IOTI Funds Small Projects | CPD

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This IOTI project trained representatives of institutions of higher learning to help people with mental illness receive accommodations.

Adults with intellectual disabilities learn how to make healthy lifestyle choices. Police officers in the field learn safe ways to handle crises involving adults with mental illness. A desperate mother finds online information on how to deal with her son, newly diagnosed with autism.

These are only three examples of training funded by the Interagency Outreach Training Initiative (IOTI), an ongoing legislative appropriation administered by Utah State University’s Center for Persons with Disabilities (CPD). Since 1995, nearly 200 projects have provided information and training to nearly 38,000 people in Utah.

According to Martin Blair, chair of the IOTI steering council, the program was an initiative of the directors of state agencies that dealt with disability issues, including rehabilitation, education, aging, direct services for people with disabilities and Medicaid funding.

“There were many services being provided to people with disabilities by people who didn’t have college degrees, what we would call paraprofessionals,” Blair said. “Services were being provided by parents to their family members. Families needed information.”

Lives changed

Alma Burgess, a CPD project coordinator, and Jeff Sheen, CPD policy analyst, have worked together on several IOTI-funded projects, including Healthy Lifestyles. The project grew out of an existing curriculum that taught healthy food and lifestyle choices, but Burgess and Sheen made modifications so they could present it to programs that served adults with intellectual disabilities. Then they modified it for a second year to include people with mental illness.

“It was a lot of fun,” Burgess said. “We had a lot of interactions with individuals.”

Sheen said they went to day programs and group homes to present the material.

“They were so happy for us to come,” he said. “They were thrilled we knew where they were and that we wanted to come and share this training with them.”

The project was too small to be on the radar, Sheen said, but large enough to make a difference.

“We saw lives changed,” he said.

The intent of IOTI projects is to put them into the hands of the community, Sheen said.

“If it’s done well, it’s sustainable,” he said. There’s an agency in Salt Lake City that still offers the Healthy Lifestyles training five or six times a year, and has trained an additional 500 people in the two years since the grant ended.

Burgess and Sheen also worked on a project that trained people to use assistive technology. Partnering with the state department of vocational rehabilitation, they created a 2 ½-day training that showed people how to use devices to aid with low vision or hearing loss and devices to aid in transportation.

Burgess said about 30 people attended the training, which was given by more than a dozen presenters. It was well-received, but because of the size and scope of the training, couldn’t easily be taken around the state. They videotaped the training and created a set of DVDs,
which has been distributed to about 150 more people. The training is also available on YouTube.

“IOTI grants are really good,” Burgess said. “The main idea is we’re supposed to collaborate with a lot of different agencies to provide training. I think it’s a great program.”

Burgess’ current project is helping institutions of higher education and mental health organizations to provide better services to people with mental illness, who often don’t know they are also eligible to receive accommodations.

“The beauty of IOTI grants is that it allows innovative training projects to get funded on a statewide scale,” Sheen said.

**Small size, big impact**

The projects are too small to get funded on a federal level, and often too large to be funded on a foundation level, Sheen said, but the IOTI grants are right in between, averaging about $30-50,000 each. And that, he said, is enough to pilot a training project for a year.

“It really does fit an important need for innovation and specific training for populations that may not be addressed otherwise,” he said.

Blair offered another example of the importance of making training available. His sister’s son was diagnosed with autism, and she connected with the Utah Parent Center’s website. There, she found online information and training, which was produced at the CPD in a project that was funded by IOTI at a cost of less than $20,000.

“It’s not about going to a conference room for training,” Blair said. “It’s about being able to access training at 3 in the morning. To me that’s a great benefit.”

The review period for new funding requests has recently opened, Blair said, but the procedure is a little different this year.

“Before, we’ve set training priorities and have had people respond to that,” he said. “This year we opened it up to let agencies and organizations propose what they think are the most pressing needs.”

The organizations present their data to show why it’s a critical need and what they would do with the grant.

“For the first time, we’re letting the community define what its needs are,” Blair said. It’s the next step in the evolution of a grant process that he has headed for almost five years.

“It has been a very rewarding and fulfilling opportunity,” Blair said. “We’ve seen many wonderful ideas come to light.”