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Employment First: Q&A with Ann Balzell

To: Employment First stakeholders

From: Statewide Employment First Coordinator Mike Maley

(Please forward to your local partners & stakeholders)

Vocational Rehabilitation (VR) recently hired Ann Balzell as Developmental Disability Policy Analyst, with a primary focus on employment issues. Ann is an experienced educator and policy analyst who started her advocacy work as a parent of a child who experienced multiple disabilities.

Ann's charge is to assist with making connections between the Office of Developmental Disability Services (ODDS), the Oregon Department of Education (ODE) and VR, as well supporting the goals of Executive Order 13-04 and the Employment First initiative. She will also collaborate with newly-hired VR counselors specializing in working with individuals with intellectual and developmental disabilities (I/DD). These new VR counselors will work in regions around the state, focused on integrated employment services for people with I/DD.

Ann agreed to sit down for a Q&A on her new role and primary goals.



1. Tell us a bit about yourself and your professional background.
Ann: I started as a high school teacher, but spent more time in adult education where employment is a major issue for adults with disabilities and it became a passion of mine. From that start, I worked for or directed supported employment programs in

three states. Most recently I managed the final three years of the Oregon Medicaid Infrastructure Grant (MIG) where evidence-based practices combined with

collaboration between agencies at local and state levels were crucial to increased employment opportunities for individuals with disabilities.

2. What is your role as VR's DD Policy Analyst?

Ann: The DD Policy Analyst has two major roles in VR that facilitate the Executive Order. The first is to shepherd any needed policy changes and to assist in informing VR staff about those changes. The second is to provide statewide coordination and technical assistance to the network of specialized VR counselors, expanding innovative practices and implementing evidence-based strategies throughout Oregon.

3. What are your top goals?

Ann:

- Promote development of policy, strategies and practices that enable VR to serve increasing numbers of individuals with I/DD.
- Expand on current knowledge within VR about employment of individuals with I/DD to increase successful employment outcomes. Use the work of the new VR counselors and the Employment First teams to inform this goal.
- Work with ODE and ODDS to understand and implement expectations for transition students within the Executive Order.

4. What are you focused on in the next three months?

Ann: Six of the new VR Counselors have begun work in their specialized areas throughout Oregon. The work done by those counselors, lessons learned, their collaboration with each other, and collaboration within their communities, will be the foundation for VR's continued work on behalf of individuals with I/DD. My focus will be to help these regional staff become a network that informs all of VR. These specialized counselors will also be a resource to the greater community, working with local DD and Transition/ODE staff, individuals and families to create and promote best practices.

Local collaboration is also a major focus of my work now as ODDS continues to experience changes in its policy and practices at the local level and understanding those changes facilitates VR and DD staff working together on behalf of individuals. We are also developing a training series about Supported Employment for all VR Counselors that will include the best and evidence-based practices. The next session in the series is set for late spring in eight communities.

5. Anything else you'd like to add?

Ann: I truly believe that a time of change is a time of opportunity. There is growing opportunity in Oregon, right now, for individuals with I/DD to create and seek an employment goal for themselves and to inspire us all with their attainment. I am excited about the opportunity to be a part of the collaborative effort that works to create a system to facilitate each individual's goals.

If you have questions or comments for Ann, she is available at:

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