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NAME OF PROGRAM/INITIATIVE: Fresh Abilities at Clark State College

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A handwritten signature in blue ink, appearing to read "Taylor Bugglin", is written over a light blue horizontal line.

Date: 5/24/2023

SUBMISSION DATE

Electronically by **May 25, 2023, 4:00pm EDT**

To submit email to: executivedirector@ncwe.org

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Fresh Abilities at Clark State College – Executive Summary

Fresh Abilities is a collaboration between Clark State College, a community college in Western Ohio, and The Abilities Connection (TAC), a nonprofit organization that serves people with disabilities and offers safe, inclusive workplaces to thrive. TAC provides several different types of vocational training programs to people with disabilities. One of these programs is Fresh Abilities, a food service training program that empowers individuals with disabilities by providing transferable skills and experience, leading to a pathway for future employment in the food service industry and beyond. As part of its hands-on training, Fresh Abilities operated a restaurant in a downtown co-op. However, there were no spaces for the classroom components of the training at this location, requiring participants to travel between two locations for training, a major barrier to the program.

Meanwhile, Clark State College had been in the process of finding a new food service provider when the Covid-19 pandemic closed campus. When the College returned to in-person education, it was left without a food service provider. Crystal Jones, Vice President for Marketing, Diversity and Community Impact at Clark State and a board member for TAC realized that a partnership could solve both issues: Fresh Abilities could fill the role of food service provider at Clark State, which would provide them with a working restaurant and classrooms in one location.

This collaboration has had positive outcomes for both organizations. For Clark State, working with a nonprofit organization has reduced the institution's subsidy for a food service provider. Students, faculty, and staff have access to healthy food options that are also cost effective. Fresh Abilities is still open to the public, bringing community members to campus. For TAC and Fresh Abilities trainees, the classrooms and restaurant are located at the same site, reducing the transportation barrier that previously existed. Trainees with disabilities or other barriers have the opportunity to become more familiar with a college campus, which can increase comfort for those who may wish to further their education in the future. TAC has opportunities to connect with other organizations that partner with and visit Clark State, and vice versa. TAC and Clark State are also more easily able to collaborate to identify funding opportunities to support training.

The program demonstrates the importance of encouraging community service among the College's employees. This partnership is a result of having a Clark State employee serving on the board of directors for TAC. The strongest collaborative workforce programs will come from the deep understanding of community needs that can only be developed by active engagement with community organizations.

Fresh Abilities at Clark State College - Program Description

Excellence in Equity

Clark State College is a community college in Western Ohio with a mission to engage and empower diverse learners by providing high-quality educational programs and services that emphasize student and community success. The Abilities Connection (TAC) is a nonprofit organization that serves people with disabilities and offers safe, inclusive workplaces to thrive. Their mission is to empower people with disabilities and other barriers to reach their full potential in the community settings of their choice. One program that TAC offers is Fresh Abilities, a food service training program that empowers individuals with disabilities by providing transferable skills and experience, leading to a pathway for future employment in the food service industry and beyond. As part of this training, Fresh Abilities operated a restaurant in a downtown co-op. While this provided real-world experience for trainees, they had to travel between two sites for training and service, which was a barrier. Meanwhile, Clark State had been in the process of finding a new food service provider when the pandemic closed the physical campus. Upon return to in-person education, Clark State was left without a provider. Crystal Jones, Vice President for Marketing, Diversity and Community Impact at Clark State and a board member for TAC realized that a partnership could solve both issues: Fresh Abilities could fill the role of food service provider at Clark State, which would provide them with a working restaurant and classrooms in one location. Trainees have the opportunity to become comfortable with being on a college campus, while students and employees have more opportunities for positive interaction with people with disabilities, which can combat stigma. This program truly embraces NCWE's core values of Justice, Innovation, Opportunity, and Practitioner-Focus and a commitment to workforce education for all.

Justice: NCWE's value of justice focuses "fair and equitable 'workforce education for all.'" The Fresh Abilities program specifically provides training to people with disabilities, a group of people historically excluded from the workforce and workforce education.

Innovation: NCWE's value of innovation states that "by promoting innovative strategies and pioneering techniques in workforce education and training, NCWE serves as a catalyst for transformative change." The idea of partnership between TAC and Clark State was an innovative one that required both organizations to step outside of the box of their normal operations. Fresh Abilities is not a typical higher education food service provider. A college campus is not a typical restaurant location. However, this innovative partnership has proven to be a positive for both organizations.

Opportunity: NCWE's value of opportunity focuses on "the advancement of high caliber workforce programs" which includes "future-focused workforce readiness skills." Fresh Abilities has

been able to utilize the knowledge and skills of educators at Clark State, and an outcome of the partnership has been increased training offerings for participants. This includes future-focused workforce readiness skills such as bias, technology in the workplace, customer service, and extended menu trainings.

Practitioner-Focus: NCWE's value of practitioner-focus seeks to "empower academic practitioners to become workforce-focused influencers" by supporting "workforce education best practices," striving to "strengthen workforce education advocacy," and collaboration "with other workforce organizations to build a coalition of tomorrow's workforce leaders." This partnership has required respect for the knowledge, skills, and strengths of practitioners from both organizations. Clark State was able to bring its workforce expertise to the table to help Fresh Abilities expand its training, but TAC has remained the expert in training people with disabilities.

Partner and Community Involvement

This program is a partnership between Clark State and TAC. It was built off of an existing relationship developed by Crystal Jones as a member of the TAC board of directors and an employee of Clark State. This program was built on shared missions and goals of educating diverse learners and creating a sense of belonging for all. The partnership and collaboration between the two organizations has been strengthened immensely by offering Fresh Abilities at Clark State. TAC used to have a misconception that Clark State was a competitor in workforce development and that they needed to be cautious of offerings to not duplicate Clark State's services. However, they now recognize the alignment of missions and see how the two organizations are perfectly suited to working together to offer more comprehensive training and services. This program also fits local workforce needs by training people with disabilities, a group historically excluded from workforce training or the workforce in general, to work in food service jobs, an area that has been experiencing worker shortages. Employers struggling to fill food service positions have an additional pool of trained employees, and a group that may have otherwise been excluded from the workforce have access to jobs and the ability to earn an income.

Innovation and Agility

The Fresh Abilities partnership was built out of a need to adapt in response to barriers faced by both organizations. Clark State was looking for a way to overcome losing their food service provider, and Fresh Abilities was looking to overcome the barrier of trainees having to travel between two locations. Crystal, realizing that both organizations had a need that the other could fill and recognizing the overlap in their missions of empowering diverse people through training and education, started the process. In summer of 2021, leadership from both organizations met to discuss a path forward. An assessment of both organizations' needs, including financially, was conducted in the fall, followed by a proposal that

was presented to the boards of both organizations. The proposal was approved, and Fresh Abilities moved into the campus space in the spring of 2022, officially opening in April of that year.

Outcome Driven Results/Potential Impact

The program has been a positive for both organizations. For Clark State, working with a nonprofit organization has reduced the institution's subsidy for a food service provider. Students, faculty, and staff have access to healthy food options that are also cost effective. Fresh Abilities is still open to the public, bringing community members to campus. For TAC and Fresh Abilities trainees, the classrooms and restaurant are located at the same site, reducing the transportation barrier that previously existed. Trainees with disabilities or other barriers have the opportunity to become more familiar with a college campus, which can increase comfort for those who may wish to further their education in the future. TAC has opportunities to connect with other organizations that partner with and visit Clark State, and vice versa. Since the program began in 2020, 27 individuals have entered the program, with nine being trained since the program partnered with Clark State in 2022. Six of those training graduates have secured employment at local restaurants. Four graduates remain at Fresh Abilities while looking for future opportunities in food service. The remaining trainees/graduates left food service and/or the training due to health-related issues or because they determined that food service was not the industry they wanted to pursue. Fresh Abilities believes these trainees were still successful because their experience helped to guide their personal decision-making. Additionally, Fresh Abilities has moved from supplementing the operation of the program and restaurant while at the downtown location to seeing a slight profit from restaurant sales. In the next year, Fresh Abilities expects to train and employ 25 team members and fill at least 20 open jobs in the community.

Replication

One of the most important aspects of this program is that it grew out of a relationship between Clark State and TAC, and it addressed existing needs each organization had. While replicating a Fresh Abilities-type program may be a good fit for another campus as well, it is more important to consider the needs of that college's campus and community. This partnership is a result of having a Clark State employee serving on the board of directors for TAC. For other institutions to find potential partnerships like this, it is crucial to not only allow for community service but actively encourage it, giving employees the flexibility needed for volunteering in and even incentivizing community service where possible. This keeps the institution connected to community organizations and keeps representatives of the institution in the community. The strongest collaborative programs will come from a deep understanding of community needs that can only be developed by active engagement with community organizations.