

Service Provider Promising Practice

YEAR OF PUBLICATION: 2021

**COVID-19
Resource**

TOPIC: Strategic Goals and Operating Procedures

Opportunity Over Adversity: How MRCI Transformed to Individualized, Community-based Supports During the COVID-19 Pandemic

Background

MRCI is a Minnesota-based provider serving more than 5,000 adults and transition age youth in southern Minnesota and the Twin Cities metro area. In 2017, MRCI implemented a five-year plan to transform from providing facility-based day and employment services to community-based supports. In March 2020, MRCI used the COVID-19 pandemic as an opportunity to modify and accelerate their transformation efforts.

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Implementation

“It was crucial very early on to understand the opportunity before us, and despite the crisis, quickly pivot to the plan we already had in place,” says Director Brian Benshoof. With the emergence of COVID-19, MRCI immediately ceased their group employment and day services to comply with new health regulations. MRCI’s director and other leadership staff determined the best long-term approach for MRCI was to continue with their plan to transform. MRCI permanently closed five of their seven facilities, three of which were owned by MRCI and two that were leased facilities. They sold one MRCI-owned facility, put two facilities on the market, and downsized staffing resources and other business functions. These reductions eliminated an estimated \$15 million in corporate costs annually that MRCI did not replace. MRCI also sold their buses and switched to a more cost-effective option of leasing minivans and picking up individuals at their homes each day. These closures and the sale of assets allowed MRCI to stabilize their finances and allocate additional resources to their goal of moving toward individualized and community-based supports.

The stabilization also allowed MRCI to rehire 50 staff members and prepare them to provide these new services. To ensure success, MRCI needed to retrain staff on new job duties that focused on teaching social, life, and employment skills, as well as how to interact with community businesses and other organizations. MRCI continued a pre-COVID contract with University of Minnesota’s (UMN) Institute on Community Integration to ensure that staff had the necessary competencies. The UMN developed competency-based training, instructional videos, and other materials for staff on how to discover individuals’ skills and interests and create community experiences that match them. To continue staff development, MRCI instituted a new corporate culture that inspires innovation from direct support staff. This new corporate culture facilitates sharing successful ideas, practices, and stories. MRCI senior personnel have worked to communicate their evolving plan with individuals, families, and other state and local agencies and stakeholders to increase awareness of their new business model.



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MRCI's original plan envisioned a gradual reduction in congregate work settings or enclaves prior to COVID-19. In June 2020, MRCI eliminated all enclaves, converting many to competitive work sites. MRCI staff were pleasantly surprised at how quickly the enclave business partners agreed to hire individuals. Although this willingness was due in part to the COVID-19 labor shortage, the businesses also knew the individuals' capabilities and trusted MRCI to continue to support high quality job matches.

MRCI's community-based supports began operating in January 2021 and they continue to grow. Instead of starting each day at an MRCI-owned building, individuals spend their entire day learning new skills in the community. Using a person-centered approach, a staff member is assigned to support a group of four adults. The schedule is based on shared interests and learning goals. MRCI did not renew their special wage certificate this past fall, and no longer pays the individuals they serve.

Impact

According to staff, one of the biggest impacts of this transformation is that individuals now have the ability to learn skills in a natural environment. Many staff continue to work with individuals and their families to answer their questions and address their concerns by sharing positive stories and enthusiasm about the impact this transformation has had on other clients. Staff emphasize that individuals can build the skills they need to be safe in the community and gain confidence from a variety of experiences and relationships. Family members and staff also communicate about the importance of the dignity of risk. Staff explain how they support individuals if new experiences do not go exactly as planned. As the spread of the COVID-19 virus has slowed, MRCI staff have begun reaching out to businesses, libraries, community groups, and personal networks to develop meaningful experiences with the individuals they support.

Suggestions for Replication

- » MRCI recognized opportunity in the midst of crisis. While it was difficult to handle layoffs and tightening budgets in the wake of closed centers, MRCI remained committed to the changes they had prepared to make.
- » Being forced to close during COVID-19 enabled MRCI to reduce costs, restructure staffing to fit their new business model, and train staff in the new competencies that are essential to providing supports in the community.
- » MRCI worked to address stakeholders needs, questions, and concerns, remaining committed to ongoing communication to assuage fears.

For more information:
www.mymrci.org



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