

**Strategies to Support Employment for
Youth With Disabilities:
A Program Template**

A White Paper

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Bronx Independent Living Services, Inc. and
Disability Anti-Poverty Initiative

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Executive Summary

Youth with disabilities have historically faced major difficulties in finding employment as they reach adulthood. If they do not *immediately* transition to further education or employment after leaving high school, their long-term options can become quite limited. Bronx Independent Living Services, Inc. (BILS) is an Independent Living Center (ILC) located in Bronx, New York. In 2016, ACCES-VR (ACCES), which is part of the NYS Education Department, selected BILS as a vendor to provide Youth Employment Services on a fee-for-service basis. BILS designed a comprehensive Youth Employment Services (YES) program with peer support, skills training and paid work experience. BILS' initial cohort began with 28 high school students. All had learning disabilities (LD); in addition, some had attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD) or mental health issues, and one also had more severe developmental disabilities (DD).

By addressing some of the psychological realities of adolescents with disabilities, as well as offering the financial incentive of paid work, BILS provided an experience that was beneficial to both participants and host work sites. Of the initial cohort, 89% of enrollees finished the training, and 92% of them received positive feedback from the host work sites. Two individuals received job offers from their sites after their internships. **A key component of the success of the program was helping students change their overall perception of their abilities, and to increase their capacity to manage challenges, as opposed to only focusing on job-related skills.** This article, which details BILS' approach, will be of interest to ILCs and other disability programs, state vocational rehabilitation departments, and employers interesting in providing opportunities for this often-untapped workforce.

Introduction

Bronx Independent Living Services, Inc. (BILS) is a non-profit, community-based Independent Living Center (ILC), dedicated to empowering all people with disabilities to understand and exercise their civil and human rights in order to live fully integrated lives in mainstream society. As an ILC, BILS is run *by* people with disabilities *for* people with disabilities. In addition to core independent living services, BILS runs a number of other programs, ranging from a well-established Crime Victims program to its new Early Childhood Direction Center (ECDC).¹

This paper first describes the general employment problems facing youth with disabilities, and then gives an overview of BILS' program and details specific aspects. It then analyses the factors that the Executive Director believes made the initial cohort of the program a success, and offers suggestions for agencies interested in replicating it.

Problems Facing Youth with Disabilities

Despite the small gains in economic growth shown in recent U.S. Census data for most of the other subgroups of the US population, people with disabilities continue to face substantial barriers in moving ahead at all economically. There was no decrease in poverty between 2014 and 2015 for people with disabilities. Nationally, 28.5% of people with disabilities of working age lived below the poverty line in 2015, compared to only 11% of those without disabilities. Although people with disabilities comprise only 7% of all adults aged 18-64, people with disabilities account for more than 17% of those who live below the poverty line in that age group.² The employment rate of people with disabilities is less than half of non-disabled people; only 29% of people with disabilities of working age are employed either full or part-time.³

For those born with disabilities, or who acquire them at a young age, disability can have profound long-term consequences. As research has shown, many youths with disabilities are at a particularly vulnerable point when they leave high school. Compared to their non-disabled peers, they are less likely to graduate high school, and/or to pursue further education or vocational training.⁴ Minority status and low income – which factor into the lives of most of the students BILS works with – often compound the effects of disability. However, the appropriate supports can make a difference.

Both federal and state education law recognize the importance of transition services for high school students with disabilities to improve post-high school outcomes, but the reality is that students with disabilities often don't receive the supports they need. And once they leave the school system, they are generally on their own in terms of pursuing options.

As previously mentioned, all of the first cohort of YES participants were students with learning disabilities. One study identified factors that influence success of youth with learning disabilities as they enter adulthood.⁵ While this study's focus was on the formal academic environment, these factors transfer to non-academic situations as well. They include:

(a) the extent of student knowledge of the nature of their disability and compensatory strategies;

(b) how able a student is to manage a disability in a proactive manner (e.g., self-advocacy, goal setting, self-identification, organizing for living and learning, etc.);

(c) the availability of emotional and academic support;

(d) the severity of the disability;

(e) strength of the student's motivation; and

(f) how willing he or she is to persevere under adverse conditions.

Overview of YES Program

In 2014, BILS was awarded a five-year contract to provide vocational services to individuals with disabilities as a vendor to the New York State Education Department's ACCES-VR (ACCES) unit. In 2016, ACCES modified its contract with BILS to include a new pilot program for youth with disabilities. ACCES expects vendors working with youth to focus on their unique concerns and issues in terms of getting ready for employment, developing soft skills and obtaining work experience. ACCES's goal in this area is to prepare "youth for successful long term employment consistent with their strengths, resources, priorities, concerns, abilities, capabilities, interests and informed choice." After BILS was selected as a vendor by the state office, it worked closely with the local Bronx ACCES office in implementing the program.

BILS' YES program provides youth with disabilities the opportunity to attend work readiness classes at the Center and participate in paid internships with area employers. In their first full year of providing these services to 28 participants, 89% of those entering the program

successfully completed work readiness training, and 92% of those placed in internships received positive feedback from their employers.

The YES program is run by Shaharah Castillo, BILS' Manager of Employment Services, under the direction of Brett Eisenberg, BILS' Executive Director. Because this was a start up program, the Executive Director spent substantial time developing the curriculum and was also involved with screening initial participants. Mrs. Castillo assisted with the development of the curriculum, recruited host work sites, taught classes, matched students with employers, and followed up with host sites during the internship phase.

As developed by BILS, the YES model has three main administrative phases: referral and screening, training, and placement.

Step 1: Referral and Screening

Clients were referred by the local office of ACCES, and then were screened individually by BILS staff. BILS was not involved in recruitment efforts, although potential participants were invited to an Open House at BILS to learn more about the program. The participants were all enrolled at several large area high schools. Although in high school, they were generally at 2nd-6th grade reading levels. Ages ranged from 16 to 21.⁶ All had learning disabilities (LD); in addition, some had attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD) or mental health issues, and one also had more severe developmental disabilities (DD).

During this phase, BILS was also reaching out to its networks and making cold calls to find host sites for the interns.

Step 2: Training

All participants received 12 days of training, which were given over a six-week period. It quickly became apparent that the person with more severe disabilities needed to receive training separately from the higher functioning individuals. The substance of the curriculum, described in more detail below, was the same for all participants.

Step 3: Internship

After successfully completing the training, participants interned for a six-week period, working 15-20 hours a week. They received the state's minimum wage, and were paid through BILS. Mrs. Castillo was regularly in touch with employers to troubleshoot problems and deal with payroll issues.

Specific Program Aspects

Training/Curriculum

Mr. Eisenberg designed the YES program with a particular vision for meeting the particular needs of youth with disabilities. The comprehensive written curriculum he developed serves as the core of the program. To produce it, he reviewed available resources, also developed some original material. Training modules focus on three broad areas: life skills, soft skills for work environments, and job-hunting skills. Specific topics include:

- Identifying goals
- My decision to work
- Working with a disability
- Power in natural abilities
- Resume and cover letter
- Getting the job
- Concerns when starting a new job
- Communication (verbal and nonverbal)
- Professionalism
- Priorities
- Resolving conflict
- Strengths and job preferences
- Speaking and listening
- Limitations and compensatory strategies
- Making back up plans

While most of these topics are part of typical job readiness programs, Mr. Eisenberg believes that youth with disabilities need to be aware of how their disability can affect their ability to work, and how to develop strategies proactively to address them and make contingency plans if other problems arise. For example, people with mental health issues should develop plans for remembering to take their medication. Others may need to plan out transportation

routes to get to work, and to be aware of alternate routes in case of subway or bus delays. These planning skills are useful both for the work environment and in other aspects of their daily lives.

The curriculum material was covered in the after-school sessions. Each lesson included several topics, had learning objectives and various exercises, and encouraged students to identify next steps. The written handbook was available as a backup, but most of information was delivered through interactive group exercises.

Strategies for program delivery

Although the content and format were carefully structured, the program was delivered to most of the students in a peer-driven and interactive manner for several reasons. First, YES was an after-school program. The emphasis on active participation, as opposed to lectures, helped keep students interested at the end of their day. Also, through the group format, students were able to share experiences, and act as resources and problem solvers for each other. This helped to create more positive views of themselves and their peers.

Staffing the position with an instructor who can relate to young people, be supportive, encouraging, and foster an atmosphere for moving forward, while still holding students accountable, is critical. Mrs. Castillo noted that she had to strike a balance of keeping the students engaged with making sure they took the program and their internships seriously.

While BILS worked with most individuals with learning disabilities in a group setting, it worked with the person with more severe developmental disabilities one on one to provide needed individual support. In this particular instance, staff felt the benefits from the individualized instruction outweighed the potential value of peer support. This fact highlights the idea that people with DD, or other types of disabilities, may have distinct training needs. While the core concepts and soft skills taught were the same regardless of the type of disability, BILS found a one-size-fits-all model of delivery did not work.

Host work sites and placements

A variety of organizations and businesses in three New York City boroughs served as host sites for YES interns. BILS staff reached out to their networks, and cold-called some businesses that seemed like they might be receptive to these interns. The program and the interns' skills were explained before placements were made, so that expectations were clear on all sides. Some placements were with employers who had not had people with disabilities as

employees before. Because BILS was familiar with both the skills of the participants and the needs of the employers prior to making the placements, staff were able to put students where they thought best.

Most sites were small entities with the flexibility to easily place interns. Placements included a thrift shop, summer camp, food bank and several ILCs. The ILC placements may have long-term benefits for the disability community. ILCs are supposed to be staffed mainly by people with disabilities. Interns with disabilities help expand the pool of people with disabilities may wish to seek future employment at an ILC.

As the interns' salaries were paid through BILS, there was no financial risk to the hosts. In addition, BILS staff handled the biweekly timesheets, paychecks and other paperwork, so there was minimal administrative burden to the host sites.

Incentives and Consequences

The most obvious program incentive was being paid for their work as interns, which served as positive reinforcement of the job readiness training, as well as an effective mechanism to encourage appropriate behavior. Two students were suspended from their internships for one week for unprofessional behavior. After they both lost a week's pay, their behavior improved and there were no further problems.

Costs

Under the ACCES contract, BILS was reimbursed \$600 per student on a fee-for-service basis for each individual who completed the training. The interns were paid minimum wage and BILS was reimbursed by ACCES for actual expenses plus an extra \$3 an hour for administrative fees. Most of BILS' administrative costs were for staff time spent on prescreening participants, arranging internships, developing the curriculum and following up with employers, and were largely subsidized through other programs at the agency.

Keys to Program Success

The factors that led to the success of the YES program grew out of Mr. Eisenberg's extensive experience in workforce development and in working with people with disabilities. Mr.

Eisenberg believes five factors were integral to helping students improve their confidence, change their mindsets about their capabilities, and develop life skills transferrable to other contexts.

First, obtaining paid work experience was an obvious incentive for participants, as well as a confidence builder. Interns are now able to view themselves as people with paid work experience.

Second, the curriculum, which included an emphasis on life skills, helped students reframe their view of their abilities. Mr. Eisenberg believes the program helps participants shift their views of themselves and of their abilities, by focusing on the "challenges" and "limitations" participants faced, but not on their "disability." Many of the students in BILS's program are students with LD who did not have physical disabilities. They did not relate to being labeled "disabled", but were more receptive to the concept of coping with "challenges." At BILS, staff both with and without physical disabilities spoke honestly about the challenges they faced in their jobs and in their lives, and what they do to work around them. For many of the students, the program helped them to identify the skills that they already possessed to address obstacles and to develop compensatory strategies.

Third, the peer-driven delivery of the training was an important component for those with less severe disabilities. While some students knew each other through school, the program offered the opportunity to meet other teens like them. Participants built self-esteem through being able to talk openly in a safe environment and by having others in the group validate their strengths. As they got to know each other, a support system grew organically. In addition, they began to recognize that just about everyone faces challenges of one kind or another, whether they are obvious or not, which gave participants the confidence to believe in their ability to work on ways to address their own problems.

Fourth, the flexibility of the basic concepts of the training could accommodate both those with severe and more moderate disabilities. While the group setting offered significant benefits to those with less severe disabilities, in one individual's case it was more helpful to receive instruction one-on-one.

Lastly, participants were able to transfer the life skills they learned during the training to other circumstances in their lives. Students reported using skills such listening and conflict

resolution in other environments to positive effect. The successful transfer of these skills reinforced the overall validity of the program in the students' eyes.

Results

Of the first cohort, 89% of those initially enrolled completed the training, and 92 % received positive feedback from their worksites. Two interns (8%) were hired by their host sites after their formal internship ended, one at a restaurant and the other by the thrift shop.

Going forward, BILS will be keeping pre/post records of skills learned and will follow up on job placements and/or other program participation for those students do not attend college. Because of the success of the pilot group, additional groups for Spanish speakers and deaf individuals are planned.

Replicating the YES Program

Mr. Eisenberg believes that the YES model can be successfully adapted in other organizations, but suggests certain conditions be in place. As noted above, these factors include a curriculum that provides a way for the students to talk about their disabilities with language they are receptive to, and that focuses on developing compensatory strategies. Staff must be able to engage students with the material, and interns should be paid for their work.

BILS intends to makes its curriculum available for a fee in the upcoming months. The advantage of using this model for another agency is that it has demonstrated its effectiveness. BILS also expects to be able to provide consulting services to assist other programs in setting up similar projects.

While the advantage of working with ACCES or a similar agency is that they both recruited clients and paid BILS on a fee for service basis, many ILCs would be able to recruit similar participants from their existing consumer base. Thus, such programs could be funded through a grant or other means of support.

Besides the important potential long-term benefits of having a successful work experience while in high school, several other facts should lead agencies and funders to contemplate using a YES model. First, with the passage of the ABLE Act, paid work is more feasible for certain youth with disabilities. The Act allows certain individuals to deposit savings

into special accounts, without their eligibility for government benefits being affected. Further details are available at <http://www.ablenrc.org>.

Also, given the complex nature of transition planning for students with disabilities, a number of commentators have expressed the need for transition planning to begin earlier, by middle school. While certain elements of the YES program, such as paid internships, are beyond the scope of middle school students, other aspects are very much worth incorporating, such as beginning the practice of identifying obstacles and challenges, and developing workarounds. While it may be too early to focus on particular careers, students may find inspiration and a sense of possibility through early exposure to people with disabilities, or even to those facing “challenges,” who are working at a variety of jobs.

Conclusion

By changing how youth with disabilities viewed their strengths and capabilities, as opposed to focusing solely on work skills, in combination with paid work experience, a relatively inexpensive short-term program such as the BILS model can have a lasting impact, with the potential to break the cycle of the negative long-term outcomes for youth with disabilities. This model can be replicated by other ILCs, disability-related programs and other state and private funders. These short-term programs offer immediate benefits to both youth with disabilities and potential employers by allowing both participants with disabilities and employers to view people with disabilities and their capabilities in a different light.

Appendixes

About the Authors

Joan Peters, JD, MPH is the founder of the Disability Anti-Poverty Initiative, which seeks economic equality for people with disabilities, and is on the Board of Directors at BILS. She has broad experience in policy, program development, agency management, program evaluation, writing and advocacy regarding disability and chronic disease. Previously, she was the Executive Director of an independent living center in Brooklyn, NY, where she designed an innovative program to train people with disabilities to be Community Health Workers for people with disabilities and chronic illnesses. She has worked with people with disabilities and chronic conditions for more than 20 years. In 2015, she was the recipient of the Frieda Zames Advocacy Award for advocacy on behalf of people with disabilities from Mayor de Blasio. She received her BA from Barnard College, her law degree from the University of Michigan, and her MPH from the Mailman School of Public Health at Columbia University.

Currently Brett Eisenberg is the Executive Director for BILS. Prior to his current position Brett was the Membership Specialist for the National Business & Disability Council (NBDC), which is the leading resource for employers seeking to integrate people with disabilities into the workplace and companies seeking to reach them in the consumer marketplace. In Brett's role he worked with companies on employing people with disabilities and various other disability initiatives. Prior to NBDC Brett spent several years at AIG leading their Disability Initiatives. As Disability Coordinator, he led AIG's Disability Initiative programs in various areas including recruitment and retention, corporate affairs, assistive technology, and products and services. He created programs whereby AIG is able to focus on the disabled population to better serve their needs and the needs of AIG. Before joining AIG Brett worked at Merrill Lynch in various areas including Private Wealth Management, Global Philanthropy, Office of General Counsel and Litigation Department. Brett holds a Bachelor of Science Degree in Accounting with a concentration in Management from Nova Southeastern University. In 2008 Brett received the prestigious Paul G. Hearne/AAPD Leadership Award.

Endnotes

¹ Core Independent Living Services include information and referral, peer support, benefits advisement and assistance with looking for housing.

² U.S. Census Bureau, Current Population Survey, 2015 and 2016 Annual Social and Economic Supplements.

3. CIDNY, "The ADA at 26 in New York City". Accessed online on March 16, 2017 at <http://www.cidny.org/resources/ADA%20at%2026%20in%20NYC.pdf>.

4. See, for example "Out of School and Unprepared: The Need to Improve Support for Students with Disabilities Transitioning to Adulthood." ARISE Coalition, February 2011. Accessed online on February 21, 2017 at

<http://arisecoalition.org/Out%20of%20School%20and%20Unprepared%20%20-%20The%20ARISE%20Coalition%20-%203-1-11.pdf>

5. Skinner, M.E., & Lindstrom, B.D. (2003). Bridging the gap between high school and college: Strategies for the successful transition of students with learning disabilities. *Preventing School Failure*, 47(3), 132-137.

6. In New York, students with IEPs may remain within the high school system through age 21, if they have not completed the requirements for their high school degree.