

AbiliMall: A Model of Supported Self-Employment for Adults With Disabilities Frances Center for Customized Employment

The AbiliMall model is an integrated self-employment support system for adults with disabilities. AbiliMall, conceptualized by Dr. M. Jo Monroe, incorporates the principles of self-determination into career choice to provide an innovative option for sustainable careers among adults with disabilities. AbiliMall is currently being piloted at the Frances Center for Customized Employment in Baton Rouge, LA.

AbiliMall specifically addresses employment goals set forth by the Louisiana Developmental Disabilities Council in the FFY 2013 plan. Successful implementation of Employment First supports opportunities to pursue self-employment and the development of microenterprises. The AbiliMall model incentivizes self-employment as a viable option by providing a network of inclusive services and support from the community at large. Overall, this model realistically views the “real jobs with real wages” objective as a narrow window as currently presented by traditional vocational rehabilitation services. More often, the jobs associated with this objective are ones with minimal self-directed choice, low retention, and virtually zero opportunity for life-long sustainability or retirement options. While the underlying principles of Employment First are sound, our current economic state undermines the presumption that all adults with disabilities can work in fully integrated jobs within the general workforce, earning minimum wage or higher.

The AbiliMall model is a multi-faceted system that, at its very core, provides the financial and physical supports for launch of self-employment ventures. As a non-profit entity, the AbiliMall serves as a hub around which clients operate as sole proprietors in a supported environment. Features of this model include a mall-type setting benefiting from the material donations of the public to provide inventory and sources of revenue for the clients’ independent businesses. Clients out-source the day-to-day operations, including the monetary transactions and overhead maintenance, to the AbiliMall, thereby freeing them up to pursue their personal interests within their business. Unlike traditional wage earning jobs, clients need not fear termination due to extended health-related absences, inability to secure consistent transportation, or a myriad of other situations that threaten job security on a daily basis for this population of workers. Additionally, the AbiliMall model is designed to support the self-employment ventures of persons with any level of disability, thereby providing career options for persons deemed unemployable in a competitive employment environment. By exercising the self-employment options offered by the SSA, clients of the AbiliMall can engage fully in an integrated workplace while protecting their disability benefits until they reach self-sufficiency.

Expected outcomes for AbiliMall models include immediate competitive employment for adults with disabilities as entrepreneurs in control of their career design and destiny. It is expected that as clients experience the freedom and pride of business ownership in a secure environment, they will naturally grow their enterprises through diversification or specialization and achieve a degree of independence not available to them with the current employment options offered to adults with disabilities. As a center for employment services, AbiliMalls offer academic and vocational training to assist their clients with furthering their self-employment goals.

While the brevity of this proposal restricts full discussion of all aspects of the AbiliMall model, the most promising aspect is that of self-sustainability of the AbiliMall itself. The model is designed to be supported by the retail sales of donated goods and tuition fees associated with classes offered within the center. While this level of self-sufficiency will not be immediate, the estimated funding of each AbiliMall will be driven by the physical overhead costs of each location and the salaries of necessary staff and personnel. For the pilot program at the Frances Center for Customized Employment, the operating costs for the initial year are budgeted at \$145,000. As a non-profit organization, we anticipate grant funding for the majority of this budget and are currently a finalist for the Capital One Investing for Good Grant.