**PRIDE Provider/Peer Mentor Module #8:**

**Working with Employers & Chambers of Commerce to Hire and Support Refugees with Disabilities**

Hello and welcome to the eighth and final module in PRIDE’s training for providers. This module focuses on working with businesses, employers, and chambers of commerce to hire and support refugees with disabilities. My name is Bill Morton. I'm President of the Rogers Park Chamber of Commerce and a PRIDE partner.

Module overview. This module begins by providing information about specific federal legislation that supports PRIDE’s mission of supporting job-seeking refugees with disabilities. Next, it presents information to support providers when working with employers to hire refugees with disabilities. Several myths about employees with disabilities are presented, with arguments to dispel these myths. The module also presents business arguments for hiring people with disabilities. Next, we discuss the role of chambers of commerce in working with employers and people with disabilities seeking employment. This section features Rogers Park Chamber of Commerce, a PRIDE partner, and another great resource, Chicago Business Leadership Network, or CBLN. The module concludes with case examples in order to give you a sense of how the information presented would apply to refugees with disabilities.

To begin, PRIDE’s mission of promoting employment opportunities for job-seeking refugees with disabilities is supported by federal legislation. It is important for employers to be aware that hiring people with disabilities, including refugees, will help them comply with this legislation. For example, the Rehabilitation Act, or Rehab Act, of 1973 prohibits discrimination on the basis of disability in programs conducted by Federal agencies, in programs receiving Federal financial assistance, in Federal employment, and in the employment practices of Federal contractors.

Perhaps the most well-known legislation that protects the rights of people with disabilities, including refugees, is the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) of 1990. This act prohibits discrimination in employment against individuals with disabilities. It also requires that employers provide reasonable accommodations to qualified individuals with disabilities who are either employees or job applicants.

A third piece of legislation relevant to PRIDE’s mission and the focus of this module is the Workforce Innovation and Opportunity Act, or WIOA, passed in 2014. This act was designed to assist job seekers to access employment, training, and support services so that they can succeed in the job market. It was also aimed at matching employers with skilled workers so that they can compete in global markets.

Who are potential employers who can hire refugees with disabilities? When we think about possible employers of refugees with disabilities, it is important to consider a wide range of employer types. Businesses can include small businesses, refugee-owned businesses, manufacturing companies, hospitality companies, and large corporations. The link connects to a list of companies known for hiring people with disabilities. Non-profit organizations are also potential employers. Some examples are refugee-serving agencies, youth agencies, and social justice organizations. Educational institutions such as K-12 schools, community colleges, and universities are also possible employers. Others are government agencies; arts and leisure institutions such as museums, theaters, and parks; and faith-based organizations. It is important to think of employers broadly as any place where people work so that we consider the range of possibilities when supporting refugees with disabilities to find employment.

The next section of the module focuses on working with employers to shift their thinking about people with disabilities as employees and as customers.

Employer concerns that service providers can address. A growing number of employers are hiring refugees and people with disabilities and learning about the benefits of working with these populations. However, some employers are reluctant to hire people with disabilities due to concerns about costs, productivity, and liability in case of on-the-job injuries or illness.

These concerns of employers can be addressed by refugee service providers seeking to support employment opportunities for refugees with disabilities. Providers can use the information in this module to dispel myths about employees with disabilities and make business-based arguments for hiring these employees. Providers can also educate employers on resources related to accommodations and the ADA.

We will now present five common myths that create barriers to hiring job seekers with disabilities. We will provide information that dispels these myths in the form of talking points that providers can use when making the case for hiring people with disabilities to potential employers.

Dispelling common myths. To foster employment of people with disabilities, an important first step is working with employers to dispel common myths about employees with disabilities. For example, there is a myth that employers should have lower productivity expectations and different job requirements for people with disabilities. In actual fact, employers should have the same expectations of, and requirements for, employees with disabilities when the appropriate supports are in place.

Vocational rehabilitation, or VR, and the Assistive Technology Unit, or ATU, can provide the necessary supports for employees with disabilities to meet employers’ requirements. PRIDE can facilitate these connections between its partners, service providers, and employers. Every day people with disabilities perform the same life tasks that other people do, including working. They have the right to participate in the full range of human experiences, including both success and failure on the job.

Dispelling common myths, continued. A second myth is that considerable expense is required to accommodate employees with disabilities. This is not true. In fact, research shows that not all employees with disabilities request accommodations. When accommodations are requested, most cost under 100 dollars. Employers can even get a tax credit for providing accommodations.

In addition, accommodations made for employees with disabilities can benefits other employees with temporary health conditions and an aging workforce. Another point to keep in mind is that employers are not responsible for providing transportation accommodations for employees with disabilities. Other supports exist to ensure that these employees have accessible transportation to and from work. For more information about transportation options and resources, please refer to PRIDE Provider Module 5.

A third myth is that employees with disabilities are unable to meet performance standards and are more likely to have accidents on the job. This is far from the truth. In fact, industry research shows that, on average, employees with disabilities are MORE productive than their non-disabled colleagues. They also have an average or above average record in safety.

A fourth myth is that employees with disabilities miss more days of work and leave the job sooner than other employees. It is important to recognize that people with disabilities are not necessarily unhealthy or chronically ill. The U.S. Chamber of Commerce's Center for Workforce Preparation has found that employees with disabilities have better attendance and retention rates, and are more loyal, than their counterparts without disabilities.

A fifth concern that employers may have is that hiring employees with disabilities will increase the cost of Workers’ Compensation. Workers’ Compensation provides financial and healthcare support to workers who acquire injuries or illnesses on the job. However, this is also a myth as hiring people with disabilities is not usually associated with inflated Worker’s Compensation rates. These rates are determined based on job and jobsite accident risk rather than disability status of employees.

In fact, there is evidence showing that hiring employees with disabilities can actually reduce Workers' Compensation costs as incidents involving disabled employees tend to be less expensive than those involving non-disabled employees.

In addition to these talking points to dispel common myths, providers can offer arguments for hiring refugees with disabilities based on business interests.

Business arguments. When working with employers, service providers can also make arguments that hiring employees with disabilities can actually be good for business. For example, hiring employees with disabilities can reduce turnover and therefore decrease costs of staff training. This is because people with disabilities tend to be committed to their jobs. This saves employers millions of dollars each year as they do not need to hire and train as many new employees. These cost savings can increase businesses’ profit margins.

Second, hiring employees with disabilities can promote a positive and diverse company image. Businesses can demonstrate a commitment to non-discrimination and corporate social responsibility and diversify their workforce by hiring people with disabilities.

Hiring people with disabilities can also increase the workforce’s capacity for problem-solving and innovation in decreasing environmental barriers for people with disabilities. Multiple surveys of American consumers have borne out that hiring people with disabilities is good for business. The vast majority of respondents reported that they prefer patronizing companies that hire people with disabilities. Hiring people with disabilities can increase consumer loyalty and broaden the consumer base.

Third, there are direct financial incentives available to companies that hire employees with disabilities. For example, the Work Opportunity Tax Credit, or WOTC, can equal up to 40% of the qualified worker’s first $6000 in wages earned during the first 12 months. For employers to be eligible for this tax credit, employees meet certain criteria such as being an SSI beneficiary or being referred through a Vocational Rehabilitation program.

In addition to the WOTC, the Social Security Administration's Ticket to Work program provides financial incentives to employers for each Social Security beneficiary with a disability that they hire. The link connects to various tax and financial incentives available to employers who hire people with disabilities.

In addition to business incentives for hiring employees with disabilities, there are also other resources that can support employers in hiring people with disabilities, including refugees.

One resource for fostering employment opportunities for people with disabilities are Chambers of Commerce. These organizations are networks of local businesses that join together to offer business assistance and to advocate for business interests. For example, members of the Chicagoland Chamber of Commerce represent a diverse cross-section of the economy, including small and emerging businesses, mid-market companies, and large, multinational corporations. These could all be potential employers for refugees with disabilities.

PRIDE has a partnership with the Rogers Park Chamber of Commerce in Chicago. The mission of the Rogers Park Chamber of Commerce is “to provide leadership and representation in order to benefit the members operating businesses in the Rogers Park Community.” Its vision is “to guide businesses, service organizations, institutions, and individuals to establish new businesses and promote existing businesses within the Rogers Park community and to create and stimulate an orderly economic growth, thereby enriching Rogers Park’s diverse community.

The Chicagoland Business Leadership Network (CBLN) is another PRIDE resource to support employment of refugees with disabilities. CBLN works towards advancement of the employment of individuals with disabilities by educating employer members about the skills and abilities of people with disabilities. In addition, CBLN educates other employers in the community and helps employers overcome traditional barriers to hiring people with disabilities.

What are some of the ways that refugees with disabilities, chambers of commerce, and the CBLN can benefit from working with each other? They can participate in events to inform and encourage businesses to work with refugees, recruit refugees with disabilities to provide input on their workforce needs and agendas, and share local success stories about resettlement and employment of refugees with disabilities.

This slide contains contact information for the U.S. Chamber of Commerce and the CBLN.

This slide contains contact information for the Rogers Park Chamber of Commerce.

We’ll conclude with two case examples. The first case example shows how providers can help connect refugees with disabilities to employers:

“Zeya, a refugee from Burma with a vision impairment, came to Chicago from Malaysia, where she was initially resettled. Burma was under military rule from 1962 until 2011 and has been known for human rights violations.

Zeya has been connected to a resettlement agency on Chicago’s North Side, which has a large refugee population. There are many refugee-owned businesses in the area as well as employers that have longstanding relationships with the local resettlement agencies and have hired refugees without disabilities.

Zeya speaks English proficiently. Heartland Human Care Services, a PRIDE partner, helped her connect with Heartland’s Cross Cultural Interpreting Services, a company that provides medical interpretation and translation services and is working closely with PRIDE to hire bilingual and multilingual refugees with disabilities as trained interpreters. This organization connected Zeya to a medical interpreter training, and she is now employed as an interpreter and translator for Limited-English-Proficiency (LEP) Burmese speakers.”

Finally, here is a case example that shows how chambers of commerce can assist providers to connect refugees with disabilities to employers:

“Akram, a refugee with a physical disability, arrived in Chicago a few months ago after fleeing unrest in Syria.

A resettlement agency helped Akram get employment in a local grocery store that is a member of the Rogers Park Chamber of Commerce. The Chamber informed the resettlement agency that the grocery store had previously hired refugees.

Akram’s case manager presented business arguments for hiring people with disabilities to the grocery store manager. Based on these arguments, as well as Akram’s past work experience and proficiency in English, the grocery store employed him as a counter clerk.”

The last two slides list the sources cited in this presentation. Thank you for completing PRIDE’s training for service providers!

The PRIDE team would like to give a special thanks to Bill Morton, President of the Rogers Park Chamber of Commerce, for narrating this module and for supporting PRIDE as a valued partner.