



COLLEGE OF DIRECT SUPPORT

PARTNER PROFILES

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AbilityFirst Describes CDS as 'Important & Integral, A Valued & Relevant Ongoing Educational Resource'

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AbilityFirst's partnership with the College of Direct Support (CDS) has had a positive impact on our organization, an impact that can be seen and felt when someone walks into any AbilityFirst facility. The children and adults with special needs who we support are realizing their full potential through AbilityFirst programs in a nurturing and creative environment, an environment that's part and parcel of our partnership with CDS. Having a bad day? Just visit an AbilityFirst facility and your spirits will be instantly lifted. That's the feeling AbilityFirst generates and exudes daily thanks to having a staff of knowledgeable, caring and sensitive employees learning and growing through CDS.

With 24 locations in Southern California, AbilityFirst's mission of providing programs and services to children and adults with physical and developmental disabilities reaches far and wide. Founded in 1926 as the Crippled Children's Society of Southern California, the organization, with its offices in Pasadena, adopted the name AbilityFirst in 1999 to better reflect its mission, vision and commitment of celebrating the unique abilities of every individual.

AbilityFirst provides programs and services to approximately 2,000 people with special needs, including autism, Down syndrome and cerebral palsy. Seven community centers provide after-school enrichment and adult programs that focus on socialization, recreation and community inclusion. Four of these centers have warm-water swimming pools providing lessons, exercise and water safety to program participants, as well as the greater community. Camp Paivika in the San Bernardino Mountains, just outside Los Angeles, is one of the first fully accessible camps in the United States. Children and adults experience traditional



camping activities in a safe and nurturing environment, including horseback riding and swimming, while their families gain much-needed respite.

Three work centers offer paid employment and job training to adults with developmental disabilities. Through its Business Services division, corporate clients partner with AbilityFirst Work Centers for document shredding, assembly, packaging, sorting, collating and mailing jobs. Some of these adults transition to employment in the wider community through AbilityFirst's Employment Services. Job coaches provide pre-employment training to help equip adults with important job and workplace skills so they can successfully interview for and obtain jobs. AbilityFirst operates 12 residential facilities for individuals with physical and developmental disabilities. The housing program includes 10 apartment complexes, a "family-style" adult residential facility and a residential home for seniors.

Most AbilityFirst programs qualify for funding through the state of California Regional Center system. As a non-profit organization, AbilityFirst relies heavily on the support of hundreds of donors who share their vision.

To assist AbilityFirst in maintaining its quality programs and services, as well as strong reputation, the College of Direct Support (CDS) has been an important and integral ongoing educational resource for AbilityFirst's 200-plus employees for the past four years. AbilityFirst Direct Support Professionals (DSPs) receive valuable, relevant instruction and training from CDS to

help them successfully impact the lives of the people they serve, while administrative staff and management receive insight into what DSPs experience, as well as training that they can apply to their positions. All of AbilityFirst has benefited from the training provided by CDS.

AbilityFirst President and CEO Lori Gangemi embraced CDS as a proactive way to ensure that employees were trained consistently and equally on safety, common language and term usage for people with disabilities, as well as best practices in the workplace. "As an organization serving individuals with disabilities, it is vital that our employees continually develop their professional skills so that they can successfully engage, understand and work with program participants and their families, as well as each other," states Gangemi. In fact, CDS was so well received by employees, several AbilityFirst board members became CDS students.

In addition, AbilityFirst has utilized the CDS survey tools. When the organization wanted

to create and deliver two separate non-anonymous assessment surveys to board members, they chose CDS because other survey services only offered anonymous survey options. The survey tool is provided through the Learning Management System and allows agencies to create customized surveys, edit existing surveys and assign and generate survey result reports.

Before CDS, professional skills training at AbilityFirst was based on the strengths and weaknesses of the people at a specific AbilityFirst location. Now, through CDS, AbilityFirst has an established baseline for professional development and training throughout the agency. To ensure buy-in from the top down, CDS courses are included in employee goals and measured through their annual performance evaluations which determine merit increases. Including CDS into annual goals also allows students to go at a slower pace to better absorb and be able to thoughtfully practice what they have learned. In addition,

many AbilityFirst employees have used CDS courses for continuing education units (CEUs).

Perhaps the greatest impact CDS has had is at AbilityFirst's community and work centers, as well as camp and residential facilities, where AbilityFirst employees support and interact with kids, teens and adults with special needs. "CDS is an amazing resource that helps keep me and my staff up-to-date with new terms and information pertaining to individuals with disabilities," states Cindy Valencia, AbilityFirst-Anaheim Program Director. "We play an important role in the lives of the children and adults we serve. CDS provides us with the opportunity to learn and increase our skills, and to practice what we learn to better serve our program participants."

"Due to the nature of our work, CDS provides a convenient and easy way to educate and train our staff on-site," says Daniel Trevino, AbilityFirst Crown House Administrator. "In addition, the course topics are good and directly relate to the services we provide and how we provide them."

AbilityFirst's Crown House is a residential facility for adults with physical and developmental disabilities. At the "family-style" residence, staff provides around-the-clock support and assistance to these adults. "Due to the nature of our

work, CDS provides a convenient and easy way to educate and train our staff on-site," says Daniel Trevino, AbilityFirst Crown House Administrator. "In addition, the course topics are good and directly relate to the services we provide and how we provide them."

At AbilityFirst, CDS is an ongoing learning program because ways of thinking and methods are constantly changing within the special needs community. Focusing on the quality of training enables AbilityFirst to continue to deliver and offer quality supports and services to its families today and in the future.

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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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