

NEBA Works!

Editor's note: Ms. Pavlak has served as executive director of New England Business Associates for the past eight years.

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New England Business Associates (NEBA) is a non-profit agency committed to enhancing the quality of life for individuals with disabilities through employment. Established in 1984, NEBA has been providing individualized supported employment services to people once considered "unemployable" due to the type and level of their disability. NEBA provides regular/private sector jobs, with support to individuals and their employer to ensure a mutually satisfying and successful employment relationship.

For almost 20 years, NEBA has worked collaboratively with the Department of Mental Retardation, Department of Mental Health, Massachusetts Rehabilitation Commission, our local Education Authorities, as well as the Federal Office of Special Education and Rehabilitation, to provide supported employment services that help individuals with developmental disabilities to have satisfying and successful careers.

NEBA has developed over 1000 jobs for individuals with severe disabilities and co-authored a "Projects with Industry Grant" that resulted in over 3500 jobs nationally for people with disabilities. Consistently, NEBA has achieved an 85-92% placement success rate over a period of 12 months, exceeding the national average of 65% placement rate over a period of 6 months.

NEBA was recently a recipient of the Best Practice Award by the Massachusetts Association of Persons in Supported Employment. Last year NEBA had the honor of

meeting with the Romanian government to discuss individualized employment services for people with mental retardation. At the same time, NEBA was given the opportunity to host two International Learning Exchange Students from the Netherlands. This past July, NEBA was asked to present at the Association for Persons in Supported Employment National Conference on "What is our obligation to serve people who do not seem to want to work." Earning a two-year certification from Quest with commendations, NEBA assisted the Office for Quality Enhancement in training the evaluators on how to measure organizational change and effectiveness.

Through periods of employment, transition and unemployment NEBA's services are provided within the community and remain individualized. Although each individual has varying support needs, these needs are addressed and supported in a meaningful and relevant way that assist each person further their career goals and have meaningful community roles. The design and philosophy of NEBA's services is one of a kind in Western Massachusetts.

Improving the quality life for individuals with developmental disabilities whose rights and freedoms are most likely to be denied them is NEBA's mission.

Our mission is accomplished through the use of employment as a vehicle for leveraging needed changes in the lives of the people we serve. The two strategies used are creating decent and relevant opportunities with support, and protecting people from harm.

Commitment to our mission is based on the following assumptions:

- All human beings regardless of type/level of disability are capable of learning and growing.
- There are universal human needs that must be acknowledged and addressed in

order for an individual to survive and prosper.

- Individuals with developmental disabilities may need support to get through the ordinary aspects of everyday living, particularly if they have been denied experiences typical of their same age non-disabled peers. Relevant opportunities, appropriate role models, positive expectations, and individualized supports are necessary for persons with developmental disabilities to learn the skills necessary to successful enjoyment of life along with their non-disabled peers.
- It is impossible for universal life needs to be adequately addressed if all of one's time is spent segregated from these necessary opportunities to learn, grow and meet others in regular neighborhoods, real homes, real jobs, community schools, and recreational settings. This is particularly devastating for individuals with developmental disabilities who may require enriched experiences to learn, understand, acquire and maintain basic life skills.
- There needs to be a good fit between what an individual's needs are and what services, supports, and opportunities are made available. In the absence of model coherency, services are irrelevant and people are likely to be harmed.
- All human beings must be recognized and treated as human beings, with caring, respect and love, or they will not thrive and grow.
- The physician's credo applies in all human services: "Before all else, cause no more harm."

People need opportunities to experience and participate in a variety of meaningful events to grow and build confidence, esteem and an

identity. There needs to be a strong sense of urgency by providers to assist and support individuals in this process, without wasting time engaging in activities that are not relevant to the individual. As advocate Gerry Provencal states, "We're far too patient with the passage of time for people with disabilities ... time is precious for a person with a disability as it is for all of us."

As an employment service, NEBA has objectives for everyone regarding continuous improvement in getting and maintaining better jobs, further career support, and the "fit" between the job and the rest of the person's life, as well as identifying and supporting people to embody other community valued roles that will enrich their lives.

Experiencing life and reaching one's potential is not a service, it is a fundamental right shared by all. People who receive services need support, which is available in many ways. Having a belief in those in need of services, having creativity, a sense of urgency and utilizing all resources both paid and not paid allow all individuals regardless of the level and amount of support to be successful, have and maintain friendships and be contributing members of society. Even those who work is less of a priority have much to give and teach. NEBA serves many individuals who need to be out of their homes 6-8 hours each day, however cannot work or are not interested in working more than a minimal amount of hours each week. Developing valued community roles and providing the support necessary for one to embrace these roles is provided by NEBA for all served. Individuals with intensive support needs who are not interested or who can not work 30-40 hours per week have flexible and varied schedules that include some paid work and receive the supports identified to pursue other alternatives of priority to them, their families and their ISP teams. On some occasions NEBA has even subcontracted out services when what is needed cannot be provided by NEBA

The desire to honor individual rights and dignity inspire NEBA's services for people with

disabilities. At the core of our services is a strong emphasis on respectful interactions that emphasize choice and the individual's control in decision-making in all aspects of development. NEBA works toward assuring each person's ability to communicate preferences through the use of interpreters, the development of augmentative communication systems, and the involvement of crucial people close to the individual. Our hiring practices and community relationships assist us to understand and to meet the language, communication style and culture of each person served. In addition, NEBA assists people in getting jobs in culturally compatible work environments to facilitate the development of lasting relationships and success in the workplace.

NEBA's structure is one that supports teamwork. Each geographical area in which NEBA provide services is comprised of staff who are from and are familiar with that geographical area and cultural patterns. In addition, NEBA requires that each staff member volunteers at a community or civic organization within the communities where they assist individuals obtain jobs and develop careers. NEBA currently has the ability to provide services in English, Spanish, Portuguese, Russian and American Sign Language.

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