



COLLEGE OF DIRECT SUPPORT

# PARTNER PROFILES

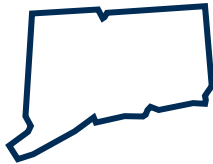
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## Ability Beyond Disability's P2E Program Using CDS Has 63 Graduates – and All 63 DSPs Are Still There

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Our organization has made a tremendous investment in our direct support workforce. To date, we have had 63 graduates, amounting to \$63,000 in bonuses alone. In addition, we have 45 current participants in the program, and a waiting list of qualified applicants eager to start...Since beginning the P2E program in May 2008 we have had NO turnover among participants. All 63 graduates are still working here, eagerly awaiting the development of the specialty training programs.

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It is not everyday that you have an employee run up and give you a hug because they got into a training program, but at Ability

Beyond Disability we are getting used to just that! Since beginning our Pathways to Excellence program in May of 2008, hugging has been on the rise.

Maybe that is because Pathways to Excellence (P2E) is more than your typical training program -- it is a career path that engages employees in our organization's vision. At Ability Beyond Disability in Bethel, CT., we have a 55-year history of providing support to individuals with disabilities. But equally as important is our dynamic vision for the future -- Vision 2013. It is a vision of growth, creative solutions, and new possibilities for providing support to twice as many individuals with developmental and neurological disabilities in Connecticut and New York. Each year, we serve approximately 1,300 individuals through community-based residential, vocational, behavioral, nursing and rehabilitation services.

Anyone in our field knows the direct support staff story – low pay, lack of training, lack of recognition, and lack of career growth and advancement. Ability Beyond Disability employs 715 direct support staff, and have been challenged by annual turnover rates ranging from 30 to 35 percent. We knew something had to change if we were going to grow to meet the increasing support needs of those in our communities. We did a lot of research, and found the College of Direct Support (CDS) to be the leader in direct support training and best practices.

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few years, but nothing compares to the success we have seen in the past year since implementing our P2E program, with CDS as its core curriculum.

We began P2E, a career path program for our direct support workforce, with two goals -- to advance the skills, knowledge and ability of our direct support workforce, and at the same time provide promotional opportunities and financial rewards. The program was designed by a focus group of direct support staff and frontline supervisors from across the organization. Before we could start, we needed the approval and support, both in spirit and financially, from our entire organization. It soon became clear the program had overwhelming support! Our focus group became our initial pilot group and began in May 2008. All 17 participants graduated in November 2008 and P2E has been rolling ever since.

Here's how it works. The first phase of the P2E Program is the Direct Support Professional (DSP) training program. Prospective participants self-select into the program and are required to complete an application, including a brief statement of what they wish to gain from the program and future career goals. Criteria for the program includes having worked in direct support with us for at least one year, compliance with all required trainings and certifications, no disciplinary actions within the past 12 months, and a letter of support from their supervisor. We run the program similar to college semesters, with a specific application period and a three-hour "kick-off" to orient participants to the program.

Participants must complete about 120 hours of online CDS lessons over a five-month period. Monthly group meetings are held to discuss a pre-selected course and

participants are responsible for a written reflection of the course being discussed and to share what they have learned. Most participants have expressed the positive impact the CDS courses have on them, including sparking new ideas to provide better support, and viewing themselves as professionals, excited by the career possibilities that lie ahead as a result.

Recognition is a crucial element. We make sure we recognize the successful completion of the DSP program, not only internally, but with the greater community so that they may understand the importance of direct support. Let's face it -- did any of us have a high school guidance counselor tell us about a career in direct support? Upon completion, graduates are promoted to a new title

of DSP, which comes complete with a 50-cent hourly pay increase and a graduation ceremony. Graduates invite their co-workers, family, friends and those they support. The crowd rises to their feet and they file in to the now infamous chant "D - S - P! D - S - P!" They are presented a framed certificate along with a completion bonus of \$1,000 by members of our Board of Directors and senior leadership. Photos and a press release are sent to each participant's hometown paper in an effort to share their achievements with their neighbors and friends.

The next step in the P2E program is still in development. It includes specialty certifications with their own 40-hour training programs combining classroom and CDS courses not completed as part of the first step of the program. The specialty certifications are designed to assist our organization with our Vision 2013 goals.

Our organization has made a tremendous investment in our direct support workforce. To date, we have had 63 graduates, amounting to \$63,000 in bonuses alone. In addition, we have 45 current participants in the program, and a waiting list of qualified applicants eager to start. This is a large investment, but with

an equal if not larger return. In the past year we have seen a decline in our turnover rate -- from 30% to 21%. We realize that the poor economy helps us retain employees, but also realize that it is how we treat people now, when the economy is poor, that will help us retain them when things improve.

Since beginning the P2E program in May 2008 we have had NO turnover among participants. All 63 graduates are still working here, eagerly awaiting the development of the specialty training programs. For each employee we retain, we save money on recruiting and on-boarding costs such as background checks and training. Each employee retained means the individuals we support know and recognize the person working with them each day, and it means

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that his or her family member recognizes the staff member working with their loved one. Can you put a price on that? As the credit card commercial says -- PRICELESS. The success of P2E has shown us that by investing in

our employees, they are, in turn, investing in a career with us.

"Our greatest asset is our workforce, and therefore, I can't think of a better investment than our Pathways to Excellence program. It is a win-win for all. Our staff have the opportunity to develop professionally, and the people we serve benefit from having consistent and highly qualified staff," said Thomas H. Fanning, President/CEO, Ability Beyond Disability

It makes one proud to work for a company that has a vision, especially in the tough economic climate that we all find ourselves faced with, and prouder still that our organization recognizes the importance of the direct support workforce who make the support we provided yesterday, today, and tomorrow possible. Oh, and of course, I love the hugs!

*Written by Kristine Foss, Workforce Planning & Development Administrator at Ability Beyond Disability in Bethel, CT. You may reach her at 203.826.3066 or via email at kfoss@abilitybeyonddisability.org.*

#### About CDS Partner Profiles

CDS Partner Profiles highlights the activities of state and local organizations that have integrated the College of Direct Support into efforts to elevate the preparation, performance, status, and compensation of direct support professionals (DSPs) and frontline supervisors and managers (FSMs). The purpose of the the CDS Partner Profiles is to identify and describe a variety of innovative and exemplary initiatives and activities into which the CDS has been integrated. CDS Partner Profiles are written by leaders of organizations that are actually engaged in these efforts.

College of Direct Support (CDS)  
www.collegeofdirectsupport.com

The College of Direct Support (CDS) and its companion College of Frontline Supervision and Management (CFSM) are internet-delivered multimedia, competency-based training curricula for DSPs and FSMs supporting individuals with disabilities.

The CDS is available for review at: collegeofdirectsupport.com

For more information about the CDS, contact Bill Tapp at bill@collegeofdirectsupport.com or Donna Kosak at donna@collegeofdirectsupport.com or call toll-free, 877-353-2767

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