

# PROMISING PRACTICES



## **“Working Words” address language barrier**

**For many foreign-born staff members, learning workplace language and enhancing communication skills are a vital part of providing quality individual services**

Eight years ago, administrators at Horace Mann Educational Associates (HMEA) recognized that it was imperative to plan strategically for the dramatically shifting demographics that the agency was encountering. The 2000 Census reported that immigrants accounted for almost 50 percent of the nation's labor force and that Massachusetts, where HMEA is a leading nonprofit provider of community-based education, residential, employment, and case management services to more than 2,000 children and adults with developmental disabilities and their families, has the seventh largest immigrant population in the U.S.

HMEA's staff of approximately 600 reflects those statistics; 40 percent of its employees who work with adults were born in countries outside the U.S., and English is not the first language of many employees. The ability of the staff to read and communicate effectively is a vital part of providing individual care, and individuals with disabilities are often dependent on those providing services to convey information, to recognize important events in their lives, and to communicate information to others in an accurate manner. A primary barrier to acquiring competence for many foreign-born staff members is workplace language acquisition, including reading and writing skills.

To help staff members improve their communication skills, HMEA has developed a two-phase workplace language acquisition program, which employees are encouraged to use to familiarize themselves with the words they need to be competent in their jobs. The first phase, a self-paced tutorial called Working Words, helps staff members learn the 250 words most commonly used and critical to its human service environment in four languages: French, Spanish, Swahili, and Portuguese. The tool consists of a series of cards with a word in English that is commonly used at work (e.g., safety plan, nausea, behavior plan) on one side, and on the other side, the translations of the word and its definition in the other languages. The staff person reviews the words until he or she feels comfortable with the definition and then takes a quiz, which is also available in all of the above languages. All employees have access to Working Words at the sites where they work.

The second phase of the language acquisition program is a writing skills training class that focuses on objective reporting and using simple words to describe observed events. Employees watch a short video and then answer questions about what happened in the scene and in what order. The purpose of the training is to teach employees about the importance of fact-based reporting.

Recently, HMEA held its first agency wide diversity conference. Employee and family panelists participated. Employees described what it was like to come from another country and have to learn the language of the new country, specifically regarding terms used at work. Family members described having services provided to a family member by someone whose accent might be difficult to understand and whose culture is different from that of the family. A common theme for all panelists was the focus on the supported individuals' needs and wants. One parent on the panel was particularly eloquent when he stated "it's about the language of love." Experiential exercises and a fabulous keynote speech rounded out the day. Feedback was overwhelmingly positive, and planning to host a conference annually quickly emerged.

HMEA recognizes that the learning process never ends, and it can be very proud of the work it has done in recognizing and celebrating diversity. The organization is recognized for its culture of respect; how its employees feel valued for their differences; and how the persons it supports receive excellent services from caring, committed, and competent employees.

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### **Putting Out the Good Word: Some Information about the Promising Practices Series**

We are offering a series of short articles on a variety of promising practices that CARF surveyors have observed during surveys from 2004 to the present. There is no particular order that we will follow in presenting this series of short reports. The purpose is not to rate one organization over another, but to encourage U.S. and Canadian community providers to dialogue with one another and to encourage creative solutions to individual service designs and organizational business practices and thereby achieve effective and positive results in each organization's community.

Although there are indeed a number of ways to approach conformance to a standard, what makes organizations given an exemplary rating stand out is their professional and strategic response to an observed service or business need, always designed with input from their stakeholders and based on those individuals' quality expectations.

We hope you enjoy the series. We encourage you to contact the identified representative in the article to get more information about their services.

### **Promising Practices issues now archived online!**

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