



# COMMUNITY PARTNERS

- BUSINESS CASE
- DEFINING YOUR INITIATIVE
- PLANNING PROCESS
- COMMUNITY PARTNERS**
- BUILDING YOUR CULTURE
- SCREENING & REVIEWS
- MEASURING SUCCESS
- ADDITIONAL RESOURCES



# COMMUNITY PARTNERS

“The key to success in workforce disability inclusion is the integrity of the program, especially as it relates to performance. It isn’t about hiring any person with a disability; it is about hiring people with disabilities who can do the job well. Finding candidates can be challenging, but one of the approaches is to develop a partnership with agencies or groups who specialize in providing services to people with disabilities. Creating a mutual understanding of the goals of both the agency and the business helps to ensure a pipeline of candidates who are qualified for the jobs.”

– Deb Russell, President, Deb Russell Inc.

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## In This Chapter



Finding and working with community partners

Recognizing agency red flags

Building agency collaboration

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Service providers and community partners can help you find qualified candidates and provide guidance on how to effectively integrate people with disabilities into your workforce. Knowing how to find these partners is an important step. After that, developing and maintaining effective relationships to ensure they meet business objectives is critical.

VR services are typically provided by the state at little or no cost to the company. Some agencies will charge a minimal fee.

## Using the Internet to Find Your Agencies

A simple internet search with your state name and vocational rehabilitation (VR) offices will generate a complete list of locations within each state. The website that lists contacts for VR agencies in all states is [www.rehabnetwork.org](http://www.rehabnetwork.org).

State agencies are not the only organizations you will come across when researching disability employment service providers. There are also several nonprofit agencies (service providers) and even for-profit agencies that work with individuals with disabilities. One source you may want to check out is the [U.S. Food and Drug Administration’s list of state vocational rehabilitation agencies](#). Another source is the [U.S. Department of Education state contacts page](#).

Likely, there are a few well-known national agencies in your community such as [Easter Seals](#) or [The Arc](#).

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## Choosing the Right Partners

The needs of your business (facility's job types, required skill sets and goal for number of hires) are the most critical consideration in choosing any agency. With a list of your local agencies in hand, you can begin to determine which services they offer that will best help you succeed.

Some agencies not only provide candidates with disabilities, but also offer training, job coaching and ongoing project management support. In many cases, you will work with more than one agency in order to ensure a cross section of talent and abilities, and to obtain the number of new hires, interns or peak time employees needed at your location.

Importantly, remember to hold disability service organizations to the same standards as you would any vendor (even though you might not be paying for the agency's services). Make sure it is clear that you expect them to help you fill a business need by securing the very best talent for your job openings.



[Click to view the Items to Assess When Reviewing Service Providers Form](#)

### Mission/Vision

What is the agency hoping to achieve? Some agencies are about family support, work or community projects. You will want to be sure that you understand the mission and focus of each agency. Does the agency define success the same way your company does? Do they recognize the same performance standards?

### Work or Work Readiness Training

The goal of an agency's work readiness training should be integrated employment (work in the community). The disability employment and inclusion program is about hiring people to work at your facilities alongside other employees.

### Placements

How many individuals with disabilities were placed in competitive work last year? Do they have the capacity to meet your company's hiring needs for this year?

### Part-Time/Full-Time

Does the agency make part-time and full-time placements?

### Tenure

What is the average tenure for each placement?

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## Choosing the Right Partners (continued)

### Training

What type of training does the agency offer employers (e.g., disability awareness and sensitivity, working with job coaches, etc.)?

### Business Services

What services does the agency offer to employees beyond training? Determine whether they will help with disability accommodation assessments for employees who are not “their” clients.

### Community Collaboration

Does/will the agency work with others in the community to fulfill your hiring needs? Many agencies can be “turf-focused,” so this is an important item to test.

### On-the-Job Supports

Does the agency offer to send a support person (typically called a “job coach”) to help people with disabilities who may need a little extra help the first few days of acclimating to a new job? How long can that support continue if needed? If the employee starts to struggle later on (3, 6, 15 months into employment), will the agency send someone to help?

### Employer References

What other companies have worked with the agency to help them meet their staffing needs? Get letters of reference from those companies, or call and ask questions about the agency’s ability to meet business needs. If you are not sure which companies have worked with this agency, a local US Business Leadership Network (USBLN) affiliate may be able to provide helpful information.

### Relationship with State Vocational Rehabilitation Services

How does the agency relate to state and local VR services?

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## Caution: Use Discretion

Some agencies provide a “learn to work” or “sheltered workshop” environment. These programs bring people with disabilities into an employment or training workshop environment where they perform tasks that have been outsourced by employers as part of a learning experience. Sometimes, employees in these facilities are paid sub-minimum wage.

While many of these programs provide a valuable service to people with disabilities, they do not meet the goals of a competitive disability employment and inclusion program which is about equal jobs, equal pay and working side by side with other employees. If you meet an agency that provides this type of work, or offers work crews to come to your facility, ask about pay scale to ensure that any workers joining your in-house workforce or are part of a company-sanctioned outsourced team are paid minimum wage or better.

## Red Flags

<b>Sub-minimum Wage</b>	You will want your employees to be paid minimum wage or better.
<b>Lack of Collaboration</b>	There can be a lot of competition among service providers, but you should look for an agency that is willing to work with other community providers, as well as the state/local VR, to help you obtain the talent you need.
<b>90 Days and Gone</b>	Many agencies work on a 90-day timeline, meaning that after an individual is successfully placed for 90 days, they are no longer involved or available for employer questions and concerns. Ask about the follow-up and how responsive they will be if you need additional assistance. There may be a fee for ongoing support beyond the first 90 days of employment.

## Interviewing Potential Partners

In our Toolkit, you will find a guide for interviewing potential community partners. As always, we encourage you to tailor questions to cover what is important to you and your organization.



[Click to view the Sample Agency Questionnaire](#)

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## Need for Multiple Agencies

It may be necessary for you to work with more than one community partner to help bring in all the talent you need. Whether one or more, it will be important to make clear that while your company wants to enhance hiring for people with disabilities, all hiring – including diversity hiring – means new hires must be able to meet the needs of the business. All talent must be qualified, trainable and able to meet all performance metrics and safety standards.

You can be most effective in working with multiple agencies by identifying a lead agency to serve as your “quarterback” with the other agencies. Choice of a lead is simply based on which one you and your core team determine to be the best fit for the role after going through in-person meetings with all considered agencies.

## Building Collaboration Between Lead Agency and Others

If you are working with a lead agency, you will want to bring all of the agencies together to discuss your program’s objectives and goals, your intent to work with all the agencies, and to begin outlining opportunities and expectations.

Make sure VR is invited to this meeting. Prior to this, a preliminary meeting with the lead agency will be helpful to discuss any possible obstacles as well as prepare for questions that might arise from the other agencies.

At your kickoff meeting, explain that your company assessed and met with several agencies in the community, and while each had its own strengths, your company chose one agency to serve as the lead for the disability employment and inclusion initiative. Define the lead agency’s role while highlighting the expectation of all agencies working closely together to meet your company’s needs.

### Conducting the kickoff meeting at your site has three key benefits:

1. Firmly establishes you, the company, as the driver of the meeting and not a service provider agency. This is about the work at your site. It lets the agencies know you are setting the standards and the expectations.
2. Sets up the lead agency and roles and responsibilities; demonstrates that you have made the choice of who to work with, and how the partnership will work.
3. Allows for facility tour; helps the agencies understand job requirements and expectations.

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## Defining Expectations; Establishing Roles and Responsibilities

Before you outline roles and responsibilities for the agencies, have a clear understanding of where you may need assistance, where you can be flexible and where you require strict adherence to standards.

Use this as a guide as you create a Roles and Responsibilities document for each agency. While it does not have to be a formal contract, it should clearly state what the agency will be responsible for, the acceptable timing for meeting deliverables and the corresponding responsibilities of your company.

## Facility Tours

Providing facility tours is an excellent opportunity to share job specifications and expectations, as well as facility culture, with service providers. In fact, many employers require that any agency providing candidates to their disability employment and inclusion hiring initiative must tour the facility before sending a referral. It will set the stage for helping the agency understand the facility, job requirements, safety requirements, stamina, interaction with managers and coworkers, and much more. This is especially true for manufacturing and distribution centers, but may not be required in banking or retail, for example, where there already is a basic understanding of the work environment.

In addition to providing tours for agencies, from time to time you may receive requests from parents to take a facility tour. This is not atypical. Parents often hear about a distribution center or manufacturing facility and assume the worst — moving equipment, heavy boxes, and a fast-paced and unsafe environment for their son or daughter with a disability.

Parent tours should be accommodated when possible, preferably at the same time that agency tours are conducted. This will help eliminate multiple tours during the same time period and also allow parents to discuss the work with agency counselors and case managers.

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## Items to Assess When Reviewing Service Providers

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### MISSION/VISION

What is the agency hoping to achieve? Some agencies are about family support, work, or community projects. You will want to be sure that you understand the mission and focus of each agency.

Does the agency define success the same way your company does?

Yes     No

Do they recognize the same performance standards?

Yes     No

### WORK OR WORK READINESS TRAINING

The goal of an agency's work readiness training should be integrated employment (work in the community). The disability employment and inclusion program is about hiring people to work at your facilities alongside other employees.

### PLACEMENTS

How many individuals with disabilities were placed in competitive work last year?

Do they have the capacity to meet your company's hiring needs for this year?

Yes     No

### PART-TIME/FULL-TIME

Does the agency make part-time and full-time placements (note – many agencies only do part-time employment)?

### TENURE

What is the average tenure rate for each placement?

### TRAINING

What type of training does the agency offer employers (e.g., disability awareness and sensitivity, working with job coaches, etc.)?

### BUSINESS SERVICES

Obtain a list of services offered to employers beyond training. Determine whether they will help with disability accommodation assessments for employees who are not "their" clients.

# COMMUNITY PARTNERS

## Items to Assess When Reviewing Service Providers

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### PROJECT MANAGEMENT

Are they able and willing to provide project support to ensure effective implementation of your hiring initiative?

Yes  No

### COMMUNITY COLLABORATION

Does/will the agency work with others in the community to fulfill your hiring needs? Many agencies can be “turf-focused,” so this is an important item to test.

Yes  No

### ON-THE-JOB SUPPORTS

Does the agency offer to send a support person (typically called a “job coach”) to help people with disabilities who may need a little extra help the first few days of acclimating to a new job?

Yes  No

How long can that support continue if needed?

If the employee starts to struggle later on (3, 6, 15 months into employment), can the agency send someone to help?

Yes  No

Notes:

### EMPLOYER REFERENCES

What other companies have worked with the agency to help them meet their staffing needs?

Get letters of reference from those companies, or call and ask questions about the agency’s ability to meet business needs.

Completed

### RELATIONSHIP WITH STATE VOCATIONAL REHABILITATION SERVICES

How does the agency relate to state and local VR services?

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## Sample Agency Questionnaire

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### BACKGROUND

1. Agency Name:
- Website Address:
- Contact Person:

2. Describe your agency's mission and vision.

3. Describe how the agency is funded (e.g., private vs. public).

4. Does your organization have a disability employment and inclusion expert on staff (e.g., business liaison, business relationship manager) that works directly with employers?

Yes  No

### WORK OR WORK READINESS TRAINING

5. How is your agency responding to the new 503 Regulations to better serve employers?

6. How often does your agency meet with employers (e.g., weekly, monthly, quarterly)?

Yes  No

Briefly describe the purpose and agenda of these meetings.

7. How many employers are you currently working with in your community?

8. Describe the types of services you offer employers (training, job coaching, program development, etc.).

9. Describe the types of services you provide people with disabilities.

10. What is the average wage, hourly rate or annual salary of individuals placed?

### PLACEMENTS

11. How many people do you place in jobs per year?

12. How many clients do you currently serve?

13. What is the average tenure per placement?

14. How do you screen and assess candidates?

15. What is the average timeline for filling a job request?

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## Sample Agency Questionnaire

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16. Please describe how your agency works with other disability organizations in your community (e.g., competitor or collaborator).

17. Is your agency comfortable reaching out to other disability organizations if your agency is not able to provide an adequate pipeline? (For example – employer X needs 50 new employees and you only have 10 that are job ready – what do you do?)

18. Describe your agency's relationship with VR, Developmental Disabilities agencies and the local one stops?

19. Are you willing and able to assign a staff member to work directly with a local employer?

Yes     No

20. Can you provide a list of business references?

Notes: