



COLLEGE OF DIRECT SUPPORT

# PARTNER PROFILES

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## The CDS Story at Alternative Community Training: Turnover is down, 'Increase in Positive Culture for Agency'



Alternative Community Training

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Alternative Community Training, Inc. (ACT) has been a human services provider for persons with disabilities in Columbia, MO, since 1975, initially providing educational services to students in a private school setting. Today, predominantly an adult-service provider, ACT supports more than 300 persons with disabilities in the following Programs: Community Living, Community Employment, Community Integration and ACT Works. The College of Direct Support (CDS) has been utilized in Missouri and at ACT as a pilot program since November 2005 -- and the results for this agency have been amazing!

The Missouri College of Direct Support currently has about 35 agencies throughout the state participating in the pilot, which will continue through June 2009. The agency administrators in the state have convened on a monthly basis to annotate curriculum, complete a thorough overview of each course and to make recommendations regarding how CDS courses could replace current statewide requirements for training. The administrators group, along with the Statewide Steering Committee, has been the driving force behind the level of success associated with using the CDS.

ACT has offered CDS on a completely voluntary basis. If learners are interested in completing courses, they seek out the agency's CDS administrator to get started with classes. ACT does offer incentives for completing courses. Learners who provide direct support can receive a total stipend of \$700 in bonus money. This includes \$350 after completing a set of six prescribed courses and the on-the-job training checklists that the CDS offers. The learners and their supervisors then have the option to choose “elective courses” from the remaining seven courses needed to complete state certification requirements for Missouri. Once the on-the-job training checklists are reviewed with learners, they

are eligible for the second stipend of \$350. The learners also receive a \$0.25 hourly rate increase and a title change, to Direct Support Professional (DSP).

Ed Ricciotti, who recently began a position as a Frontline Supervisor after working as a DSP for 12 years states, “The CDS courses assisted me to become a better DSP and now I am able to use this as a frame of reference when I am training and supervising our DSPs.”

Employees complete surveys to provide feedback regarding the validity of the courses completed. This survey data is maintained on a statewide basis and has assisted the Missouri Division of Developmental Disabilities to have credible data supporting the use of CDS statewide. The state is currently looking into funding options that would sustain this program into the future.

Employees from ACT have given rave reviews regarding the CDS content. Employees feel better prepared for their daily responsibilities after completing these courses. Employees who support persons with behavior challenges feel more confident when dealing with challenging situations. Employees have a realistic picture of the vital role they play in the lives of persons supported. ACT's mentor and CDS graduate Emma Landry, notes, “The CDS classes that I took were very user friendly. I enjoyed listening to the stories of real individuals and their staff members and felt like they helped me to fully understand what was being taught to me. I can honestly say that I gained a great deal of knowledge, understanding, and awareness from taking the CDS courses. I feel that I can now better support the individuals in our program and I feel that I can be a better advocate for them.”

ACT recognizes all learners who have achieved this status at ACT employee events (our annual retreat, holiday party, employee appreciation days, etc.) The learners receive a framed certificate from the State of Missouri recognizing the com-

pletion of the required curriculum. This certificate is portable across the state, so retraining would not need to occur if a DSP relocates to a different part of Missouri. ACT also provides CDS graduates with a CDS tote bag filled with items/goodies to assist the DSP in doing their job. Learners are recognized in ACT's quarterly newsletters. ACT believes that celebrating these accomplishments is an integral part of the delivery and success of this curriculum.

ACT also offers an incentive to Frontline Supervisors and Managers, which includes a \$500 bonus for completing 13 courses in the DSP curriculum and four courses in the College of Frontline Supervision and Management (CFSM). Again, learners complete these courses and reviews the on-the-job training component prior to receiving bonus monies.

Carrie Griffith, Manager of ACT's Community Living program and a CDS graduate said: "The CDS has become a valuable resource for our organization. Even though I had experience in the field, going through the coursework (both the direct-care portion as well as the frontline supervision) taught me new information as well as

helping me to refresh on important points. As a manager, the On-the-Job Training Assessments for each course were a great opportunity to touch base with my staff, to have the type of discussions that you don't typically have in the hustle and bustle of the work week. The OJT Training Assessments served as a springboard to several conversations about where we are as an agency and where we are going. The CDS experience is a reminder that what we do is important and we need to keep learning so that our practices don't become stagnant. The DSPs who have completed the courses typically are contributing more ideas and have renewed enthusiasm for the profession."

The response from other ACT employees has been phenomenal! There are currently 148 learners from ACT utilizing the CDS. This includes consumers, direct care employees, supervisors, managers, administrative support staff -- and even our Chief Executive Officer, Mark Hassemer. Mark notes, "We are very encouraged by the early results of making CDS training available to our Direct Support Professionals. People are increasing their skill

level, which results in more effective and efficient services. Staff retention has been enhanced, critically important in today's environment. The direct support positions are just perceived differently since we started the CDS training; people are on a career track and receive a portable certification.

ACT's Training and Development Committee recently revised the agency's New Hire orientation to include employees completing the CDS Safety course as part of their new-hire training with ACT. This introduction to CDS has sparked an interest in many employees to continue with courses and gain the wealth of knowledge this training program offers. ACT's Training and Development Committee is currently working on new-hire training for supervisors and plans to include the new course from the CFSM -- "Becoming a Supervisor."

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**--Emma Landry, ACT mentor**

Retention statistics for the agency for the past two years have shown that the implementation of the CDS and making it available to ACT employees has "raised the bar" for delivering quality services for consumers supported in ACT's pro-

grams. Retention statistics from calendar year 2006 showed a 43% turnover rate. In 2007 that dropped to a 23% turnover rate. The CDS was a contributing factor in the 20% decrease in turnover. ACT has seen an increase in a positive culture for the agency. The level of professionalism has increased as a result of this curriculum being available to employees. Employees understand that they are not just providing supervision to persons with disabilities; they are facilitating support for persons served to be included in their community.

*Michelle Saunders is the CDS Administrator for ACT and can be contacted via email at michelle4act@socket.net or by calling Alternative Community Training at 573-474-9446. If you are interested in more about the services Alternative Community Training provides, please go to their website: www.actservices.org*

About CDS Partner Profiles

CDS Partner Profiles highlights the activities of state and local organizations that have integrated the College of Direct Support into efforts to elevate the preparation, performance, status, and compensation of direct support professionals (DSPs) and frontline supervisors and managers (FSMs). The purpose of the the CDS Partner Profiles is to identify and describe a variety of innovative and exemplary initiatives and activities into which the CDS has been integrated. CDS Partner Profiles are written by leaders of organizations that are actually engaged in these efforts.

College of Direct Support (CDS)  
www.collegeofdirectsupport.com

The College of Direct Support (CDS) and its companion College of Frontline Supervision and Management (CFSM) are internet-delivered multimedia, competency-based training curricula for DSPs and FSMs supporting individuals with disabilities.

The CDS is available for review at:  
collegeofdirectsupport.com

For more information about the CDS, contact Bill Tapp at bill@collegeofdirectsupport.com or Donna Kosak at donna@collegeofdirectsupport.com or call toll-free, 877-353-2767

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