

Disability Program Navigators in Profile Interviews from the Field

In the Spotlight: Karen Engel, Disability Program Navigator, Fox Valley Workforce Development Board of Neenah, **WISCONSIN**

The U.S. Department of Labor (DOL) and the U.S. Social Security Administration (SSA) have jointly established the Disability Program Navigator position located within DOL's One Stop Career Centers. There are now 30 states participating in the DPN program. Each navigator is hired and employed by the state or local workforce system. DPNs assist individuals with disabilities and One Stop staff with a variety of employment-related services. The DPN (1) develops linkages and collaborates on an ongoing basis with employers to facilitate job placements for persons with disabilities; (2) facilitates the transition of youth with disabilities to secure employment and economic self-sufficiency; (3) serves as a resource on SSA's work incentive and employment support programs; and (4) serves as a resource to the workforce investment community.

Published September 2006

Brief Highlights In Karen Engel's experience as a DPN, she has learned to appreciate that "every community is different." She comments, "What may seem huge in one area may be fairly insignificant in another. When we navigators get together we may be rejoicing over what some consider minor. Yet, in learning what customers need and trying to make system-wide changes, some of those seemingly small accomplishments are really huge." This sentiment applies to her experience working with transportation improvements too.

Karen explains that transportation challenges can prevent capable individuals from fulfilling their potential. To illustrate her point, Karen describes the challenges a visually impaired student in her program faces. He lives in a very rural area with limited employment options nearby and has difficulty finding alternative transportation. In this interview, Karen tells more of how she helped this student solve his mobility challenges and other ways in which she has become involved in transportation solutions in her community.

Seven counties and six job centers comprise the Fox Valley Workforce Development Area¹ that Karen Engel canvasses in her DPN endeavors. Counties range in size from rural Waushara County and its largest city of Wautoma with 2,096 residents to Outagamie and Winnebago Counties, each with their largest city numbering at least 59,000 people. A variety of community transportation services and gaps in service exist in this expansive area.

How long have you been a Disability Program Navigator and what were you doing prior to your current position?

I have been a Disability Program Navigator (DPN) since December 2003. Prior to that, I worked for almost five years in job development at a small for-profit agency. While I was there, I hired job coaches and coordinated a School-to-Work program for a large local high school. Prior to working in job development, I spent two years providing support for people in transitional

On behalf of the U.S. Department of Labor, the Community Transportation Association of America prepares resources supporting access to employment. These resources facilitate a learning network among grantees and others interested in employment transportation and access for all, including those with disabilities. For more information on passengers with disabilities and employment transportation, visit: www.ctaa.org/ntrc/is_accessibility.asp & http://www.ctaa.org/ntrc/is_employment.asp.

housing. I have a Bachelors degree in Human Services with a minor in Developmental Disabilities.

Within which agencies are you housed?

My base office is in a One Stop job center² but I also work out of the two larger job centers on a set schedule. I try to work at each of the three rural centers at least once a month.

How many customers do you serve?

Direct customer interaction makes up about 10%–12% of my workload. I work directly with about two to five people a week, providing information and referrals in person. I also field phone calls from another two to five people a week. My goal, though, is to provide the staff in job centers with the information they need so that they can better assist a larger number of customers.

We know that DPNs wear a multitude of hats based on their own community characteristics and resources. What are the major responsibilities or efforts you undertake as a DPN?

Educating the staff, the customers, and the employers is my primary responsibility. Right now, one of my focal areas is providing outreach to youth with disabilities. I go to schools, give presentations, and arrange tours for students to visit the centers.

I have also had success in my outreach efforts to employers. I am a part of the “Community Employment Opportunities Association,” a group that includes four vocational support agencies. We have created a video that we use during presentations to local civic groups. We also make resources and information on hiring individuals with disabilities available to employers.

Are there any transportation services you provide to your customers?

I try to connect customers with the transportation services that are already available in their communities. However, I do feel that improving existing services for riders with disabilities is important. For example, there is a volunteer driver program, in one of the rural counties that I serve.³ Once a year, it holds a training session for volunteers and I often conduct the disability etiquette part of the program. I also distribute that program’s training information (with its permission) to other counties that are interested in building similar programs.

What are your future goals in working on transportation services? Do you have a sense of who you would like to work with or how to otherwise accomplish such goals in your area?

Greater emphasis needs to be placed on coordinated services. This will help urban areas to fully utilize their resources and give rural areas the opportunity to meet the service needs of their communities.

I think rural areas are particularly in need of coordinated services. I am part of a team that includes the county, the Division of Vocational Rehabilitation, a high school, and a vocational support provider. Our goal is to work with youth who need some support and who often fall through the cracks. We want these students to have a better chance at making a successful transition into the world of work.⁴To achieve this goal, the vocational support provider awarded us a grant to work with five students at the high school. The selected students have some limitations that are not necessarily severe.

The biggest barrier for one student, we found, is transportation. With his visual impairment, he cannot drive or ride a bike. He lives in a rural area with limited employment options nearby. His dad works a varied schedule so it can be difficult for him to coordinate transportation with his dad; his mother is deceased. He wants to work and is capable, but finding transportation is very difficult. Our team is exploring different

options for him such as carpooling, hiring a driver, taxi service and paratransit services.⁵ I would like to see the volunteer driver program expand to meet work needs as well; currently, its focus is on elderly individuals and transportation to medical appointments.

If you do, or have attempted to, offer transportation services for your customers, what are the roadblocks you have faced?

I attended the People on the Move training (hosted by Easter Seals Project ACTION) and it motivated me to make things happen. There were two areas that I pursued—the first was in a larger community that had a variety of community transportation options. My goal was to survey the services available in the community, centralize the information and make it accessible and user friendly. I wanted services to share what they are doing in order to support efficiency and help the organizations access each other's resources. The problem was that agencies did not readily collaborate; operating in silos was a major roadblock. Territorial issues arose, as well as financial concerns that needed to be addressed. Furthermore, partners needed to trust that they all make a contribution of time and energy. Personally, I did not feel that I had the time to assuage all these obstacles to action, so I let it go. I am willing to work on a partnership: *If everyone commits to do a little bit, the task of forming a successful partnership would not be insurmountable.*

The other area I worked on was expanding services in a rural community that has an existing transportation committee. I wanted to see the community put more of a priority on transportation related to employment. I was impressed by the committee because the members knew what services were available in their community and worked at coordinating their system. This rural community also has a great volunteer driver program; however, it focuses mainly on transportation of elderly individuals to medical appointments. I did

encounter a few challenges in working with the group. First, the committee only meets on a quarterly basis, which slows the process. I entered as an outsider and needed time to develop a relationship. I was proposing something different and the committee needed time to think about it. Two years later, I feel like I have not yet formed the connection needed to affect change, but I am still a very interested partner.

Please share a striking experience you have had with a customer that made you feel a real love for what you do as a DPN.

The differences I try to make are not necessarily in a straightforward, one-on-one customer service capacity. I try to focus on making the system operate more effectively and on bringing different partners to the table. For example, when I work on a grant with a particular county, it brings the school, the Division of Vocational Rehabilitation, the county, and the workforce development center into the same room to talk to each other and that is HUGE. For some counties, that might not be a big step, but it has been a significant achievement for us. These agencies have had great difficulty in understanding each other's perspective. Once we were in the same room and working on a grant together, we developed a better understanding of each others' services. As a result, we have been able to serve our customers better.

When I provide information and referral to customers, I do not often know the outcome. I get them started in a direction and leave my door open for their return if they get stuck. Some need more assistance, some don't, some I just don't know.

Could you describe your funding sources? Do you know how far into the future your position is funded?

My position is funded by the U.S. Department of Labor and the Social Security Administration. Right now the projection includes funding

through June 2007. Next year, we will likely focus on trying to find ways to continue funding, either locally through the Workforce Investment Board or from other sources.

Who are your most valuable community partners in accomplishing gains for your customers?

Our local partners include the Department of Health and Family Services (DHFS) Bureau for the Deaf and Hard of Hearing; DHFS Bureau for the Blind; Fox Valley NAMI (National Alliance on Mental Health); Division of Vocational Rehabilitation; ADVOCAP (a community action program); the technical colleges; the Benefits Planning Assistance and Outreach Office; the local Social Security office; the Work Incentive liaisons; and the Cooperative Educational Service Agency. I have also been very closely connected with the local Workforce Development Board.

Are there partners not currently at the table you would be thrilled to join you?

Promising partners include those such as the Chambers of Commerce. I find the chambers in rural areas are easier to connect with; however, once connected, there is a need to address their misconceptions regarding people with disabilities. For example, chambers in the larger communities I serve have at times been guarded in their relationship with my office.

Health care is another area that has been a challenge for customers, so partners from this sector are strongly needed. For example, if a person needs surgery before he or she can work but has no health insurance, then how does that person get the services they need in order to break the cycle? A successful partnership requires a dynamic approach to accessing resources.

Karen Engel plans to continue her efforts of the last few years into the next few years. For more resources and information related to the

Disability Program Navigator program or to access toolkits related to employment and accessible transportation, please view the following sites or contact Gabrielle Sivage for further details and hard copies of information at sivage@ctaa.org or 800-891-0590 x720:

<http://www.ctaa.org/NTRC/>

<http://www.ctaa.org/ntrc/dpn/home.asp>

<http://disability.law.uiowa.edu/>

http://www.doleta.gov/disability/new_dpn_grants.cfm

(Please bear in mind that not all Internet information is up-to-date.)

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***Karen left her position before publication of this profile. Her position will soon be filled.**

¹ The Fox Valley Workforce Development Area is a seven county area with six job centers. Three of the centers are located in counties with at least one fairly large city. The other three centers serve more rural counties.

² One Stop Centers, also called job centers or career centers, are funded by the U.S. Department of Labor Workforce Investment Act dollars.

³ The example from rural Waupaca County has an established transportation committee and does much more in collaboration and sharing of resources. Their volunteer driver program focuses on transportation of elderly individuals to medical appointments and social events.

⁴ The example of the grant working with high school students is in more urban Fond du Lac County; however, the student Karen references lives in a rural area of the county.

⁵ Fond du Lac, where the high school is located, has a public transit system and paratransit available; however, neither extends out to rural areas of the county or school district. The ARC has several accessible vans; however, it is difficult to coordinate the use of ARC resources when not needed for ARC. The local nursing home has accessible vehicles but there are no shared services in place. Taxi service is also available within the city.