

# Transforming Services: Opportunity Development Centers Wisconsin Rapids, Wisconsin

Since 2015, Opportunity Development Centers (ODC) has been partnering with the Wisconsin Board for People with Developmental Disabilities (WI-BPDD) to transform from facility-based services to a model of community-based support that creates pathways to greater independence, meaningful connections, and competitive integrated employment. Having made great strides in their service transformation journey, ODC's leadership and staff provide guidance and mentor opportunities to other organizations as part of the WI BPDD's Building Full Lives initiative. ODC provides services in a number of counties including Wood, Portage, Marathon, Adams, Clark, Taylor, Lincoln, Langlade, Oneida and Vilas.

## ODC's Decision to Change:

ODC's transformation journey began in 2010, when ODC was one of several organizations to receive a Rebalancing Initiative grant, funded with a Medicaid Infrastructure Grant through the Wisconsin Department of Health Services. In addition to monetary support, the grant provided numerous opportunities for technical assistance, mentoring, peer support, and staff training. In the two years that ODC participated in the grant, a total 60 people in center-based programming took steps toward community employment, and 20 people who had participated in center-based prevocational services for many years obtained community employment for the first time.

This initial success created momentum and excitement. ODC leadership committed to building upon this success by implementing several strategies to assist more people to transition from center-based services to community integrated employment.

The change has been gradual but intentional and steady. ODC has encountered a number of challenges along the way. As each new hurdle arose, ODC recommitted to identifying innovative approaches to support people in their own personal journey.



ODC has relationships with over 350 businesses across its 9 county locations. Businesses, like Power Pac in Marshfield, see ODC as a valuable partner. "If you're not hiring through ODC, you're missing out," said Mandy Witt, co-owner of Power Pac. **"They offer opportunities to hire great, qualified employees that will change your life."**

## Looking at the numbers:

In 2009, 58 people, or **20%** of the people served by ODC, were in Supported Employment. As of December 2019, over 250 people are in Supported Employment working in their community, which represents over **60%** of the people in ODC's long-term work programs.

## Transformation Strategies ODC Used:

**1. Leadership commitment:** It is very important for the leaders to make up their minds about whether to commit to change or to resist. Every organization will deal with skepticism, but once committed to change and to being creative and finding innovative approaches to meet hurdles, there are a lot of employees with energy to look at things differently. Support these employees to go in the direction of trying new strategies.

**2. Think "Addition" vs. "Taking Away":** Initially leadership was personally resistant to shifting from predominantly facility-based to community-based services. Instead of viewing the change as taking something away from people's lives and choices, they began to see it as value added. They were adding new opportunities to explore, experience, and discover the community – the chance to try and see new things. Some people were then ready to "let go" of center-based options because they had developed other things in life and work.

**3. One person at a time, one job at a time:** Any kind of change or transformation takes time and can feel overwhelming. Accept that the change will not happen overnight and that it really is just one step at a time. Remember that a baby step is still a step. ODC took the approach of looking at one person at a time and one job at a time.

**4. Different people = different approaches:** Every single person has different dreams and goals, so it is necessary to take a different approach with each person. This requires turning the traditional approach of slotting people into jobs around and really getting to know the person.



**5. Understand people's reluctance and resistance:** People's fears, whether actual or perceived, are real to them. It is necessary to address these fears in an individualized way. One solution will not work for every person or every family. ODC began their Community Connect service line as a way to validate and address these fears. For example, if someone was worried about losing time with friends, through Community Connect they worked on finding time to meet up after work.

**6. Never say never:** Language is powerful. It can create a reason to not try as hard or to stop trying all together. Words like "can't", "never", and "won't" are no longer accepted at ODC. Staff and leadership now correct each other and use statements like "it might be a challenge, but let's see what we can do" or "We haven't figured that out yet." Being sensitive to how you speak impacts the team as well as the people served and their families. Use positive language and messaging internally and externally about where the organization is going.

**7. Update Job Titles and Descriptions:** ODC wanted their job titles and descriptions to reflect movement, to show that people would navigate through the services at ODC to reach their desired outcomes. For example, their "Case Managers" became "Employment Resource Specialists" since the goal was employment. Some staff resisted this change in job description and decided to leave the agency. While this was challenging in the moment, in retrospect, it was okay.

**8. Remove silos:** At ODC the two different approaches—facility-based and community-based—led to two separate teams that didn't interact much or collaborate around client goals. Now, staff are aware that people are going to navigate through the programs, so they talk to each other a lot more through the process.

**9. It's all about relationships:** Partnerships with employers, the community, and its funders is one of ODC's strengths. ODC invests time in building relationships with employers by being involved and present in the community and by being supportive and responsive to the needs of the employee with a disability and the business. ODC and its funders have developed trusting and transparent relationships. They recognize each other's perspective as well as the limitations each entity faces. From this foundation, they can problem solve and move forward.

**10. Celebrate success:** As people got jobs in the community, ODC highlighted their successes. They quickly realized that the staff needs and deserves that recognition and celebration too. The individualized approach they now use takes a lot of creativity and resilience from staff.

**11. Take all the help available:** ODC learned through the Rebalancing Initiative that, while funding may spark motivation, the most beneficial resource is technical assistance, peer learning and sharing.

**12. Collaborate rather than commiserate:** Venting is sometimes needed, but ODC leadership recognized that time and energy are limited. They now focus their efforts on solutions and collaboration rather than commiseration.

**13. Change is not linear:** For periods of time ODC felt stuck and worried that they had plateaued in their progress. However, they have learned that setbacks will happen and that these challenges will not stop them. They will still make forward progress.

## ODC's Advice for Other Organizations:

■ Put your energy toward figuring out what you *can* do, and identifying possibilities, rather than putting your energy into resistance. They have seen some great successes that might not have happened in the past, and people are enjoying new opportunities.

■ Leadership has to set the tone in a positive way and support people through the change process with positive and consistent language.

■ If people are resistant to change, determine what is behind that resistance and find ways to support their concerns and apprehension.

■ Remember it will not happen overnight...but it will not happen at all if you don't take steps. ODC has been transforming for 10 years and the journey continues on.



Nathan "Buck" is one of the 250 participants now working in the community. He started in ODC's facility based prevocational services in 2007 while he was still in high school. He participated in prevocational services for twelve years. In 2019, after a couple of successful work experiences in the food industry, he got a job at the local coffee shop and is a valuable member of the team.

