



CDS Partner Profiles

Maine OHI CEO Says CDS Training Is ‘Critical’ for Staff; Group Working to Expand Its Reach

After years of wild anticipation, the long-awaited College of Direct Support, snow and the north wind all arrived on the doorstep of OHI in March 2010. OHI is a 33-year-old nonprofit organization that serves citizens with a variety of abilities and disabilities throughout “Downeast Maine.” Yes, while the far northeastern tip of the 3,500-mile Maine coastline is up to most, we call it, “downeast.”

OHI’s greatest asset is its 260 Direct Support Professionals (DSPs), who work in a multitude of services supporting more than 200 people with intellectual disabilities and autism, and more than 400 other Maine citizens with mental illness – many of whom are or have recently been homeless. OHI – based in Hermon, Maine, just outside Bangor – provides Case Management, Daily Living Supports, Skills Development, Community Rehabilitation Services, clinical supports and a wide array of housing options. These services spread throughout five rural counties and to more than 150 specific locations.



Prior to July 1, 2010, all DSPs here who were supporting people funded by the Medicaid Home and Community Based Waiver were required to be certified through the use of a state curriculum. The curriculum was developed and monitored by the Muskie Center of the University of Southern Maine in collaboration with the Department of Health and Human Services. Unfortunately, the curriculum became outdated and expensive to administer, so the state turned to the rapidly expanding, highly regarded College of Direct Support (CDS).... and it did it hook, line and sinker!!!

Seven agencies were asked to pilot CDS on a volunteer basis from March through June 2010. OHI immediately stepped forward and was chosen. As founder and CEO of OHI and a former ANCOR president, I had a better-than-average working knowledge of CDS from my leadership roles

with ANCOR and the ANCOR Foundation, both champions of this innovative curriculum. I also had been on one of the advisory groups working on the development of some of the curriculum components.

At OHI we developed a CDS Implementation Team and began to explore the organization’s nooks and crannies. We spoke with Scott Trudo from New Hampshire, an early CDS pioneer and a tremendous CDS advocate. Several providers from across the country were immensely helpful in sharing their experiences and advice. We wrote to and received a grant from the JTG Foundation to purchase the hardware technology and to engineer the space necessary to create a 10-station computer lab.

I began an extensive effort to roll out an agency-wide communication plan about this high-quality new learning tool coming our way. Each week I write a “CEO MEMO” to our staff, which is emailed to each work site, individual employees, and my colleagues in Maine. I used the CEO MEMO to tell our staff about CDS and about the huge potential it has for broadening our ability to provide better services. I personally met with every OHI staff member and gave them a preview of CDS and its value for us – not only for them but for the people we support.

All new Direct support employees are required to engage in learning by using CDS. We decided that for the first year we would train all new employees in CDS and enroll all supervisors and leadership team members in the College of Frontline Supervision and Management, using 22 of the 33 courses. Our hands were full at that point because we not only chose to acquire an administrator’s license, but we also serve as administrator through a variety of different levels of contractual relationships for more than 12 sister agencies. ►

We are in the process of developing an incentive program for our other employees who were working at OHI when we implemented CDS. This will be rolled out in the next several months. We have enrolled all of our employees who support people with intellectual disabilities in CDS so that we can prepare for the next phase. We believe that it is critical that ALL staff be equally trained through this curriculum that focuses on leading practice. We quickly discovered our new employees were learning skills and practices that some of the longer-term employees had not learned.

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Currently, OHI has 30 active learners fully engaged in CDS, and 76 others have graduated with flying colors. There are many more in active stages of learning or who have graduated from the other agencies whose programs we administer.

Over the next 18 months we plan to present CDS to our board of directors by introducing one lesson at each board meeting and engaging the directors in discussion. This will culminate in a graduation ceremony for all OHI staff and volunteers that have utilized CDS!

In doing an assessment of the CDS Maine program with staff, I was thrilled to hear anecdotal stories of the benefits this cutting-edge curriculum has had on staff and the people they support. I heard many accounts about how “new” staff are now educating the seasoned staff who have been with OHI for a number of years about things they learned in the CDS. We are finding that in weekly staff meetings our staff is engaging in

conversation about the skills they are learning and, as a result, are questioning some of our practices.

Staff members tell me that person-centered planning is being closely analyzed and that although OHI is very focused on this type of planning, we are gaining even deeper insights about how to truly support people to voice their needs and desires and to develop and reach goals. One staff member said that for some people “the caretaker role has taken a backseat and teaching has come forward!” This is music to the ears of our leadership team!

OHI has been so vocal about the impressive benefits of CDS that the president of the Maine Association for Community Service Providers (MACSP) asked me to convene a working committee of some of its members to join with representatives of the state in making suggestions for “next steps” and to begin to work on further policies and procedures to more fully take advantage of this fantastic learning tool. Frankly, I was astounded by the number of members who wanted to work with me to continue to improve the way we use the curriculum here in Maine.

In this austere budgetary environment and with the turmoil of a new state administration, CDS is a blessing. It is a comfort to be using a state-of-the-art curriculum that is constantly being reviewed, updated and enhanced. OHI is thankful for the wisdom and work of all of those involved in CDS and looks forward to a continuing relationship as the winds of change continue to blow around all of us and the years roll by.

Written by Bonnie-Jean Brooks, founder & CEO of OHI.

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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 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 is written by leaders or organizations that are actually engaged in these efforts.



For more information about the College of Direct Support curriculum, call 888-526-5756 or email collegeofdirectsupport@elsevier.com.