



College of Direct Support
Training for the 21st Century

An Interview with Judy Dotzman
Corporate Officer, Professional
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The Office of Developmental Programs purchased the license for the College of Direct Support (CDS) for Direct Support Professionals in Pennsylvania in September of 2003 and implemented its voluntary use in December. The College of Direct Support is a national, web-based curriculum for people who support women and men with developmental disabilities.

Q: *How did you first learn about the College of Direct Support?*

R: As an agency we were aware of the College of Direct Support prior to the Office of Developmental Programs (formerly Office of Mental Retardation) signing the contract to bring the training to PA. We had been fortunate enough to hear presentations by Bill Tapp from the College of Direct Support as well as staff from the University of Minnesota. At the time we were

unable to purchase the training on our own because it was cost prohibitive. However, SPIN Inc. management team, support departments, and volunteer Direct Support Professionals were involved in pilot activity with the College of Direct Support, and we were “chomping at the bit” to get started because we immediately saw the benefit of the training. SPIN, Inc. was the first agency to sign on when the contract was signed with PA.

Q: *Is participation in the College of Direct Support voluntary for employees?*

R: We offer a variety of options. Lessons are rolled into the annual training plan and mandatory for what is required. After that, there are some lessons that are chosen for employees and some lessons that are selected by employees. SPIN, Inc. has a working partnership with the Community College of Philadelphia. If an employee completes all of the College of Direct Support lessons, they can then register and receive 3 credits with the college, and that is voluntary.

Q: *How many staff are currently participating?*

R: In fiscal year 2007 we had 994 people enrolled in the College of Direct Support with 4777 lessons assigned. In addition to employees we have had many board members, family members, individuals, volunteers, and students involved in internships take, and continue to take College of Direct Support courses.

Q: *Have you seen any improvement in your own skills since your involvement with the College of Direct Support?*

R: Anyone who participates in the College of Direct Support will see positive outcomes. When I listen to the stories it gives me a chance to look at things differently, especially the stories of what individuals who receive supports want in their lives. Whatever the lesson, you have to come to the table with an open mind and believe “I can and will learn something.” I believe this and our employees believe this. It is also important to know that you cannot implement this training in a vacuum. At SPIN, Inc. we have other activities that support the training such as facilitated discussions, where staff has the opportunity to discuss lessons with each other and with a training facilitator. Natural teaching opportunities also occur, such as lesson discussions at staff meetings.

Q: *What changes have you seen in others taking the courses?*

R: When I ask people about the benefits, I get so many different answers. I often will hear the value piece. Value in knowing that there is a curriculum developed specifically for the direct support professional. Participating in the College of Direct Support is a source of great pride and people can see that they are growing and developing professionally. They see that this often times unappreciated profession is very critical, and has an impact on the world. It brings a national prospective for human service professionals across the globe,

learning together from the curriculum. This offers a great deal of hope. College of Direct Support uses an adult training model, and as we know learning styles can and do vary with generations. For example, generation Y’s love the training as they have grown up with technology. For baby boomers it can be new and different, but they have invested themselves in it and it helps them to feel more comfortable with using the computer not only at work but also in their personal lives.

Q: *What direct impact has the College of Direct Support had on your interactions with the individuals you work with?*

R: I was able to talk with a number of SPIN employees and want to give a sample of some of the things employees say about participation. Janice, a SPIN Home Life Coordinator said, “The thing I like about the College of Direct Support is that if there is something I did not understand, I can go back and re-read that section. Also, by taking the test at the end, I can find out if there is something that I misunderstood. Knowledge and education will always help me to better support the individuals I work with.”

A SPIN Direct Support Professional said, “College of Direct Support has helped me to understand my role as a direct support professional. My support has improved as I get to know the individual better”.

Another Direct Support Professional added “all of the College of Direct Support lessons are very current with day to day situations concerning

the individuals I support. CDS helps me to grow personally and professionally”.

Q: *Are individuals receiving services or family members involved in taking College of Direct Support courses?*

R: We invite everyone to participate in all of our professional development opportunities and we do have individuals and family members participating in College of Direct Support lessons. For individuals, it may happen when a direct support professional is doing their required lessons during work time with the approval of their supervisor. At this time individuals may be asked if they would like to participate in the training with their support professional. Other times individuals may ask to learn more about a specific topic such as safety. Many of the lessons in the College of Direct Support curriculum can be very valuable to individuals who are preparing for community employment.

Q: *Has involvement in the College of Direct Support provided any cost savings for your agency?*

R: Yes, in a number of different ways. We started our involvement slowly at first because we wanted it to be successful. It was a collaborative effort because we wanted everyone in the agency to see it as important and a great strategy for training and investment in professional development of the workforce. We knew we needed to look at new and different ways to educate our employees. There is a workgroup that reviews lessons and decides what lessons to recommend.

We try to match the agency goals and the outcomes we want for the individuals with the lessons. Doing it the right way helps us meet workforce-training needs, and outcomes needed the individuals and families.

SPIN, Inc. has moved from bringing employees in for 3 days of in-house training to 2 days. Three days often involved overtime situations. Employees can do 8 hours “anywhere or anytime”. This change after the implementation of College of Direct Support resulted in a cost savings of 8 hours per employee in adult residential services. We have computers available at the agency lab and there are computers at each site location.

A cost savings has also been realized in children’s services. Many of these services are home based and our therapist spend a lot of time in family homes and in transit. Because many of these employees have laptops, they can work on the training during the course of the day as time allows. Again the “anytime anywhere” philosophy works for this mobile workforce.

Q: *What would you recommend to other agencies considering involvement with the College of Direct Support?*

R: I would tell them they would benefit no matter what their size. The College of Direct Support meets the needs of so many audiences. The University of Minnesota is constantly updating the lessons. They are amazing and extremely responsive. You can say “it would

be great if there was a lesson on Aging,” and before you know it they are working on developing a lesson in that area.

We have also learned some valuable lessons along the way. Agencies need to be prepared to do some up front work. You need to have buy-in from executive leadership and every other person involved with the agency. Everyone needs to believe in the training. College of Direct Support is a reward for the agency, not just for direct support professionals because it is about providing quality support for individuals and this is “everyone’s business”. You need to invest the time and develop a culture that “we are all in this together”. Collaborate with direct support professionals from the start. SPIN, Inc. had a working committee, and our most important input was from direct support professionals. We had to understand how to roll this training out to their peers in order for it to be successful. We asked, and most importantly we listened.

I also want to mention that we do use other resources available from the College of Direct Support such as surveys for new and existing staff, creating agency lessons and having the College of Direct Support host them, use of data reports, and annotated lessons specific to our agency.

And finally, our involvement in College of Direct Support has allowed our trainers to spend more time doing “point of service training”.

Training staff where they work and where they have the most impact.

If you are interested in learning more about how SPIN, Inc. makes it work, contact: Ms. Judy Dotzman at JDOTZMAN@SPININC.ORG or 215-612-7127 (www.spininc.org)

If you are interested in learning more about the PA College of Direct Support contact: Sarah Rollin at srollin@pattan.net or 1-800-441-3215 ext 255.

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