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Georgia Options Leads The Way

By Ruksana Hussain

Since 1992, a little known nonprofit organization in Athens, GA has been steadily making strides in caring for individuals with intellectual and developmental disabilities (I/DD). By working on a case by case basis, Georgia Options has dedicated itself to ensure people with disabilities thrive in mainstream society by supporting them to live in their own homes and enjoy typical life experiences.

Founded by a small group of family members, people with disabilities and other citizens concerned about the well-being of adults with disabilities, Georgia Options began with offering support to five people and has gradually grown not only in number of persons served, total 76, but also in their understanding of quality of support provided.

"We don't look at people as a number. We look at each person, figure out what they need, what support they want from us and how we can provide it to help them meet their goals," said Rena Harris, executive director at Georgia Options. "We are intentional about people joining our organization, and that the ability to provide excellent, evidence-based services is always there."

Focusing on Choice

This clear focus has contributed to Georgia Options being one of the most progressive residential providers for the disability community. All people they serve live in their own homes, choose where and with whom they want to live. Direct Support Professionals (DSP) assist people and provide person-centered support at varying levels in all areas of a person's life – enabling everyone to pursue their hopes and dreams; to be active in the community; and to live the best life possible.

"Success here isn't measured by the services we provide – that is a vehicle," said Harris. "The measure of success for us is what impact does our support have on a person's life, not considering the people that are paid to support them. We don't look at our service provision as a measure of success; we look at what a person is able to accomplish and have in their life that they wouldn't ordinarily have without our services."

Georgia Options values the people they serve as persons with dignity and capacity, who not only have the right to live in a home of their choosing, but who also have untapped potential to contribute to the community in immeasurable ways. What truly pushes this organization to a higher level is that they support people in their own homes. Individuals have their own support staff during the day and all activities are based on their interests and preferences. Georgia Options provides support throughout the life span of an individual, treating their family as partners in this journey.

Promoting Community Living

While individuals with severe disabilities are usually assigned to community living in a home with a large group where individual needs are not necessarily met, at Georgia Options, there is a minimum of two DSPs



Gabby

Gabby requires complete assistance with personal care and has severe medical needs. She is new to Georgia Options and was turned down by at least three other providers. At some time, her mother had been advised that a nursing home was the best option.

for every person they assist, meaning every person has individualized support during a typical day. DSPs are specifically recruited for each individual. The person served and family actively participate in interviewing and hiring the direct support staff.

Harris cannot stress enough the importance of this under-appreciated segment of the disability community. The challenging job scope and difficult training period paired with below average pay doesn't provide much incentive for DSPs to continue in the field when they could be earning double that anywhere else, but the need for their services is enormous.

"For the people we have accepted into our service right now, we are at an over 20% vacancy rate for DSPs," explained Harris. "Statewide, the shortage is only going to grow – it is going to become more challenging. Turnover in general is high, but our turnover rate is lower."

They are extremely dedicated to the people that they support and not paid nearly enough for what they do. This is not a job for everybody for what our funding permits us to pay, but if they excel at this job then we will do everything in our power to make sure that they are satisfied and continue with us," she added.

The organization currently employs about 80 DSPs, with many having worked with the organization for 18-20 years – unheard of in this field.

Successes of Independent Living

In providing such customized, best practice support services, Georgia Options regularly witnesses candidates enjoying independent lives and contributing to their community. While families' adult children are refused services by other providers because of the level of their disability,

Georgia Options has excelled in providing support leading to excellent outcomes.

A recent example is a gentleman with autism who was institutionalized. His family's search for a provider eventually led them to Georgia Options where he now receives support, has social connections and a job.

"We pride ourselves on being accepting to people with a significant level of need, recognizing that they are just as entitled to quality, person-centered services and level of choice as people with less severe challenges," said Harris.

The quality of services Harris refers to is outlined in a 2015 National Council on Disability study which

concluded that individuals receiving home and community-based services and supports in smaller, more dispersed and individualized community settings demonstrated signs of greater community integration and positive life outcomes. Many studies conducted in the US found that outcomes such as greater individual choice, satisfaction, stability and community participation are positively related to people living in smaller, more "typical" home settings.

Another example Harris cites is of a young lady who was turned down by three other organizations because of her level of personal care needs, but is now supported by Georgia Options.

Not everyone provided services through this organization necessarily continues, and there have been instances where individuals have chosen to go a different route.

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Matt

Matt spent time at Gracewood Hospital and with a traditional provider. He has severe behavioral challenges and requires the company of two direct support professionals when he leaves home. He has close relationships with his neighbors and works at the YMCA. Matt's dad, Phil, is also the Board President.



Matt on the job at the YMCA.



John

John came from Central State Hospital in 2011. His parents were extremely worried about whether he would be safe outside of the hospital. He has 24-hour support, lives in his own apartment and is doing very well.



Full Steam Ahead

Funding crises and supporting DSPs has not limited Harris' plans for the immediate future and the long-term goals for Georgia Options. The goal for next year is to improve sustainability. She plans to develop the board, search for grants that support best practices, seek connections to foundations that support the cause, cultivate corporate donors and establish partnerships, develop collaboration within the community and bolster outreach and awareness.

Despite 25 years in operation, Georgia Options is a well-kept secret in the Athens community and within the larger disability community that it serves.

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While disability of any nature might have been a less discussed topic in 1992, today it is a conversation in the general community. There is a growing force of not just self-advocates and their families, but also members from the communities who are recognizing that people with disabilities bring an intrinsic value, irrespective of the extent or nature of their abilities, to mainstream society.

Harris is optimistic for what lies ahead. “I do believe that the community will partner with us, people will want to collaborate with us because we do best practices and that is really important. We have a cause and a model worth fighting for.”

For more information on Georgia Options, visit <http://www.georgiaoptions.org/>

“If an individual decides we are not the right service provider for them, then we respect that and will make sure we do everything we can for them to get to the right service provider,” says Harris. “Their needs might change over time and people might want to try something different. People should have that choice and an informed and experienced alternative should be possible.”

Cause for Concern

An integral issue is the availability of Medicaid waivers. The NOW/COMP waiver has the longest waiver list in Georgia of 8,821 individuals (as of 3/31/17). The current fiscal year's ask is to fund at least 2,470 new waivers for a state impact of \$33,058,273.

It is unclear how the recent revision of the Medicaid waiver will affect Georgia Options.

“We relied on 98% Medicaid and 2% other income,” discloses Harris, “which is worrisome in terms of funding. My priorities, in addition to making sure that our services are top-notch and our employees are experiencing job satisfaction, are to figure out different ways to enhance our revenue, become less reliant on Medicaid and diversify our income sources.”

Additional funding outside of Medicaid will help the organization continue to provide best practice services for every individual accepted.



Martin

Martin (right) requires complete assistance with personal care. Martin and his mom had some challenges with Georgia Options prior to current administration, so they left to try services with another provider. They returned a few months ago. Martin is pictured above with staff member, Jim.