

Disability Program Navigators in Profile Interviews from the Field

In the Spotlight: Monica Huffstutlar, Disability Program Navigator,
Ada, **OKLAHOMA**

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 June 2007

Brief Highlights In Monica Huffstutlar's experience as a Disability Program Navigator (DPN), she has recognized that "there is a large available workforce eagerly wanting employment that is overlooked due to a disability." She continues, "What is not understood about this untapped workforce is that these individuals value working and make extremely loyal employees. With the help of the Disability Program Navigator Initiative, the stereotype of individuals with disabilities can be changed, and more people with disabilities will obtain successful employment." Monica feels that DPNs play an integral part in bridging the unemployment gap and that this program must continue.

Monica believes that proper transportation is not always accessible to people with disabilities. Although public transportation systems exist in many rural areas, it is sometimes difficult for people to travel between counties or into metro areas. In this interview, Monica explains the transportation limitations experienced by these individuals. Although she discusses the transportation aspect of her duties, Monica also talks of the other roles that she plays as a DPN.

Ten counties and multiple job centers comprise the Southern Workforce Investment Area that Monica Huffstutlar canvasses in her DPN endeavors. Counties range in size from rural Coal County and its largest city of Coalgate (pop. 1,895) to Carter County, with the largest city's population being just over 24,000. 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 DPN since September 2004. Before that, I was a project coordinator for the Work Incentive Grant (WIG) program through our local Workforce Investment Act (WIA) provider. My main duty was assessing the One Stop Centers in my ten-county area. Through the WIG grant, we were able to purchase equipment to help the centers become accessible. Equipment training sessions were also conducted for the staff of the One Stops.

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.

Within which agencies are you housed?

I am housed in the Workforce Oklahoma One Stop Center in Ada, Oklahoma, but I cover a ten-county area. The Oklahoma Employment Security Commission, a state employment agency, is the DPN grant fiscal agent.

How many customers do you serve?

It is hard to say how many customers I serve. The primary goal of the DPN project is to train One Stop staff to better serve individuals with disabilities and raise employers' awareness of the available workforce that remains virtually untapped. I spend 10-15% of my time giving one-on-one assistance to people with disabilities. Another 15-25% of my time is spent giving information and referrals to One Stop staff, partnering agencies, organizations, employers, and customers with disabilities, as well as addressing accessibility issues.

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

One of my responsibilities is to edit the *Oklahoma Navigator*, an electronic newsletter distributed to over 1,000 people, organizations, agencies, and employers. It is a team project of all 16 of the Oklahoma navigators and is a great way for us to keep others up-to-date on the happenings in the disability world.

Another area I am involved with is the Business Service Team in my ten-county region. Through this group, I am able to participate with other agencies and businesses to address workplace issues that concern workers with disabilities, such as changes in disability law, accessibility issues, and many other areas.

I also work with the local Department of Rehabilitation Services to serve youth in transition from school to the workplace. For example, we give presentations to schools on

services available through our agencies. Of course, these areas are only a few of the hats I wear as a DPN.

Do you provide any transportation services to your customers?

I was able to assist our WIA provider with a CTAA-funded grant project, the Freedom Express Project, through which we developed a resource guide of transportation for people with disabilities in Oklahoma. This guide gives information on transportation providers and programs available in the southern 17 counties of Oklahoma. Using this guide makes it easy for the One Stop staff and me to refer people to the appropriate transportation provider in their area.

Another part of the Freedom Express Project was a multi-media marketing campaign, which advertised the toll-free number of the Workforce Oklahoma office as a source for further information. Even though the Freedom Express Project has ended, the tools developed have continued to be a valuable part of providing services to people with disabilities.

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?

We are fortunate that in the rural areas of Oklahoma we have a fairly good transportation system in place. Problems arise, however, when people need to cross territorial boundaries or travel to metro areas. For example, we have disabled veterans who need to travel to the Department of Veteran Affairs Hospital in Oklahoma City, and it can be near impossible, even with the Disabled American Veteran transportation, for an individual to make this trip unless a personal driver is hired. Another example of the need for specialized transportation is a man with a visual impairment who needed transportation to the metro area for a job interview. All of the available options were quite costly. I think a volunteer driver program

would have been a great solution in both of these situations.

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

When assisting customers through the Freedom Express Project, I found that the most persistent barrier is finding transportation service that crosses territorial boundaries and travels into metro areas.

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.

I have striking experiences with every person whom I am able to assist, whether I can successfully meet their need or not. The fact that I am able to help or listen makes me love my job. I have met so many wonderful people through this program and feel blessed to be a part of it.

I do not want to take away from any of the people I have assisted in Oklahoma, but the most moving experience for me was my participation in the DPN Hurricane Relief Effort in the Gulf Coast region after Hurricanes Katrina and Rita. I spent two weeks working along the coastline of Mississippi and one week in New Orleans and surrounding communities in Louisiana. The people with disabilities in those areas had been overlooked. There was so much need, and they were so grateful that we had come to help. It was three weeks of my life spent on pure adrenaline and truly was a “life-changing experience” for me. I came home with a new sense of determination to help as many people as possible, knowing that there should be nothing we cannot accomplish.

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

The DPN project is funded by the Employment and Training Division of the Department of Labor and Social Security Administration

through June 2007. The goal of the Oklahoma Navigators is to secure funding to continue the program for our state.

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

The active partners are numerous, but I would like to mention a few of them: the Department of Rehabilitation Services and Visual Services, Workforce Oklahoma, Big Five Community Services (WIA provider), Benefits Planning Assistance and Outreach, the Social Security and Area Work Incentive Coordinator, the Chickasaw Nation, the Office of Handicapped Concerns, the Department of Human Services, the Oklahoma Statewide Independent Living Council, the National Center for Disability Education and Training through the University of Oklahoma, Experience Works (agency for older workers), and Oklahoma AbleTech (assistive technology information and training).

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

Partners in the health services industry are greatly needed to assist in addressing the health care needs of individuals without insurance. The people especially in need of health care assistance are those awaiting disability determination by Social Security who are not quite ready to obtain employment and do not qualify for vocational rehabilitation because of funding limits. Also, there are still misconceptions about employing people with disabilities and thus, a reluctance among employers to hire them.

Monica Huffstutlar plans to continue her efforts as a DPN and hopes to continue with the DPN program. 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 Amy Conrick at conrick@ctaa.org or 800-891-0590 x734:

<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.)