

## **Ask Me Anything about Employment webinar with Dennis Rice & Bill Gravel**

This call is being recorded.

**David Blair:** Good afternoon everyone and welcome to Ask Me Anything about Employment with Dennis Rice and Bill Gravel. My name is David Blair, and I will be your moderator today. This webinar is not a presentation but an interactive question and answer period. For the next hour, Dennis and Bill will take any questions you have related to "Community Engagement as a Pathway to Employment."

Dennis co-founded Alternatives Unlimited in 1976, which is a non-profit rehabilitation agency located in central Massachusetts and has served as its Executive Director since 1979. He led the steady growth of Alternatives from its original three programs to a comprehensive agency of more than 60 programs, with a budget of \$50 million. His expertise includes extensive work in the development and implementation of successful residential and employment services for adults with psychiatric or developmental disabilities.

And Bill is the Director of Employment and Community Membership. Over the past 40 years, Bill has played a leading role in providing employment services for individuals with psychiatric and developmental disabilities at Alternatives Unlimited. His experiences over that time have included; overseeing the transformation of sheltered work programs to supported employment programs in the community, directing a Services for Education and Employment program, facilitating employment services within the Community Based Flexible Support Model, and developing employment resources within a Clubhouse environment.

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During registration for the event, you were given the opportunity to submit a question in advance. Over the course of the webinar, we will alternate between questions submitted in advance and the ones you have today. You may ask questions now by typing them into the chat box below. So welcome to the webinar, and I hope everyone enjoys the next hour.

So welcome Bill and Dennis, thank you for taking your afternoon today. It's a little rainy here in Boston right now. I don't know what it's like out there, but

**Dennis Rice:** We think it's going to thunder and lightning right through the middle of it. So we'll see. No, we're delighted to be here. Just some really just quick orientation. One is that Alternatives has been affiliated with the Center for Psych Rehab since actually 1980 and have worked with them around a number of projects. So we're really proud of that, of that partnership. The second thing is that Alternatives in this last year has affiliated with The Bridge of Central Massachusetts, just for clarification purposes. And together that those two organizations, DBA of Open Sky Community Services. I just wanted to sort of clarify sort of the names. And I am the sort of, Executive Director Emeritus Senior Advisor. So they sort of kicked me upstairs, in semi-retirement, and Bill has just retired from Open Sky Alternatives. And so we are just two old guys here to answer some questions.

**David:** Okay, that's fantastic. You know, before I start, could you tell me a little bit about the history of the organization, how it got to where it is now?

**Dennis:** Well again, we started in '76, as you mentioned, and we started with three programs, and it was sort of the beginning of the whole deinstitutionalization process. Basically the state had been sued in class action suits to improve the conditions of the institutions, but also as quickly as possible, begin to fund community-based services. So we got in at the beginning of that in '76, and basically have sort of grown having to do with sort of the funding and closing of the institutions here in Massachusetts. So, that's sort of how we've grown. We started with just with residential, but then moved into employment, where Bill has been very involved. And we do serve both populations of people with psychiatric disability but also people with developmental disabilities.

**David:** Sure. Well, thank you. So I'll turn to the first question then. Michelle asks, "Can you please explain how the SEE program works?, and I think that Services for Education and Employment?"

**Dennis:** Yes.

**Bill Gravel:** Okay. Well the SEE program is actually operated, I want to say from 1997 to 2008, and there were about 25 of these programs throughout the state of Massachusetts. The different feature about them was, rather than just focus on employment, you said there was education and employment. So it was kind of an exciting time, this new model, because we were really helping people realize other dreams of going to school, as well as work. In doing that, our program, we located it from this Whitinsville facility, and we actually got a downtown,

storefront building, downtown Milford. So we were right in the heart of the community. It was very mainstream, and just the idea of helping people, again, return to college, realizing that dream, in addition to doing some competitive employment, took hold and we ran that for around 11 years. And, then the state funding dried up, and those programs all closed throughout the state in 2008, and then we got to kind of folded into the next model, the CBFS model. So, but very, very successful model. We did a lot of collaborating with Mass Rehab also, getting people employment. And we served, our program had about 40 people we served on a regular basis.

**Dennis:** We also had relationships with a number of the community colleges in the area, so that was also very beneficial in helping people be supported in their education.

**Bill:** In that program particular, with the employment programs, helped us really start to do some of the more detailed community connecting with partners in the community. So we developed some good relationships with Milford, with folks that we still have relationship with. And that led us down this path of really focusing on orally engaging people in the community in the process.

**David:** You know, so that program is over. If you were to restart that program, you know, what would you do the same, what would you do differently? What would it look like these days?

**Bill:** Hmm. I don't know that they were, there were a lot of good things about it. I mean, I think again, as we build more momentum we saw the real, the more we got the community involved. So I think we would be more proactive on a lot of fronts with that. We would really make it truly engaging. Like we used to have this way of thinking that unless we're working with somebody from the community, it's incomplete. So it wasn't just staff helping somebody get a job, it was staff and partnering with people in the community. So I think as we got more into that, I think we would really accelerate that way of thinking, and do a lot more interacting with the communities. It took us a little while because it was a brand new program, new model, so those first few years was really, we had to change away from the people we serve for Alliance on like subcontract work and more sheltered work. And for them it was a big change of going out into more competitive-type work situation. So there was a few years of transitioning people and then getting, growing more and more with the community connecting aspects.

**David:** Okay. Danny in the room asks for Dennis, Dennis or Bill, "How much does the Rehabilitation Services Administration interact with the workforce innovation and opportunity? Is that's something you guys know anything about?"

**Dennis:** I have no way.

**Bill:** I am unfamiliar with the RSA.

**David:** if you're not familiar, it's fine. I wasn't sure if you'd know. He has a second question so we can go onto that one. "Has your organization had success with your local community colleges using a supported education model?"

**Dennis:** Yeah, we sort of already talked about that. Yes. No, we've been, so certainly the main one here in the area is Quinsigamond Community College. We've done a lot of work with them around a variety of initiatives, and they've been really helpful in sort of supporting the people that we serve in college. So that was a very good relationship.

**Bill:** They were the ... We lost out visual here.

**David:** Sorry about that. You guys can just listen, and I can take care of the reading for you, if you'd like.

**Bill:** Well just in continuing what Dennis mentioned about our Quinsigamond and what's going on here... But anyway, with Quinsigamond, when we did start the SEE program, that was one of the main colleges we worked with. So we developed a good relationship with the Disability Office in Quinsigamond and placed a number of people in school there taking courses. Years later we were involved in the CBFS model, which was the next model. We actually collaborated with Quinsigamond and created actually something, Dennis kind of spearheaded, an employment academy. And that was like an eight-week course we did on the campus where we brought people in, got them to kind of connect with people on the campus, students there, and we actually taught classes there on employment, and we did some, from the classroom then we toured sites. And it was all a way of getting people more ready for employment. But again, that was a continuation of our relationship with Quinsigamond.

**Dennis:** We brought in speakers, we helped them with resumes, they did some job shadowing, and we also gave them a food credit to go eat in the cafeteria with all the other students. So, that was a really interesting, and we did that several times.

**Bill:** Both populations, too.

**Dennis:** Yeah, both populations, and also several people then got interested to attending Quinsigamond, which was really neat and some people were excited about getting their GED. So that was, that was an interesting, yeah.

**David:** Great. Now he has a third follow-up, and I'll ask that and move onto the next one. "Does your organization receive any funding from the State Department of Rehabilitation?"

**Dennis:** Yes. Yes, absolutely, we do. And with the new model for the Department of Mental Health, the employment is through Mass Rehab, what we call Mass Rehab.

**David:** Hmm. Excellent. The next question comes from Eben, and Eben asks, "What advice would you give to an organization, organizations that are still in the process of transitioning from sheltered workshops to integrated employment?"

**Dennis:** Okay. Ooh, that's a good question.

**Bill:** I say that, no worries. Sometimes it is the need to kind of move and get into the community because once you're there, then things start to build from there. And again, going back to 1997 when the mental health program that I was overseeing left this Whitinsville facility that was kind of a risky move then, but we situated ourselves in the community, and then we were able to kind of build from there. Years later our other programs, our programs that serve people with developmental disabilities, likewise set up we call them Career Centers in different locations in downtown locations, in different towns around here. So, I think the need to kind of get out there and be around the community is very important. You know, I think that's where it all kind of begins.

**Dennis:** But we, when the whole deinstitutionalization process started in '76, we did have a sheltered workshop, and you know, it was meant to be a sort of a stepping stone to get people who maybe haven't done a lot of work, interested in work. But again, it, although people for the first time maybe you went home with a small paycheck, it was, people just, very much became isolated, very little relationships, very little sort of transition to the community. Not only did the people serve get sort of institutional, reinstitutionalized sort of. In our wisdom, we took people out of the institution and put them back into an institution. But staff were sort of very stuck in that kind of, that sort of situation. So, as Bill said, we closed the workshop maybe, well pushing 20 years ago, and set up these career centers, which was, and they then left from, we split, we had probably

200 people at its max in our sheltered workshop, and we set up several career centers that instead of serving 200 people, they were serving, like 30, 35 people. And what was the other interesting thing having to do with the whole community connection piece, each one of these career centers tried to figure out how they can give back to the community. And so the one in Uxbridge is an art gallery. The one in Wrentham was a career, was a community gardens. The one in Milford was a computer bank for the community. So each one sort of had their goal of giving back to the community. And when we did this, what was interesting is that we found that people were, but we were becoming much more part of the sort of community fabric. And over time, people would then come to us with job leads, which was I think, a lot to do with the fact that we weren't just taking, we were also giving back.

**David:** Thank you. The next question comes from Samantha, and Samantha asks, "What are some engagement techniques for individuals who are offered supported employment services but not currently interested? Income and community involvement are not their current goals."

**Bill:** Well, sometimes I think we, as much as we want people to be involved in the community, we generally respect what people's choices to pursue. We've had a lot of situations for different reasons where people aren't willing to take that step there, that there might be fears they have of going out in the community doing things, and there could be a lot of readiness issues around them making that type of commitment. So, I mean, in those situations, I think we try to increase people's awareness, whether it's sharing what other people are doing or still exploring with them their passions, their interests, challenges they have. Sometimes uncovering that is the beginning step, where then people realize something they have a strong interest in or a talent that maybe could be demonstrated out from the community eventually. We've had that happen many times where people that are in residential programs that aren't looking so much to go out and get a job, or have a lot of support needs, but maybe are very artistic and creative, and staff can work with them on those aspects. And with situations like that wherein some of their work might get known at an art gallery our agency has. And then people, slowly but surely, see the positive response they get from that part, and that starts to build the beginning steps for building that confidence. But, so I mean, I think it's this kind of a readiness thing and certainly increasing their awareness of their own abilities, but what's out there, there's something that we would strive to do.

**Dennis:** Sure. You know, and that has a lot to do with the psych rehab approach in what is called Readiness about Self-Awareness, Environmental Awareness,

Commitment to Change, etc., that we have found we have used and found very effective in bringing people towards their goal of whether it's having, developing a friendship or getting a job, or having a real home.

**David:** Great. This one's an easy one. Donna asks Bill, "Are you from Rhode Island?"

**Bill:** Yes! Why do they know that?

**David:** Yeah. I'm not quite sure, though I thought it was interesting. She just says, "Of course, you are." Oh, because they, too, are from Rhode Island apparently. Kim asks, "How were you able to combine programs for the two different populations, serious mental illness and developmental disabilities, both in terms of funding and curriculum options?"

**Dennis:** Well, we served that very, very separately, and the funding sources are also very separate. So, there's the Department of Mental Health for the people with more of the psychiatric disability, and then there's the Department of Developmental Services for the people on the developmental, the intellectual side. Mass Rehab at times can actually serve both populations. But, DMH and DDS, are our funding sources.

**Bill:** And I was gonna say, the curriculum you mentioned, too, we're referencing the Academy we talked about before. Those were two very different types of curriculum were developed for the different populations we're working with. So, we both were involved in the Academy, but they were separate. There'd be certain days, staff would take some of the folks in the mental health programs three days a week to the college for the classes. Then the other two days, the staff on the DDS side would take them. So they had different approaches, respecting the difference.

**David:** Great. The next question comes from Danny, and Danny asks, "What are the top three training areas for your direct service staff?"

**Dennis:** That's a good question. Well, I'll do one. We do teach a type of interpersonal skills, you know, for staff to really demonstrate understanding for the individuals that we serve. It's Carkhuff, if people want to know the person that sort of developed this. And those trainings are, they start right at orientation, and there's three levels of those interpersonal skills that we teach, in sort of growing sophistication of how to respond to feeling and content and meaning. And those I think are crucial not only in working with the individuals we serve, it's crucial in working with staff, it's crucial in working with your significant other. And those are those skills that are, that have been helpful to me, although I don't always

use them when I should be, but have been really critical in sort of my own development.

**Bill:** I think another type of training our agency's been very strong in is some of the community training, we at one time called the Redefining Community. So it's, teaching staff how to help engage people in the community more. And there are two types of trainings actually that sprung out of that. One was more of a focus on how to help individuals make connections, so how staff could support individuals and making connections in the community. And the other one was how to develop partnerships with members of the community so we can kind of help them create opportunities for the folks we serve. So, at one point that was one training that kind of branched off into two. And where we stand now that that has kind of risen and become like a really, the training that would be emphasized for all our staff as we try to get people more involved in the community.

**Dennis:** I guess the third would be that, you know, again, we've been affiliated with the Center for, since 1980, and we certainly use the Rehab Approach, on a daily basis and helping people get the skills and supports that need to be successful and satisfied in the community.

**David:** Yeah, these are all great things. Kim, kind of following up with her, because she had asked the question, one thing she says, "Thank you. I'm from West Virginia, and I'd like to work on expanding our resources. Presently we're graded a 'D' for mental health resources." So, there's a lot thought people can learn from the things that you two have been working on for the past 30+ years now. I can't even do the math in my head too quickly.

**Dennis:** Actually. It's 43 years.

**David:** Yeah, 43 years, I was off by a decade! Well, let's skip that decade for your age at least. The next question is, "Why is it so difficult to help the people we serve to become active in contributing members of the community?"

**Dennis:** Yeah. That's a real, you know getting a job, that's certainly a really wonderful way of becoming connected. But I think only it's like, I'm not sure the exact percentage, but there's something like 20, 25% of people with a significant mental illness actually we're even part-time. So, when we, this, I might ramble a bit here, you know, so we, for the first 20 years that Alternatives operated, we were very proud of the work we we're doing. We were very sort of dedicated to putting our efforts internally in helping the people we serve, you know, get out of the institutions, etc. And although we always preach community inclusion,

when we took a hard look at ourselves, you know, that the people that we serve, as you just said, they were pretty isolated, almost living like in a whole other sort of parallel world, you know, feeling unwelcomed. And, when we looked at Alternatives itself, you know, that our energies were going inward, only asking outwards for money. And then when we looked at the community itself, more and more, and Robert Putman talks a lot about this, more and more the community itself, we're becoming isolated in that, like people don't know their neighbors anymore. So, the jobs, the homes, and the relationships that we went for the people we serve, so they would be connected are in the community. So, when we looked at ourselves, we realized that we were much more of a bonding organization, and there's nothing wrong with the bonding organization. It's basically it's our energies inward to sort of reinforce our identity for the private good. And what we needed to become, in which we've worked really hard on, is much more of a bridging organization where our energy is going outward to sort of collaborate and work with those community assets for the public good. You know, and certainly bridging is harder than bonding cause bonding with people that you already know in your life. But, bridging I think is more important if you're going to connect with the communities that help the people we serve to connect. And if we're not connected, how can the people we serve be connected? So we've spent a lot of time and effort in a number of initiatives that are much more bridging and connecting. And as we do that, we are helping the individuals, so for example, we encourage staff to make community connections and then use those connections to help the person that they're working with to become connected. And we also have this technology that Bill just talked about in helping the individual person get connected to a club or an association, or developing these community partnerships and working on sort of around a community interest or need. And again, it's that giving back process that we find so important. Because what it does over time, is it builds reciprocity. That by us doing all these things for the community, the community is much more open to who we are and providing those real opportunities for a home, a job, and a relationship that the individuals we serve deserve. That was a long one. Sorry!

**Bill:** Just to add onto that. Earlier I had mentioned that, we've got the people we serve, we've got the staff, and we've got the community as the three groups that are involved and everything. So, I jotted down a few things for that question. And what I saw is what makes it difficult to help people become active, contributing members of the community from the individual's perspective, it's that it can be very fearful of the change in lacking confidence moving forward, and they might not know what, where, and how to be involved. So, there's a lot of uncertainty on their part on how to move forward. So they require a lot of assistance. The staff that are supporting them also can find this very challenging

to engage people in the community. Sometimes staff are very, feel very safe working within a program, but as they have to go out and work more on the community, it requires a different set of skills. And they also are, the staff are in a position of providing support to the individuals and the community members because as people get more involved, their support is kind of branching out more to support both groups now that they're working with. And the community members from their point of view, we always hear the stigma of them changing negative beliefs about people with disabilities. So, I mean, there were three groups here when we say what makes it difficult that are all challenged in some way with this effort unfolds.

**David:** Thank you both. Danny asks, "Are you accredited with the Commission on Accreditation of Rehabilitation Facilities (CARF)?"

**Dennis:** Some of our programs are, and The Bridge of Central Mass is actually totally CARF accredited, all their programs. So I think the next round with CARF that both organizations, the whole organization, both organizations will be CARF accredited.

**David:** Great, great. This was more of a statement, go ahead.

**Dennis:** This is more about CARF. I mean, we first, I think the first time we were accredited with CARF maybe '83 or '85, somewhere in there, and CARF has been really helpful in sort of developing the infrastructure of our organization, and setting up sort of accountable systems. So it's, I think it's fair, it's worthwhile for people to take a hard look at CARF in whether they want to be accredited or not.

**David:** Can I ask a follow-up to that? How has the accreditation changed since the 80s? You know, what's different now? Is it the same basic principles? Or what's the value that it brings to you?

**Dennis:** I think it's the same basic principles in that they have the sort of the administration side, the program side, and then looking at the individual. I've been, I think it's, they've sort of expanded and changed sort of as program models develop. They too have developed, in accrediting those models. Like, you know, when we started out, there wasn't supportive employment, and now they will look at supportive employment or shared living, there wasn't anything called shared living, and nowadays I think the accredit shared living or a version of that.

**David:** Great. This one, this one's more of a statement. Curtis, and someone else has a question following. So, I'll read both together here, try to merge things for you. We have integrated Robert Carkhuff, I don't know that last name, *The Art of*

*Helping* with our staff training for many years and find it to be very, impactful approach, in addition to other approaches. For example, motivational interviewing, these integrate very well with the psychiatric rehabilitation model we use.

And then Evan writes, "Does the Carkhuff translate well to working with individuals with IDD, or are there other curriculum resources you can recommend for training staff to integrate individuals with IDD into the community?"

**Dennis:** Well, we certainly do some, you know, some computer stuff and talking that way through computers, which had been helpful. But no, I think Carkhuff uses, it works well. Even people that are non-verbal, many of them are, can understand, although they can't speak. So the idea of responding to feeling and content to someone who is, you know, is upset that, "*You're feeling angry because whatever.*" I think can be very helpful and confirming to that person's feeling, even though they can't necessarily talk back to you. So, we have used that very much. Did I do something?

**David:** Hi Guys. Sorry, I'm currently having some audio problems, so I tried to reconnect. Tarik asks, "What ways does your organization or what ways do your organizations support and advise high functioning persons with mental illness who worked part-time, volunteer, live codependency, and receive government support, break free into professional and competitive work to be self-reliant, live independently, and develop and/or maintain meaningful relationships?" As I said, a long question, but I can reread it for you if you need.

**Dennis:** Yeah. You mean to become the perfect human being. Yes. We all strive for that! So, I mean I think it's just part of the process.

**Bill:** Right, I think it doesn't end when people, let's say people get jobs, in some ways a lot of our work really begins then because now they are tasked with becoming more independent and transferring that support to others. But all the things that go along with it, supporting them on how to access other resources, dealing with SSI or benefits specialists and things like that, they're going to be crucial for them. And we generally follow along with people as long as we are needed kind of thing. But you know, to see that transition step forward, transitioning our supports to others in the community. And Dennis mentioned earlier that this year we're in the process with employment services of transitioning a lot of that in a direction of Mass Rehab. So the employment staff, we have now the format of working closely with Mass Rehab. So some of that, those responsibilities are

gonna be geared more in that direction. So it's similar to a lot of things that, we try to provide that support as long as it's needed.

**Dennis:** I mean, what, just one more angle on that in that, when we, we're talking about real homes, real jobs, and real relationships. And so when we talk about real relationships, what we mean by that, and there's nothing wrong that an individual served has a relationship with staff or a relationship with someone else that has a disability. But what we've, but if that's all they have, that's really limiting. And so with this emphasis on community connections and getting people involved in various associations or clubs, or you know, basically contributing there, what they have to offer their gifts and their talents within a day and role. Basically that is helping that person develop their own social network that maybe isn't always connected to the two human services. As a matter of fact. I mean it depends a lot on what they want to do, but to me the more they have in addition to whatever they have within the agency, develop connections, I think the better it is and helping that person sort of move along.

**David:** Donna asks, "Does your organization have funding for post-employment services?"

**Bill:** Well, again, vocationally with Mass Rehab, I mean, there are aspects of Mass Rehab contracts that can provide ongoing supports.

**David:** Okay. Yeah. So ongoing support comes through Mass Rehab, not something they necessarily go through you for.

**Dennis:** Right, right. I mean, once they graduate, yes, that is correct.

**David:** Rhonda asks, "Have you utilized a Wellness Recovery Action Plan (WRAP) for individuals who are working or going to work?"

**Bill:** Yes. In fact, a few years back, our agency got involved where we began our first like, hiring some peer specialists, and we had like a coordinator of peer services. And that's continued on with the newer agency now. But, in doing that, that was part of it, too, because we had people in recovery that were in staff roles, so a lot of them had WRAP plans and were in the process of kind of with the people they support get involved in helping them with that. And again, I'm sure that's continuing on now because now they're even more peers within the Open Sky Community Services.

- David:** Great. Danny asks, I'm just kind of going through a bunch of questions quickly here, "Does your organization acknowledge or celebrate community employers who hire your job seekers, and if so, how?"
- Dennis:** Oh yeah, no. We really liked those guys. So we have a, I mean, we do it sort of ongoing, but the big one we have, what is it called, the Thank You Reception, where we can have as many as 800 people there, or Alternatives had that, and I think they're trying to figure out how to do something similar with the combined organizations. But, there'd be, there would be individuals served awards, staff awards, but then we had a number of community awards. And a number of those awards would then go to employers that have hired individuals that we serve, either part-time or full-time or have helped, other help in advocating on our behalf to get other employers to hire the people that we serve.
- David:** And then, Can you talk about other ways you engage the broader community, but not necessarily the clients you're serving, but the way you engage employers or...?
- Dennis:** Community in general. Yeah. Well, what we had what were called Regional Advisory Councils, and those would be, there's some staff that are there, too, but basically these would be sort of community leaders in a given geographical area. And basically their job is to sort of widen our circle of friends in that geographical area. And, they would, they do that by, well, working on special projects. If they see something in the community that we could sort of tackle with another community or non-human service, other community, and then we would, they would be helpful in setting that up. We have what are called Bridging Grants that then would fund like, some examples of our Bridging Grants is that together with the Rotary Club in the north, and I think also the Lion's Club and a couple of the schools, we, with a bridging grant, totally renovated a playground in the town or city of Gardner. In Worcester, we did a mural, again working with Quinsigamond Community Center and volunteers there and volunteers from our side to then paint this beautiful mural of the Blackstone Canal. So there's several of these bridging grants that we then engage people. And our biggest thing that where we engage is that we restored the Whitin Mill here in Whitinsville. And besides it being our corporate headquarters, and having affordable apartments, and an employment program; it has a theater, it has a gallery, it has studios, has a community plaza where we have free summer concerts. There are, I think it's six community theater groups that make it their home. We, there's that, we have all sorts of arts and culture sort of activities here at the Whitin Mill that is very, you know. And people ask, "Well, why do we do that?" And we, because we had to raise a lot of money to restore this and

renovate this mill. We raised over four and a half million dollars. And so, I sort of have two answers for that. One is that, one of our highest priorities as a human service organization is to live in a more collaborative, diverse community with a strong sense of place, and we believe very strongly that the various activities and events that we have here at the Whitin Mill contribute to that end. And the other thing is that, by Alternatives or by, well back then Alternatives, Open Sky taking sort of an active role in historical preservation, and one of the mills that we started here is probably the second or third valuable mill here in the Blackstone Valley, which is, if people don't know, the birthplace of the American industrial revolution, it's very green. You know, so, what we've taken leadership in the green with the turbine, the water turbines, the Geo Thermo, and in the panels on the roof. And then, the arts and culture aspect that by taking a leadership role in all of those for the community, to me, the community is much more open to who we are and helping us with those opportunities to get a home, to get a job, and to get a relationship for the people we serve. And sort of one way of sorta summing that up is it is all about reciprocity. It's something that we should all be working towards as we as we move forward.

**Bill:** And we have years ago, Alternatives built a curriculum on this, as I mentioned before, like a two-fold approach of helping individuals make their way into the community. But the second training was referred to as Creating Community Partnerships, and I'm just reading off here, there are four in that process. There are four main steps we take that have several parts to them. But the first one is we help identify neighborhood passions of folks in the community who we can collaborate with. We engage with these organizations, the second one. Then we initiate joint projects, and then we celebrate successes. So we, this is curriculum that's developed, and staff through Alternatives all these years, and now in Open Sky, who trained in these things because they're all challenged, all staff are challenged to take part in helping to create these opportunities in the community.

**David:** Yup. Can you guys, you touched on it a bit earlier, but you mentioned Open Sky and Alternatives, and at one point you two have come together? How has that, how has that relationship working? How is that benefiting the two of you, as an organization that is?

**Dennis:** Well again, just to be clear, it's Alternatives who have, both organizations still exist, but who are affiliated with The Bridge of Central Mass. That is a very similar organization to Alternatives. And again, the DBA is Open Sky, and of course, and we are, even though we're affiliated in two separate agencies, and basically we are sort of merging the services and the programs under one

management system. And it's, you know, growing, you know, whenever you, it's interesting how on paper we have very similar values and we do a very similar mission, etc., but it's interesting when you come together with another organization, you do everything no matter how small it is differently.

**David:** Sure, sure.

**Dennis:** There is a, and we're still in that. It's just been a little over a year. We came together last July 1st, so it's a year and a month that we've been together. So it's, you know, there's certainly a learning period, but, you know, my sense is that things are going pretty well.

**David:** Happy Birthday! Rhonda asked, "Do you work with staff on training and teaching staff on supporting other, in acquiring life skills through how to break down skills and meet individuals where they're at or just right at the challenge for that individual? And if so, what training do you use?"

**Bill:** Well, made me think when you were describing that of our Direct Skills Teachings, and trainings we've had that we got from our early years working with Boston University on helping people break down skills into manageable steps and then routing them together. So that's been kind of just as like in interpersonal skills training, has been a long standing training Alternatives put out there for all its staff to learn. It's certainly necessary to help people in whatever environment, work or in the residence, develop more skills.

**David:** Okay. Yeah. And I'm trying to read, go ahead.

**Dennis:** We would break that down. Absolutely. You know, using sort of the Tell, Show, Do, Feedback format, which we were taught again using your ROPES method.

**David:** Great. You know, I was trying to look for it, the program you mentioned to people on our website, and I couldn't find it, so I'm just going to drop a general link to people who might find that training or something like that on there. If we are aware of the fact, it predates me, but if we're the ones who developed it, there's probably something out there still.

<https://cpr.bu.edu/store/curricula/training-technology/direct-skills-teaching/>, and <https://cpr.bu.edu/store/curricula/self-directed-skill-lessons>

**Dennis:** Sure.

**David:** Danny asks, let's see, "Is Supplemental Security Income and/or Social Security Disability benefit planning provided to people?"

- Bill:** Yes. Well, again, in recent years, where that's become taken on a bigger role, and the state has had more benefits specialists throughout the state and the different regions, so staff, we have employment staff are instructed certainly to work with benefits specialists in each area, to kind of help them track throughout their employment journey, where they're at and how it's going to affect them, how to report wages. So that's kind of one of the first steps when we start working with people on employment that we kind of make a connection with the benefits specialists in the area, and we have them in each of the areas: the Worcester area up in the Fitchburg area and down in the Milford area where we operate.
- David:** So the next question is, "How can participation in community life lead to successful employment?"
- Bill:** Well, I think what comes to mind to me is, you know, certainly as people get out there and experience more, spend more time with people, maybe demonstrate some talents or gifts they have, it certainly affects their confidence in their ability, how they feel about themselves. Also, gives them an opportunity to impress others, so maybe improves their marketability and their opportunities to kind of go in the direction towards employment. But our experience has been, again, people that are somewhat timid around getting out there often is a confidence issue and as they have gotten healthier, and when we say get out there, we again have an approach of really trying, not necessarily get out there just to get a job, but try to find out what people's true passion is. And so I used the example before, if somebody that's creative or artistic or maybe somebody likes music, and help them try to pursue that in the community or their groups. They could join their music groups or just around. We even had a situation a few years back, where we had this fellow the staff was working with, he was fascinated with rocks and stones, and the staff actually found a mineral club that he was able to join and get together with other people on a regular basis to kind of connect around that. So that kind of meeting people where they're at, finding what they're interested in, and getting them to kind of build relationships with people that have similar interests is kind of the direction we try to pursue. And again, often times that might lead them in a direction towards employment.
- Dennis:** Right. I met the board, sort of, you're out there that hopefully the larger your social network you're developing. And you know, I mean that's just, and that has a lot to do with social capital. That's sort of a word I think people know. A lot with that means, as you know, those resources and who you know and the different groups that you're associated with to have, to increase your sort of quality of life. And so the more you're out there, I think that the more chance

you would have of making it connection that could lead to employment. The one example is that, we have, as I mentioned, these advisory councils and, there's an opportunity for one of the people we serve to go before that council to sort of present who they are and the kinds of things that they're interested in. And so, that has happened on and off. This particular individual went to the one in Milford and presented and sort of described what he was then interested in. And usually it's not this easy, but one of the community members was looking for someone to actually meet that very job, and he was hired like the next week. So, I think the more you're out there, the more chances you're going to run into something, or hear about something that would be of interest to you.

**David:** Sam asks, "We have challenges engaging some individuals who have a permanent housing voucher. Aside from discussing community involvement and having income, what are some ways we can highlight the value of working to participants?"

**Dennis:** I'm not sure if I understand.

**Bill:** Are you saying that the housing voucher is a barrier for the person?

**David:** Yeah, so I'm going to try to take a guess. I'm guessing the idea of having everything safe for forever, either his housing is permanently taking care of, their basic needs are taken care of. Aside from discussing community involvement of them and having more of an income, you know, increasing what they take home so they can live and do more. What are some ways that they can highlight the value of working to those sort of individuals?

**Bill:** Well, all right. If money isn't, I mean again, I think certainly increasing people's awareness of what other people are experiencing. I think again, we try to go in the direction of what is the person most interested in. And sometimes that kind of opens up in the direction towards employment. If somebody's feeling totally safe in that situation, they don't need money, so we're almost trying to get them to see the value of becoming more independent, standing on their own, and maybe there's ways we would try to emphasize that when somebody does do things that go in that direction that we would really get behind that and recognize that. So we try to solidify that value in that person so they have less dependency. The importance of becoming more independent.

**Dennis:** Or interdependent, right? You know, that there's sort of giving and receiving in the outside. But you know, some of the systems that we have in place sort of breed dependency. I mean it's certainly an issue that we've had that at times we, too, have to try to breakthrough.

**David:** Okay. Tom has an interesting one. He asked for any suggestions on “how to keep employers engaged, when you don't have an individual that is a good fit for them at that time?”

**Dennis:** Yeah. Well, that's interesting.

**Bill:** One of the things, when it's part of the CPFS programs, we actually utilize the IPS, Individual Placement and Support approach, which if people are familiar with that, it's more of a, with people we serve if they express any interest in employment, we try to act on that and move in that direction. One of the things that's unique to that model, the approach they had around job development was often they referred to as the “three cups of tea approach,” where the first cup is you just make the connection with the person and set up an appointment with and employer. Second one, you actually go in and, to some degree, interview the employer around their needs and get them to see that you're there as another resource for them. You're trying to find out what their ideal employee would be. And then the third step, third cup would be that maybe you create an opportunity for one of your folks to interview there. But using that model, I think it leaves the opportunity to continue to stay in touch with that employer. Because again, maybe you don't have the employee for them, but maybe you can still act as a resource to connect them that somebody else does. So, I think when you don't have that person, you can still play that role of being an employer because you're all in the same business. You're all trying to create opportunities and fill those opportunities.

**Dennis:** So, we have in this, in central Massachusetts, a, is it called the deployment collaborative?

**Bill:** Yes.

**Dennis:** Right. And so it's several agencies in employment, so if for some reason, we couldn't fill the slot, we would put that out there to the collaborative, and maybe they have someone that could fit that slot.

**Bill:** Right.

**David:** Sure. The next couple of last questions that we have time for here. The next one is, “Do you have any suggestions for an employer reluctant to split a full-time position into two part-time shifts to try to find roles for people?”

**Bill:** If they were reluctant to that?

**David:** Yeah.

**Bill:** I think on the employer's side, I think if they're familiar with the folks involved, we've seen that happen. At times it can be positive, it can lend flexibility that you've got two people that kind of are involved. So, I think we've done that in the past. I think it's a matter if they're satisfied with both people, talking about splitting a job and kind of like two part-time jobs that the people involved are in qualified. Usually it's not a problem.

**Dennis:** Yep.

**David:** All right. Next one up is Jenny asks, "Even with Work Incentive Planning and Assistance, we still have a problem getting people to try to get back to work. We also have the barrier of community and work incentive coordinators not even wanting to talk to people unless they are already working. What do you suggest?"

**Bill:** Yeah, I'm not sure, it's a little different than what our experience has been. But I sense maybe it's the numbers game that if there, we did have some points when we had less benefits specialists, so they would tend to only prioritize people at certain stages. So, it sounds like it's a bigger system issue about how many resources are available to kind of help people. We did, when that did occur, when we had less, I want to say five years ago when we had less of these benefits specialists, the UMASS Medical Group, that has a Work Without Limits Department, they put on some trainings with the Department of Mental Health. So the idea was to train some of our existing staff to become pretty skilled around benefits specialists. So they wouldn't be the total person, but they could be, they could be an extension of that. So, that is probably the closest we've come to around feeling the struggle with that and what was done about that. And we did a sense that was almost like a bootcamp where they would send staff to like three intense days of learning a lot. In fact, I think that they still offer that around the area. So they train staff up to become very knowledgeable about benefits so they can help to whatever degree they can, and maybe you offset some of the overload on the benefits specialists.

**David:** Sure. And then the final question we have today is, "How do you increase the reciprocity of community members to provide real opportunities?"

**Dennis:** Well, it's, I mean again, it takes two to have reciprocity. And so, in a number of our initiatives where we then say renovate a playground or put up a mural or repair the railings of a community's library, always working with people from Open Sky Alternatives, but also working with their volunteers. And we do that in

little ways and we do that in larger ways, like the Whitin Mill and all that it gives back to the community. By us giving back, we have seen how then communities are more open to who we are, and will consider giving back to us. And if I have a choice of them writing a check for \$50 or providing a job or willing to volunteer at Alternatives, I'll take the job and volunteer every time.

**David:** Well, thank you, Dennis, and thank you very much for your time, Bill as well, for answering everyone's questions today; and for everyone joined us. It was really quite informative, I appreciate it. The next Ask Me Anything, for everyone in attendance, the next session is coming soon. And you should receive an announcement by email in the weeks ahead. And the next few days, you should also get a survey about to your experience today. We'd love to get any feedback you have about today's event. So thank you again, and we look forward to having you join us in the future. Thank you, Dennis and Bill, I really appreciate it, guys.

**Dennis:** Okay, thanks. Take care.

**David:** Bye now.

**Bill:** Bye.