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**Title:** The LEAD Project (Leadership, Employment, Advocacy, Development) for Youth and Emerging Leaders with Developmental Disabilities

**Brief Summary of Project:** LEAD promotes the benefits of education, employment, recreation, and health for enhancing the lives, well-being and community participation of youth ages 13 to 17 and emerging leaders ages 18 to 30 with developmental disabilities in order to increase opportunities to improve their informed choice and self-determination when making decisions about their activities as full citizens in their communities.

**Introduction and Overview:** In Delaware, services for youth and emerging leaders with developmental disabilities come from three departments and eight different divisions. This structure creates gaps in services especially as youth transition into adulthood. The LEAD Project addresses these gaps in services through its collaboration with multiple agencies ranging from service providers to state agencies. With the activities of the LEAD Project being conducted in typical settings with peers who are not individuals with disabilities, communities become more inclusive.

For the five years before the LEAD Project was implemented, the high school completion rate for all students with disabilities fluctuated between fifty-one and fifty-seven percent. The Education Associate for Secondary Special Education and Transition Services in Delaware's Department of Education indicated that youth with disabilities in Delaware needed additional skill building and learning opportunities for greater involvement in their IEP meetings including the ability to run their IEP meetings. The importance of this skill was also stressed as youth transition from school to adult services. Kamens (2004) underscores this point:

The literature on transition emphasizes the need for collaborative, community-based activities for students with developmental disabilities to develop functional skills. Furthermore, most authorities agree that these activities must involve a variety of stakeholders from the family, school, and community. In order to be effective, these collaborative transition programs must incorporate the development of social skills in a natural setting, where individuals with and without disabilities will benefit from the interactions. (p. 24)

The LEAD Project promotes the benefits of education, employment, recreation, and health to enhance the lives, well-being, and community participation of youth and emerging leaders within society. These goals are realized through providing the opportunity for the youth and emerging leaders to engage in career, social, and life skill development activities. Furthermore, LEAD addresses the needs of youth who are transitioning from school to work and beyond by providing information about higher education, work, healthcare, housing, financial planning, and social and recreational life on the website, [TransitionMapDE.org](http://TransitionMapDE.org), that the LEAD Project members developed and maintain. The LEAD team also produces and distributes a monthly newsletter that highlights current events, regional interest stories, success stories of inspiring youth, and information on best practice and upcoming events in the field of transition.

**Participants:** The LEAD Project team and its advisory council are composed of 14 youth and emerging leaders, with ages ranging from 17 to 25 years old. The disabilities disclosed by the participants include: Down Syndrome, Cerebral Palsy, Learning Disability, ADHD, Spina

Bifida, Bi Polar Disorder, hard of hearing and Seizure disorder. The LEAD team members were selected from a group meeting of youth and emerging leaders who participated in Junior Partners in Policymaking® (see below) in June 2005. At a group meeting, the participants who were interested in working at the University of Delaware in paid positions were those who became members of LEAD's advisory council.

The backbone of the project is made up of three talented and hard-working individuals. One of them is an outgoing and popular 21-year-old man with learning disabilities and anxiety disorder, who is responsible for the majority of the work that we do on a daily basis. He researches disability news for our monthly newsletter and assembles the newsletter in a logical manner. He also maintains the TransitionMapDE.org website, and updates it with new and up-to-date content. Another main LEAD team member is a quick-witted and detail-oriented 25-year-old man who has a traumatic brain injury and uses a wheelchair. We call him our "Contributing Editor" because he also helps research for the newsletter, but mainly he uses his keen eye to detect and fix errors in spelling, punctuation, and formatting. Last but not least is the patient and slightly mischievous 24-year-old man with an intellectual disability who takes care of the required data-entry, as well as contributing his own For Youth By Youth page on the website, which all three of our leaders have created for themselves and for other young adults like them.

I embraced the opportunity to serve as a graduate assistant on the LEAD Project during my second year of work for the Center for Disabilities Studies at the University of Delaware. I jumped at the chance to work directly with a unique and dynamic group of individuals who ended up teaching me more about young adults with disabilities than I ever could have imagined. I realized quickly that with a combination of advice, support, and encouragement, my team could make great strides in a variety of skills by doing things that could positively impact large numbers of people. My approach to my position on the project was one of a scaffold, or a temporary support that assists the project members to accomplish a task and take responsibility for similar tasks in the future. I attempted to be as "hands-off" as possible, allowing the team members to work and make decisions autonomously, while providing input and alternative opinions as necessary to create an overall strong product. I believe it was this approach that helped the team grow, learn to work independently, and be proud of their accomplishments because it was *theirs*.

### **Overview of Main Program Components:**

TransitionMapDE.org: The LEAD Project partners with Ken-Crest Centers to create and maintain this valuable resource for transition issues. The website serves as a roadmap from school to the future for youth and emerging leaders ages 13 to 30 with developmental disabilities living in Delaware and/or receiving special education services. It provides individuals with disabilities, their families, and the community, information pertaining to the transition from school to work and adult life. Topics included on the website include: information about schools in all three counties in Delaware, transition specialists for those schools, the Individualized Education Plan and Individualized Transition Plan, employment programs, post-high school education, housing, social and recreational life, healthcare and respite, estate and financial planning, and adult services.

For Youth By Youth: Another element of TransitionMapDE.org is the For Youth By Youth pages that were developed by three members of LEAD. This page highlights the latest in movies, music, sports and other entertainment from the perspective of our emerging leaders, with the purpose of informing other individuals with similar interests. LEAD also partnered with the Community Based Education Alliance at the University of Delaware to create a For Youth By Youth page composed of movie and restaurant reviews written by that program's participants, along with short bios of each reviewer.

E-Newsletters and E-Alerts: Every month the LEAD team researches, creates and distributes an E-Newsletter that highlights topics of interest that impact the lives of individuals with developmental disabilities in transition and those who support them. The newsletter includes articles on news and current events, regional interest stories, links and information on best practice, stories of inspiring youth with disabilities, and notices about upcoming events in the area and the nation. E-Alerts are disseminated as often as necessary in order to inform our subscribers about up-to-the-minute news, pending legislation, upcoming conferences or other events that pertain to those with developmental disabilities.

Junior Partners in Policymaking®: JPIP is a week-long summer institute for young adults ages 15 to 22 with and without disabilities, held on the campus of the University of Delaware. Participants spend the week living in the dorms, eating in the dining halls, and attending classes. The courses cover the history of developmental disabilities and treatment of people with developmental disabilities, People First Language, and a discussion of the IEP. Students spend time discussing goals and futures planning (MAPs). Students also learn about self-determination, informed choice, disabilities legislation, and how to impact public policy. Lastly, the students travel to Legislative Hall in Dover for a tour and to meet with a Representative.

Community Connectors: This program helps adults with disabilities become involved in their community by building skills, networking, and socializing. Through the Individual Program, participants pursue personal interests, and with support from program staff, self-motivated participants create their own goals and then implement plans to achieve those goals. In the past, these goals have included joining sports teams, volunteering, or taking art classes. The Group Program provides the opportunity for participants to build friendships and gain new experiences. Examples of group activities include sports events, movies, dinners, theater, and volunteering.

REAL (Recreation Enhancement and Learning) Project: REAL is a continuing education program intended for adults with disabilities in Delaware. The project offers the participants a choice of five different tracks for their course of study: Exploring Employment, Fine Arts, Independent Living, Leadership & Advocacy and Health & Safety. After completing one class a week for six weeks, the student earns a Certificate of Mastery in the selected track.

**Results and Discussion**: Over the course of the year I worked on the LEAD Project, our team has accomplished several major tasks. We increased the accessibility of the website by addressing the need for text descriptions of non-text images, according to Section 508 compliance procedures. We provided text descriptions of picture images in order to allow people who use screen-readers to experience the website in a more complete way. The team also updated the extensive list of transition specialists in every county in Delaware by providing the most recent names, school affiliations, and contact numbers for each specialist. This was carried

out by creating a detailed and organized Excel spreadsheet that tracked each phone call made, message left, and specific piece of information acquired. Other updates to the website included adding numerous links to valuable resources, such as a blank IEP form and a timeline to supported employment, providing additional information and advice about transition issues, and adding a "Success Story" about a member of LEAD, which is a bio he wrote himself.

The LEAD Project and its partners were pleasantly surprised at the overwhelming popularity the TransitionMapDE.org website has experienced. Since its unveiling in February 2006, the website has received over 80,000 hits from around Delaware and the nation. Similarly, the distribution list of subscribers to the E-Alerts and E-Newsletters has grown significantly from a list of 25 in January 2007 to 133 in March 2007. We have distributed a newsletter every month of 2007, and sent out at least five E-Alerts. One of LEAD's emerging leaders has increased his hours from 2 per week to 10 per week this year, while another emerging leader has increased his hours from 2 per week to 5 per week. Members of our program have been involved in directly teaching others about disability, transition, self-determination and self-advocacy by participating in panel discussions, giving presentations, and being interviewed by the local press.

Additionally, Junior Partners in Policymaking®, which will take place in June 2007, has received overwhelming numbers of applicants, many of whom had to be placed on a waiting list because of limited space. Community Connectors has hired one of its participants and is in the process of training her to learn how to search, locate, set up, plan and implement the Community Connectors Group Program. The Leadership and Advocacy class of the REAL Project attended a public forum on the public education system in Delaware, offering insight about their own public education experiences and communicating the need for post-21 continuing education classes like REAL.

Personally, I can see how the members of LEAD have grown. Their writing skills, such as spelling, punctuation, and articulation of thoughts and opinions have improved tremendously in the course of this year. Researching for the newsletter is now a rewarding and productive task, as opposed to being ominous and unfruitful as it was in the beginning. The team has made strides in their behavior in an office environment, and they have befriended most everyone that works around them. I can plainly see the pride on each of their faces when they present their work to others.

An excerpt of an article written by one of the LEAD emerging leaders that will appear in the May 2007 issue of the TransitionMapDE.org E-Newsletter:

"Being a person with disabilities, [working on the newsletter] has been truly an awesome experience that I have loved doing. I want to thank CDS for the opportunity, and all the people that read the newsletter and have learned from it. Thanks to [other members of LEAD] for helping me fix my spelling errors and for being a great team. I hope that next year I can come back and see that the newsletter is still going out. I hope that the people working on it will feel the same honor I have had doing this."

The grant period for the LEAD project will end in September of 2007. The Project Manager is currently seeking funding options that will allow the program to continue to benefit youth and emerging leaders with developmental disabilities into the future.

### **Work Cited**

Kamens, M. W. et al. (2004). A Collaborative Approach to Enhancing Employment and Social Skills of Students with Disabilities: Perspectives of the Stakeholders. *Preventing School Failure*. 48 (2), 24-30.