities, which is consistent with the agency's mission and warrants the time spent coordinating the initiative.

*Outreach and Screening.* Outreach and screening services for potential candidates for positions at the Lowe's distribution center is conducted by the two provider agency partners, Step by Step and Keystone Community Resources, as an extension of their role as community rehabilitation providers for the Pennsylvania Office of Vocational Rehabilitation. Luzerne Intermediate Unit 18, the regional education services agency, using special education funds, recruits and screens students with disabilities for trial work experiences at Lowe's.

*Training.* Training of employees with disabilities at the Lowe's distribution center is conducted by job coaches from Step by Step and Keystone through vocational rehabilitation funding from the Pennsylvania Office of Vocational Rehabilitation. Students with disabilities receive training and on-site supports from job coaches funded by Luzerne Intermediate Unit 18.

*Follow-along Supports.* Both Step by Step and Keystone have contracts with their respective county mental health and mental retardation programs, which are able to fund follow-along supports for eligible employees. To date, the mental health and mental retardation programs have provided funding to cover transportation costs for some employees and have provided funding to Keystone for training and initial job coaching while it was pending approval as an Office of Vocational Rehabilitation community rehabilitation provider agency. Due to funding shortfalls, however, the mental health and mental retardation programs have not yet provided funding for follow-along supports. The agencies continue to provide these supports from agency funds because of their obligation to Office of Vocational Rehabilitation to provide follow-along for people placed in jobs with Office of Vocational Rehabilitation funding.

Table 2. Lowe's Pittston Model Braided Funding Strategy (Adults and Youth)

Services	Funding Stream	Partner
<b>Service Coordination and Technical Assistance</b>	General agency operating funds	The Arc of Luzerne County, Pennsylvania
<b>Outreach and Screening</b>	Vocational rehabilitation	Step by Step and Keystone Community Resources (vocational rehabilitation community rehabilitation providers)
	Special education	Luzerne Intermediate Unit 18 (regional education service agency)
<b>Training</b>	Vocational rehabilitation	Step by Step and Keystone Community Resources (vocational rehabilitation community rehabilitation providers)
	Special education	Luzerne Intermediate Unit 18 (regional education service agency)
<b>Follow-along Supports</b>	County mental health and mental retardation funding for eligible employees only; otherwise from agency general program funds	Step by Step and Keystone Community Resources (vocational rehabilitation community rehabilitation providers)
Transportation		
Supports for job retention		

## Project SEARCH, Cincinnati, Ohio

Project SEARCH is a unique and highly regarded program model for hiring and retaining individuals with significant disabilities that was developed at Cincinnati Children's Hospital Medical Center (CCHMC) in 1995 in response to a business need for reliable employees in the Emergency Department. Erin Riehle, who was at that time the Clinical Director of the CCHMC Emergency Department, led the development of the Project SEARCH employment program in an effort to prepare people with disabilities to meet the hospital's workforce needs.

Under the leadership of Ms. Riehle, CCHMC began development of the Project SEARCH program model to prepare adults with intellectual and developmental disabilities for entry-level hospital jobs. As part of this effort, the hospital initially established collaborative partnerships with Great Oaks Institute of Technology and Career Development, and the Hamilton County Developmental Disabilities Services. However, as the program evolved, it expanded to include a one-year high school transition program for students with disabilities in their last year of high school known as the Project SEARCH High School Transition program. Under the Project SEARCH High School Transition program, the Cincinnati Public Schools and the Ohio Rehabilitative Services Commission joined the partnership (Rutkowski, Daston, Van Kuiken, & Riehle, 2006; O'Day, 2009).

The Project SEARCH High School Transition model focuses on students 18 to 22 years of age who have significant cognitive and/or physical disabilities, have an Individualized Education Program, and have an interest in competitive employment. Students spend their final year of school at the hospital participating in classroom instruction to learn employment and independent living skills as well as engaging in a myriad of work experiences by rotating through unpaid internships at work sites (Rutkowski, Daston, Van Kuiken, & Riehle, 2006; O'Day, 2009).

Once the student has successfully completed the rotations, a job placement process is initiated in concert with a vocational rehabilitation counselor. The process is guided by a career goal developed from the student's experiences during the year (Rutkowski, Daston, Van Kuiken, & Riehle, 2006; O'Day, 2009). The hospital hires approximately 25% of the graduates each year and program staff assist the remaining graduates to find jobs in the community with employers that need the skills they have acquired (Nicholas, Kauder, Baker, & Krepcio, 2011). For the students hired by the hospital, program staff use task analysis and an innovative and flexible training process to teach the required skills for the respective job.

When the employee has completed services provided through vocational rehabilitation, follow-along supports are provided by retention specialists who are employees of the hospital. The retention specialists work with the youth and the job sites, assisting with such areas as accommodations, retraining when new skills are required, staff training in areas such as Americans with Disabilities Act requirements and disability etiquette, and, if necessary, providing employee assistance or termination counseling. This retention model is considered to be a cornerstone of Project SEARCH (Rutkowski, Daston, Van Kuiken, & Riehle, 2006).

According to Project SEARCH officials, the model has successfully created a pipeline of talent for CCHMC. As of October 2010, CCHMC had hired 62 employees as a result of the program (personal communication with Jennifer Linnabary, October 21, 2010). To date, the Project SEARCH model at CCHMC has been replicated at 140 sites in 42 states as well as the United Kingdom and Australia, predominantly in hospitals but also in other industries and the federal government (O'Day, 2009).

## Variations on the Project SEARCH Model

The replication of the Project SEARCH model has resulted in variations in partnerships and funding strategies. Project SEARCH provides a template for written partnership agreements to each replication site. The Project SEARCH model inherently requires that there be a source of start-up funds for planning and initial costs of the new Project SEARCH sites.

The Project SEARCH replication in New Hampshire illustrates successful implementation of the model. The program is operated primarily at St. Joseph's Hospital in Nashua, New Hampshire but involves other area hospitals as well. It was seeded by a grant from the state's Medicaid Infrastructure Grant, with LinkAbilities, a local nonprofit workforce organization, responsible for coordinating the program. There are also partnerships with eight area school systems, with a single school system acting as the lead — serving as the fiscal intermediary for the education funding and providing a teacher for the internships. Students do their first two rotations at St. Joseph's but have the option of doing their third rotation at two other collaborating hospitals. Based on the success of this program, the Medicaid Infrastructure Grant is supporting the development of five additional Project SEARCH replications throughout the state (personal communication with Emily Manire, November 8, 2010).

In Georgia, the Council on Developmental Disabilities recruits and coordinates Project SEARCH replication sites. According to Dottie Adams, Project SEARCH Coordinator for the Council, Georgia currently has 13 Project SEARCH sites and she is recruiting additional sites for the coming year. In addition to her support, the Council funds staff from Project SEARCH at CCHMC to assist in the development of the programs at each site. Some of the initial replication sites received start-up funding from the state vocational rehabilitation agency and the Department of Education (personal communication with Dottie Adams, February 14, 2011).

Finally, the Project SEARCH model at Seattle (Washington) Children's Hospital is another example of a successful implementation of the model. Program start-up seed money was provided by the King County Division of Developmental Disabilities, which also funded half of the cost for job coaches that provide on-site follow-along supports for the initial people hired by the hospital. Follow-along funding from the King County Division of Developmental Disabilities has been available for some subsequent hires. For those who do not have follow-along funding, the program relies on funding from Social Security Work Incentives to cover the costs of four to five hours per month of individual supports (personal communication with Lisa Fox, October 22, 2010).

## Project SEARCH Braided Funding Strategy

The local employer(s) that hosts Project SEARCH sites relies on community partners for funding to cover the costs of program development and start-up, internships, job placement and training, and follow-along supports for job retention. The following are strategies used by Project SEARCH sites in Cincinnati, Ohio; Seattle, Washington; Georgia; and Nashua, New Hampshire to cover the costs of each of these elements. Table 3 illustrates the diverse array of funding that various program operators and sites have used to finance their local Project SEARCH model.

*Program Development and Start-up.* Project SEARCH program start-up has been financed by a variety of funding sources, unique to each site. At CCHMC, the program was initially developed with assistance from the Great Oaks Institute of Technology and Career Development and the Hamilton County Developmental Disabilities Services. Project SEARCH at St. Joseph's Hospital in Nashua received funding for start-up and technical assistance from the state's Medicaid Infrastructure Grant. Thirteen replication sites in Georgia have received assistance in program development funded by the Council on Developmental Disabilities. Finally, Project SEARCH at Seattle Children's Hospital received start-up funding from the King County Division of Developmental Disabilities.

*Internships.* The Project SEARCH hospital sites each provide office and classroom space as well as staff time to mentor the interns. Teachers for classes and support for the interns in each of the sites noted in this study are provided through funding or direct services from local school systems in each area. In New Hampshire, the program receives referrals from eight area school systems. Additionally, students do their first two rotations at St. Joseph's Hospital but have the option of doing their third rotation at two other collaborating hospitals.

*Job Placement and Training.* The Project SEARCH sites described in this report each accessed services funded by their respective state vocational rehabilitation agencies.

*Follow-along Supports.* The Project SEARCH sites at CCHMC, Seattle Children's Hospital, and St. Joseph's Hospital all received funding for follow-along supports from their respective developmental disabilities service agency for at least some of the students hired through the program. Additionally, CCHMC has accessed Ticket to Work performance-based payments for all eligible students that are hired. This has provided additional revenue for follow-along supports for those not receiving developmental disabilities funding. The King County Division of Developmental Disabilities provided funding for follow-along supports for five of the initial people hired by Seattle Children's Hospital, but follow-along funding for subsequent hires has not been available. Therefore, the Seattle program relies on funding from Social Security Work Incentives to cover the costs of four to five hours per month of individual supports.



**Table 3. Project SEARCH Braided Funding Strategy (for All Location Models)**

Services	Funding Stream
<b>Project Development and Start-up</b>	Grants from private entities; state Medicaid Infrastructure Grant; Developmental Disabilities Council; state and county developmental disabilities services agencies; state vocational rehabilitation agency; and State Department of Education
<b>Internships</b>	The employer hospitals provide in-kind office and classroom space as well as staff time to supervise students; local school district funds support instructors and special education supervisors
<b>Job Placement and Training</b>	State vocational rehabilitation
<b>Follow-along Supports</b>	State or county developmental disabilities service agencies for at least some of the students hired through the programs; Ticket to Work; Social Security Work Incentives

## Start on Success (SOS) Baltimore, Maryland

Start on Success (SOS) is a school-to-work transition program that was developed by the National Organization on Disability (NOD) in 1994. The core of the SOS model is paid internships for students with disabilities at a range of local employers, combined with classroom instruction on job readiness skills. The program provides employers with the opportunity to assess potential employees to see whether they are a good match for employer workforce needs. According to NOD, Start on Success is now operational in more than 30 schools nationally, and students who take part in the program go on to postsecondary education or employment at a rate of 75% to 85%.

The SOS program began operating in Baltimore, Maryland in 1997. The program is a partnership between the Baltimore City Public Schools, the Maryland Division of Rehabilitation Services, Humanim (a community rehabilitation provider agency), and a group of local employers, including the University of Maryland Medical Center, the University of Maryland-Baltimore, and Johns Hopkins Hospital. Humanim organized the partnership through verbal agreements and coordinates the supports to students during their internships and transition to work. Table 4 illustrates the Baltimore SOS model partnerships.

According to Humanim officials, 50 graduating seniors enter the program each year. Students participate in individualized career assessments, and then select an internship at a participating employer based on individual skills and interests. Students spend 15 hours per week for the last quarter of the school year in the paid internship, while concurrently participating in classroom-based job readiness training on the campuses of each employer. Job coaches are on site to support each participating student, but Humanim also identifies an employer staff member to serve as a mentor for each student (personal communication with Marsha Legg, September 8, 2010).

Table 4. SOS Baltimore, Maryland Model Partnerships

Partner	Role
<b>Employer(s):</b>	
Multiple local employers, including University of Maryland Medical Center, the University of Maryland-Baltimore, and Johns Hopkins Hospital	Provides workplace mentors. Potentially hires students after the internships.
<b>Single Point of Contact:</b>	
Humanim (a community rehabilitation provider)	Manages the program and serves as liaison between the employers and the community partners. Coordinates the supports to students during their internships and transition to work. Provides job development and placement services to students.
<b>Community Partner Agencies:</b>	
Baltimore City Public Schools	Identifies eligible youth and adjusts school schedules to allow for “work study” participation. Also provides financial support for project coordination.
Maryland Division of Rehabilitation Services	Provides financial support for services provided (job readiness training; job development, placement, and retention). Assesses and enrolls students in state vocational rehabilitation program as vocational rehabilitation clients.

All students who are admitted to the Baltimore SOS program have an open case with Maryland’s vocational rehabilitation agency (Maryland Division of Rehabilitation Services) and are eligible to receive the agency’s services. This means that the students who participate in the program must have a significant disability that meets the Maryland Division of Rehabilitation Services’ criteria for Category 1 on its Order of Selection. According to the Maryland Division of Rehabilitation Services, a key feature of the Baltimore SOS program is the integration of the vocational rehabilitation process into the internships. At the conclusion of each internship, Humanim works closely with each student to place them into employment, either at the internship site employer or another employer that can use the skills the student has developed. In terms of outcomes, Humanim reports that 90% of Baltimore SOS graduates are in paid employment within six months after graduation (personal communication with Michael Breeden, October 12, 2010).

The participating employers view the program as a source of qualified employees and see the SOS internships as an important part of each employer’s recruitment efforts. According to the University of Maryland Medical Center, the hospital’s participation in the SOS program is part of its strategy to fill vacancies noting that, “at the end of the day, it’s about meeting the needs of our organization for a pipeline of employees for a stable workforce. It’s a win-win for us” (personal communication with Jo-Ann Williams, October 14, 2010). Another employer partner, Johns Hopkins Hospital, reports that it has hired 35% of the students placed in internships there and is extremely satisfied with the quality of the workers it has hired through the program.<sup>4</sup>

## Start on Success Braided Funding Strategies

The SOS model requires resources for program development and start-up, project coordination, paid internships, and job placement and training. While there are SOS programs operating across the United States in eight states using the basic program model framework, they are operated using various forms of braided funding. For example, in comparison to the Baltimore SOS program, the Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania SOS program is operated directly by the Pittsburgh Public School System, with the school system providing project coordination as well as support to the employer partners. In addition to a host of local employers, key Pittsburgh program partners include the Pennsylvania Office of Vocational Rehabilitation and the Three Rivers Workforce Investment Board.

To make the Baltimore and Pittsburgh SOS programs work, program operators rely on a variety of funding resources that are braided together. These are outlined below and illustrated in Table 5.

*Program Development and Start-up.* Both the Baltimore and Pittsburgh programs received start-up grants and technical assistance from the National Organization on Disability.

*Program Coordination.* The Baltimore SOS program is coordinated by Humanim, Inc. through federal Carl D. Perkins Act funds from the Baltimore City Public Schools.

The Pittsburgh SOS program is coordinated by a supervisor employed by the Pittsburgh Public School System.

*Internships.* Baltimore City Public Schools provides a grant to Humanim from federal Carl D. Perkins Act funding to offset the cost of the wages for the student interns. Humanim provides staff to support the employers and interns in the workplace through funding from the Maryland Division of Rehabilitation Services.

The Pittsburgh SOS program also uses teachers from the public school system to teach the job readiness classroom portion of the internships but the Pittsburgh teachers also provide supports to the host employers. The Three Rivers Workforce Investment Board provides the program with Workforce Investment Act youth funds through a grant each year to cover the cost of student intern wages. The Pittsburgh School System, through educational funds, supports a project coordinator and teachers that instruct the classes and support the employers.

*Job Placement and Training.* In the Baltimore program, job placement and training for graduates, who are either hired by the employer where they served their internship or by another employer, is provided by Humanim through funding from the Maryland Division of Rehabilitation Services. Likewise, job placement and training costs for student interns in the Pittsburgh SOS program are funded by the Pennsylvania Office of Vocational Rehabilitation.

**Table 5. SOS Braided Funding Strategy (Baltimore and Pittsburgh)**

Services	Funding Stream-Baltimore	Funding Stream-Pittsburgh
<b>Project Development and Start-up</b>	A grant from the National Organization on Disability	A grant from the National Organization on Disability
<b>Program Coordination</b>	Public education funds	Public education funds
<b>Internships</b>	State vocational rehabilitation funds support job readiness training/internship experience; public education funds (Carl D. Perkins funding) offset the cost of wages for the student interns	Public education funds support job readiness classroom teachers; Workforce Investment Act youth funding covers the cost of wages for the student interns
<b>Job Placement and Training</b>	State vocational rehabilitation	State vocational rehabilitation

## Key Characteristics of Employer-Responsive Programs Profiled

All in all, in each of the three program models described, it becomes clear that they share similar characteristics:

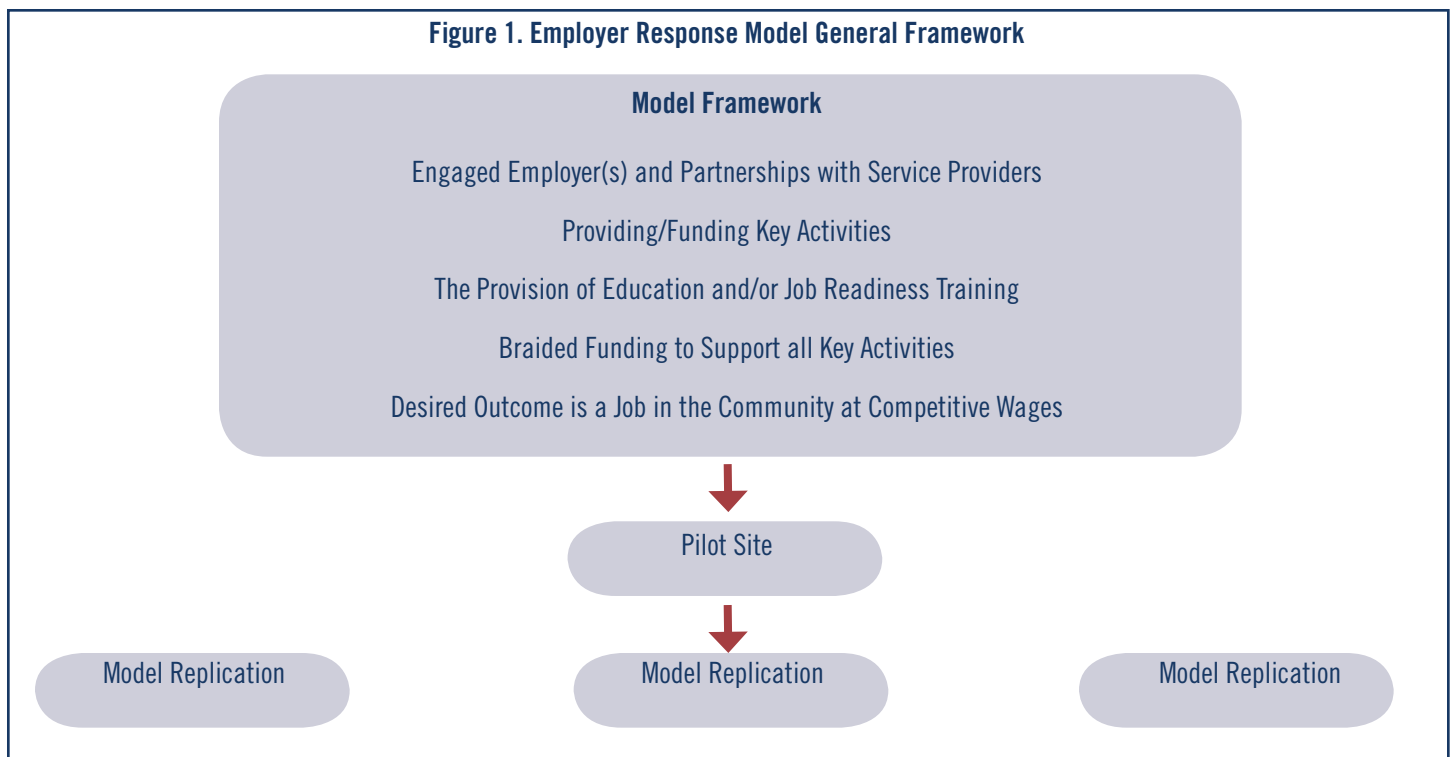
1. They began in response to meeting a local employer's (or group of employers') human resource needs and, in order to meet those needs, developed partnerships with local service providers to conduct educational and/or workforce activities that were in concert with agency missions (i.e., increasing employment opportunities for persons with disabilities, educating students, etc).
2. The framework for the program models and their braided resource strategies all started with a job. Program operators subsequently work to secure qualified candidates to meet that job need, and then work to secure resources to provide the appropriate service needs of a particular candidate for a particular job (such as a job coach, assistive technology, transportation, follow-along services, etc.). This framework is different from a traditional view of braiding resources (see Table 6) where service providers have initially identified a job seeker with a disability, looked for resources to meet that job seeker's perceived need for services to work, then look for a suitable job for the job seeker.
3. To meet both the needs of employers (for qualified workers) and the mission of the partner agencies (educating and training individuals with the outcome goal of finding local community-based employment for individuals with disabilities), each, through a lead entity, established clear roles and responsibilities for the partners based on the services each provides and employer needs.
4. The program model frameworks all required certain key activities, including project/partner coordination, educational instruction/job readiness training, job development, and eventual job placement. All of these key activities have costs associated with them, and in each case these activities required the braiding of various types and streams of funding (grant or categorical, public or private) to implement the model and make it function.

**Table 6. Side-by-Side Comparison of Braiding Funding Strategy Perspectives**

Traditional Perspective of Braiding Funding Strategies	New Employer Response Model of Braided Funding Strategies
<b>Step 1:</b> Job seeker identified	<b>Step 1:</b> Job Identified
<b>Step 2:</b> Assess job seeker’s employment-related needs in order to work	<b>Step 2:</b> Find qualified job seeker/candidate
<b>Step 3:</b> Identify funding required to provide employment-related services	<b>Step 3:</b> Assess job seeker’s employment-related needs necessary to work in that particular job with that particular employer
<b>Step 4:</b> Conduct job search or negotiate an individualized job with an employer	<b>Step 4:</b> Identify funding required to provide employment-related services
<b>Step 5:</b> Secure a job	<b>Step 5:</b> Job seeker begins employment
<b>Step 6:</b> Reassess job seeker’s employment-related needs in order to work at the identified job	
<b>Step 7:</b> Finalize funding required to provide employment-related services	

In addition, in each of the examples described — at Lowe’s in Pittston, Pennsylvania,<sup>5</sup> the SOS program, and the Project SEARCH program — once the original program model framework was developed and tested in one site/area, the projects were then able to be replicated based on the methodologies developed within each model in the original site. This is illustrated in Figure 1. What changes in each of the replicated sites are the factors that are unique to each local area — the employers in the local labor market (with the exception where the model is a single employer such as Lowe’s), the available community partners and employment service providers, and the ability of the local area to craft a braided funding strategy based on the different interests, resource levels, and creative flexibility of all interested parties.

The public workforce system played a role in the Pittsburgh SOS program, but was not a partner in the others profiled above. However, without a doubt, the Workforce Investment Act-financed system of Workforce Investment Boards and One-Stop Career Centers can and does play a role in brokering and coordinating job development and placement for individuals with disabilities. An example is the Eastern Connecticut Workforce Investment Board, which uses a model that relies on a collaborative partnership with a wide variety of agencies and organizations that are able to provide staff and funding resources to better help local residents with disabilities access jobs in the community through use of the area’s One-Stop Career Centers. While the model does not have a designated employer partner, it uses a multi-agency-funded approach and the presence of a business service organization to ensure that the needs of both job seekers with disabilities and the business community are mutually served.



## Eastern Connecticut Workforce Investment Board

The Eastern Connecticut Workforce Investment Board (EWIB) has gained national attention as a leader in providing business-driven services to job seekers. The local labor market is home to two of Connecticut's largest employers, Foxwoods and Mohegan Sun casinos; a military (naval submarine) base; a military academy (the U.S. Coast Guard Academy); and numerous small businesses. EWIB's workforce area has four CTWorks [One-Stop] Centers, located in New London, Norwich, Willimantic, and Danielson, Connecticut.

Over the 10 years since the Workforce Investment Act was implemented, EWIB has worked to integrate and streamline services to make it easier for employers to use its CTWorks system and to take advantage of the incentives available from the various funding streams. According to EWIB officials, its goal has been to provide access for employers to the full range of job seekers and to provide all job seekers, regardless of which workforce program funds their services, access to employer job openings and training opportunities.

To meet employer needs, EWIB developed a workforce area-wide unified business services team that includes staff funded through both the Wagner-Peyser Act and Title I of the Workforce Investment Act. The team is led by the Eastern Connecticut Chamber of Commerce, with which EWIB has a contract. The business services team solicits job openings from Chamber of Commerce member companies and others, and coordinates available incentives and training subsidies to employers.

The program model used by EWIB to serve job seekers with disabilities involves a dedicated effort to integrate services within the CTWorks system through the co-location of key partners at the CTWorks Centers and the designation of a single agency to coordinate the partner organizations. EWIB contracts with the Thames Valley Council for Community Action to coordinate the partner organizations; however, EWIB itself also plays a key role in coordinating and streamlining services to job seekers. Table 6 illustrates the model partnerships.

**Table 7. Eastern Connecticut Workforce Investment Board Model Partnerships**

Partner	Role
<b>Employer(s):</b> Business services team, including the Eastern Connecticut Chamber of Commerce, the Northeastern Connecticut Chamber of Commerce, and the Connecticut Department of Labor	The business services team functions on an area-wide basis and interfaces with Chamber members and other area employers about jobs. It also interfaces with job seeker service staff that provide job development services for CTWorks participants and other community partners. The business services team and EWIB provide education to businesses about available tax incentives and training subsidies.
<b>Single Point of Contact:</b> Thames Valley Council for Community Action	Coordinates the CTWorks (One-Stop) partner agencies in partnership with EWIB.
<b>Key Community Partner Agencies:</b> CTWorks (local One-Stop Career Centers) Connecticut Bureau of Rehabilitative Services (the state vocational rehabilitation agency) Eastern Connecticut Transportation Consortium Social Security Administration Thames Valley Council for Community Action as a service provider under contract to EWIB Connecticut Department of Labor EASTCONN (Regional Educational Services Center)	Provides space for partner agencies. Provides and pays for specific activities such as career assessment, case management, job search, education, job training, transportation and travel training and assistance, and benefits planning.

The EWIB business services team acts as the single point of contact between employers and the local area workforce system. All job leads are fed to this team. There is close communication between the business services team and frontline staff in the CTWorks Centers and it is through this mechanism that employment opportunities are communicated and matches are made between interested employers and qualified job seekers. People with disabilities are served as are any other job seekers who visit the centers. Perhaps most important is the joint funding of the business services team and the commitment of the team to reach out to all job seekers to match skills with employer needs. In addition to Wagner-Peyser and Workforce Investment Act-funded staff, representatives of the Bureau of Rehabilitative Services, the Department of Social Services, and other provider organizations attend monthly business services team meetings that typically have 20 entities represented.

To help further finance job development activities for individuals with disabilities, EWIB became an Employment Network under the Social Security Administration's Ticket to Work program and has opted for the milestone/outcome method of payment. Through September 2010, EWIB had been assigned 17 tickets. Although the revenue received to date does not completely cover the cost of employing the one area Disability Program Navigator, EWIB officials note that it offsets the cost.<sup>6</sup> (personal communication with Carol LaBelle, September 15, 2010).

EWIB supports one Disability Program Navigator who functions as part of the CTWorks team and spends one day per week at each of the four centers. This individual's role is to ensure that all partner staff members are knowledgeable about serving people with disabilities, to maximize resources available related to securing employment opportunities for people with disabilities, and to be a resource for the CTWorks Centers about their employment needs. The Disability Program Navigator also conducts workshops for people with disabilities and their families and friends concerning career transition, with a focus on customizing the career transition for each individual. EWIB supports the position partly by generating revenue through its status as an Employment Network under the Ticket to Work.

The vocational rehabilitation agency, the Connecticut Bureau of Rehabilitative Services (BRS), is fully co-located in the CTWorks Centers in New London, Norwich, and Danielson, and is seen by program staff as advantageous, in that staff members get to know each other on a daily basis. According to BRS officials, this arrangement serves to facilitate the inclusion of people with disabilities into the CTWorks system and in many instances Wagner-Peyser and Workforce Investment Act-funded career advisors are more knowledgeable about when to make referrals to BRS. In many cases, BRS and Workforce Investment Act funding are combined to serve people with disabilities. Some costs are borne by BRS and others, such as training, by the Workforce Investment Act. This has been done with both youth and adults. For example, Dislocated Worker funds have been used to support on-the-job training for people with disabilities. To facilitate communication and streamline services, the Disability Program Navigator and the BRS supervisor in the region have worked on a release-of-information form that allows for the sharing of information. BRS customers sign off on this release, which allows for the sharing of information with the Workforce Investment Act and Wagner-Peyser-funded programs. In addition, BRS has a Community Work Incentive Coordinator assigned to every CTWorks Center that is called upon to advise individuals about employment benefits. This coordinator is paid by both the Social Security Administration and BRS through Medicaid Infrastructure Grant funds.

EWIB is especially proud of the coordination among EASTCONN, BRS, and the Workforce Investment Act-funded summer youth programs. This initiative has grown each year, and BRS has been contributing funds toward the program.

## Discussion

As employers across the nation demonstrate their eagerness to include people with disabilities in their recruitment efforts, and some even establish targeted recruitment and hiring initiatives to attract people with disabilities into their workforce, they need a responsive partner with which to work. Evidence suggests that they typically rely on partnerships of local disability and workforce development organizations to provide assistance for outreach, screening, job placement, and job retention that include job seekers with disabilities (Nicholas, Kauder, Baker, & Krepcio, 2011). Evidence also suggests that this collaboration between the employer(s) and partners is necessary in order to make the program work. Fundamentally, a key element in the success of these efforts is the dual focus on the needs of both the employer (for qualified workers) and the job seeker with a disability (for competitive, integrated employment). Accordingly, another important component, and a significant challenge to local partnerships that support these employer-responsive initiatives, is how to execute an effective strategy to braid funds from multiple sources to meet employers' workforce needs.

This research profiled four types of partnerships that have been working to support employers to hire and retain employees with disabilities. It explored the braided funding strategies used in each case. Three of the models (Lowe's, Project SEARCH, and Baltimore's Start on Success ) are currently used by many different employers



across the United States; as such, the research presents a sample of alternative braiding strategies used by the partnerships at different sites. The fourth (the Eastern Connecticut Workforce Investment Board) is a model for how a One-Stop system can look to braid funding to support employment opportunities for people with disabilities. As noted earlier, these programs have not been rigorously evaluated. More dedicated research on their costs and long-term educational and employment outcomes would reveal whether, in the long run, program participation results in longer-term employment gains for individuals with disabilities (O'Day, 2006). However, in lieu of more in-depth research data, the program model frameworks offer important lessons for state and local disability and workforce systems that seek to expand employment opportunities for job seekers with disabilities:

1. *The profiles demonstrate the advantages of a braided funding strategy.* In each of the initiatives, funding from multiple programs was necessary to make the program model operational. Each profile demonstrates an effective strategy for braiding different funding sources. A braided funding strategy is a critical element for supporting initiatives to hire and retain employees with disabilities in general or replications of the models presented here in particular.
2. *The profiles illustrate that different strategies for funding can be used successfully even for the same model.* Each initiative profiled used a different strategy for braiding funding, and in most instances, the funding sources used in the braiding strategy were different when the model was replicated. This highlights the flexibility in the range and use of funds in braiding strategies. For example, state vocational rehabilitation funding was used in different ways in the different initiatives. In addition to its standard use in each of the models for assessment, job placement, and job coaching, it was also used to support student internships for the Baltimore Start on Success program. Additionally, common elements of the respective models had different funding sources at different sites. For example, the salaries for student interns are financed by Carl Perkins Act funding through the school districts in the Baltimore Start on Success program and by Workforce Investment Act youth funding through the Three Rivers Workforce Investment Board in the Pittsburgh Start on Success program. State and local workforce and disability services systems have options in developing braided funding strategies based on local preferences and availability of funding. In Eastern Connecticut, Workforce Investment Act dislocated worker funds have been used to support on-the-job training for people with disabilities.
3. *In each of the profiles, a lead entity coordinates workforce and disability service resources for the employer(s).* This lends credence to the notion that employers prefer to deal with a single point of contact to address funding issues and coordinate the provision of services. A trusted coordinating entity is an important component of an effective braided funding strategy. The funding for the coordination function in the profiled initiatives varied from operational funds such as vocational rehabilitation, to grant funds such as the Medicaid Infrastructure Grants, to the membership dues of advocacy organizations such as the Arc, to generic workforce funding from Wagner-Peyser and the Workforce Investment Act. This presents an array of options to state and local systems that want to replicate these models.
4. *Local workforce systems can be an effective coordinator of resources to support employer efforts to recruit and retain employees with disabilities.* With the right leadership, commitment, communication mechanisms, and staff development, One-Stop systems can play a role to coordinate funding with disability-specific systems and include people with disabilities in their recruitment and training efforts on behalf of employers. As evidenced by the Eastern Connecticut Workforce Investment Board profile, by becoming an Employment Network under the Social Security Administration's Ticket to Work program, local Workforce Investment Boards or One-Stop operators can generate additional revenue to support their disability-inclusive practices.

5. *Funding for follow-along supports for job retention is an issue and was true for those models that focus on job seekers with intellectual and developmental disabilities.* The Project SEARCH model and the Lowe's initiative focus on job seekers with intellectual and developmental disabilities. These models involve the provision of follow-along supports to employees with disabilities, sometimes at the workplace, for job retention and career development. Some of the sites noted in the profiles have had access to state or federal funding for follow-along from the respective state's intellectual and developmental disabilities system. However, many states have waiting lists for intellectual and developmental disabilities services and, as a result, funding for follow-along services is not available. It is encouraging to note the success of Project SEARCH at Cincinnati Children's Hospital in accessing Ticket to Work performance-based payments to supplement revenue from the intellectual and developmental disabilities system for follow-along supports.

Given the alternatives that these models provide in meeting employer workforce needs with qualified, reliable employees with disabilities, it is no surprise that they continue to attract the attention of additional employers and community providers and are being replicated at new sites. All of these program models show potential as innovative approaches to helping individuals with disabilities find and maintain employment, and they represent an exciting emerging paradigm for expanding employment opportunities for people with disabilities.

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## Endnotes

1. Braiding funding strategies refer to the combining of existing funding, predominantly but not limited to categorical funding streams, to support a unified effort such as providing a mix of services to an individual under a program model. See National Collaborative on Workforce and Disability (2006) for further discussion of this topic.
2. Information available from <http://www.lowes.com>, "Press Kit," November 1, 2010.
3. Ibid.
4. Taken from the Humanim Web site, <http://www.humanim.com>, "Opening Employment Opportunities, Johns Hopkins Hospital receives coveted EEOC award," November 2010.
5. Lowe's has since begun to replicate its Pittston model in distribution centers in other states.
6. The Connecticut Bureau of Rehabilitative Services is not an Employment Network and does not accept ticket assignments. The Bureau of Rehabilitative Services encourages customer choice for Supplemental Security Income and Social Security Disability Insurance recipients in using the Ticket to Work program. The agency has been trying to encourage Workforce Investment Boards and One-Stop operators to become Employment Networks and be assigned the tickets. There are also sharing arrangements where ticket payments may be split between more than one Employment Network.

## About ODEP

The Office of Disability Employment Policy (ODEP) provides national leadership on disability employment policy by developing and influencing the use of evidence-based disability employment policies and practices, building collaborative partnerships, and delivering authoritative and credible data on employment of people with disabilities.

## About the NTAR Leadership Center

Founded in 2007 under a grant/contract with the Office of Disability Employment Policy at the U.S. Department of Labor, the NTAR Leadership Center's mission is to build capacity and leadership at the federal, state, and local levels to enable change across workforce development and disability-specific systems that will increase employment and economic self-sufficiency for adults with disabilities.

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