

Signature Employment Grant 2015: Realizing Education and Advancement for Disabled Youth (READY) at Access Living

Young people with disabilities often face multiple social and physical barriers that prevent them from accessing opportunities on a playing field level with their non-disabled peers. From kindergarten through high school, Individualized Education Plans (IEP) help students with disabilities navigate and address those barriers. Unfortunately, youth with disabilities are often left on their own to make the transition from high school to further education or employment. In 2015, Kessler Foundation provided critical operational funding to the Realizing Education and Advancement for Disabled Youth (READY) program at Access Living to address this gap. Using a person-centered model, READY supports youth with disabilities transitioning out of the Chicago public high school system to gain access to college or employment. It addresses the barriers beyond high school, and provides tools and resources for youth with disabilities to build a foundation for success in college and the work force.

The program has four key components that work together to increase success: the Personal Advancement Plan, a 10-week, classroom-based curriculum called “Teens in Transition”, and customized, ongoing support. First, students elaborate their future education or employment goals and develop a plan to achieve them. READY coordinators track the completion of those tasks and objectives, and help participants stay on track. During the school year, READY staff deliver the curriculum in local high schools to teach work readiness and independent living skills, such as job culture, résumé writing, and navigating the healthcare system, as

well as positive disability identity and self-advocacy skills. Once students finish the training, they work one-on-one with Access Living staff toward their goal of either attending college or securing employment.

One of the cornerstones of the READY program is the ability for students to identify either a vocational or postsecondary educational track – a model that moves beyond the “vocational for all” model typically offered to students with disabilities. For students looking to enter college, READY coordinators escort students on college visits, assist with college applications, provide guidance on financial aid and expose them to programs and services for students with disabilities on college campuses.

For participants who want to pursue employment, READY coordinators help individuals identify employment opportunities and prepare for interviews. They provide support with navigating public transportation to get to a job, proper work attire, and mock job interviewing. It also includes one-on-one assistance, supporting participants’ skill development around resume building, interview techniques, technology skills, and conducting a job search. It connects participants with existing programs in the Chicago area offering employment services and job training skills, while providing in-house expert training and education on disability access and accommodation in the job market.

Project at-a-glance

Grantee Organization:

Access Living (Chicago, IL)

Grant Amount:

\$500,000

Geographic focus:

Works with four Chicago-area high schools

Description:

The READY program prepares high school students with disabilities to transition into higher education or enter the job market.

Impact:

Students with disabilities confident to enter the workforce or higher education with the skills needed to ensure future success.

Students, whether they are interested in pursuing employment or postsecondary education, are provided targeted work readiness training, one-on-one transition planning, and ongoing coaching and support by dedicated READY coordinators whose foremost goal is ensuring that individuals continue making progress toward their personal employment plans and overcoming barriers to success. READY both directly supports students with disabilities and serves as a bridge to other organizations, thereby providing a continuum of service. Indeed, program coordinators sometimes take on case manager roles and the program is expanding its partnerships to connect students with additional services.

In its first year, READY recruited 70 students with disabilities, predominantly black and Hispanic students with disabilities, to participate. READY has had significant demand from the Chicago Public School system and expects to meet or exceed its initial goal of recruiting 120 students. Such demand demonstrates the important gap this program fills for youth with disabilities preparing to transition out of high school.

Thus far, READY has had significant placement success with students – many finding their very first job. It partners with four job training and placement organizations that are responsive and enthusiastic about working with READY students. To ensure the greatest possibility for retention and education completion, READY provides one-on-one support for at least a year after participants enroll in school or begin a job.

Key elements of success

Without the services the READY program provides, many students with disabilities in Chicago would be left behind, with far fewer options, in the transition process from education to adulthood. Several features of the program stand out in its success thus far.

Challenging stereotypes

Committed to challenging stereotypes and breaking down institutional and community barriers, Access Living is a nationally recognized change agent at the forefront of the disability rights movement. Critical to the READY program is an approach that helps students with disabilities build pride in their identity. As one READY staff member described, the curriculum and the program, work to teach students to “empower their disability and own who they are and battle the stigma of disability.”

One noteworthy strength of the READY program is its staff, many of whom have disabilities, and can relate to the participants’ challenges. They provide a real-life demonstration about the possibilities for individuals with disabilities in the workforce and in education. In surveys, participants noted that the staff with disabilities embodied the skills and success they were seeking, motivating and building confidence in students.

Flexibility and scalability to high schools throughout the country

The program is designed to be adaptable and scalable, so other institutions and organizations around the country can use READY as a model to implement their own programs. In particular, READY program can serve as a model for the 400 Centers for Independent Living across the country. Beginning in 2016, all independent living centers were required to offer services that “facilitate transition of youth to postsecondary life.” Access Living is sharing its READY model as a template for how Independent Living Centers can fulfill this role successfully. It has conducted webinars for the Independent Living Research Utilization (ILRU) and the National Council on Independent Living (NCIL) as well as shared the model at conferences. Access Living’s READY Program Coordinators and Program Manager (as well as Elaine Katz of Kessler Foundation) presented the program at the 2017 National Council on Independent Living Annual Conference. Hundreds of Centers for Independent Living from across the country attended the conference, many requesting information

about the program. The READY Program Manager also presented the program at the 13th Annual Illinois Statewide Transition Conference in the fall of 2017, which was attended by transition-aged youth and young adults with disabilities, their family members and teachers, vocational professionals, caregivers, health care professionals, college students pursuing careers in special education and community advocates.

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Kessler Foundation's fundamental strategy is to link science and grantsmanship so that people with disabilities can lead more productive, independent, and fulfilling lives. Kessler Foundation Research Center conducts research that improves quality of life for persons with injuries of the spinal cord and brain, stroke, multiple sclerosis, and other chronic neurological and orthopedic conditions. Although individuals living with disabilities represent the largest minority group seeking employment in today's marketplace, they are often not considered an integral component of corporate diversity programs. Through its strategic focus on employment, Kessler Foundation has invested more than \$41.5 million since 2004 in organizations that work to create job opportunities through development, placement employer education, and social enterprise. This funding has enabled people with disabilities to overcome the obstacles that often face them and meet the workforce needs of American business. Innovative grantmaking has introduced creative solutions to help eliminate some of the barriers that prevent people with disabilities from working.



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