

The e-bulletin as a communications strategy in Des Moines Making Connections



E-bulletin, March 23, 2007

Time and attention build valuable soft skills in job-seekers with disabilities

Employers say that soft skills like networking, conflict management, or handling daily stress are some of the most important workplace skills around – yet they often take time to develop.

That's why **Project Employment** offers a five-week, 72 hour in-class program that gives job-seekers with disabilities (as defined by the ADA-Americans with Disabilities Act) the chance to develop skills that employers say are too often lacking.

"For many people, hard skills are easier to come by, but the soft skills are harder to get – they need time to develop," says Mary Ubiñas, Manager of Project Employment. The program is part of Iowa Employment Solutions at DMACC, in partnership with Iowa Workforce Development, located at 430 E. Grand Avenue in Des Moines. Classes are held in the Harkin Center, which features state-of-the-art assistive technologies specifically designed to accommodate individuals with disabilities. Project Employment gives students the classroom time they need to develop independent skills to seek jobs and keep them.

Ubiñas says students with disabilities come from many different scenarios. "Some have suffered with long-term depression, while others might have had a workplace injury that has forced them to change careers," she says.

- 54 million Americans, or 1 in 5 individuals are currently living with a disability.
- Most individuals will experience a disability sometime during their life.
- Many individuals with a disability are able to transition to a new career and higher quality of life. Staying disabled often keeps an individual living in poverty.
- Project Employment offers in-class time to learn soft skills, job coaching, job leads, and a job club for disabled individuals searching for work. To qualify, participants must show documentation that supports their disability as defined by the ADA. No fee to participate.
- Project Employment is located at 430 E. Grand Avenue in Des Moines. Contact Rose at 281-9752 for more information or to schedule an intake assessment.

Des Moines *Making Connections*' e-bulletins, which comes out every Friday, try to "tell the story behind the story" while also providing a summary for people who prefer to skim the information.

Imagine building a communications strategy with one click of a button. That was Ellen Wonderlin's first move when she took on the role of Communications Lead at the *Making Connections* site in Des Moines.

The site had set a goal for 2006 to quickly reinvigorate communications, with Wonderlin hired early in the year to meet that charge. At her disposal was an e-mail database with over 800 names of residents, community-based organizations, businesses, media and individuals with an interest in *Making Connections*. Wonderlin put those contacts to work, resurrecting a previously tried and tested product known as the "e-bulletin."

"The *Making Connections* e-bulletin was utilized in the past, discontinued and was an easy way to get going with little infrastructure," she said. "It's a way to get information out quickly, routinely and inexpensively on the initiatives and efforts going on in the Des Moines community as they relate to the *Making Connections* neighborhoods."

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— Ellen Wonderlin

Wonderlin and her team resurrected the old tool, yet beefed up the strategic value. They mapped out a consistent formula, with concise and simple information reflected in the content, and the *Making Connections* Des Moines logo as a visual banner. Regular dissemination each Friday was another way to increase awareness of the initiative.

Making Connections Des Moines sees its role as a community convener, and Wonderlin wanted the e-bulletin to clearly reflect

that. “We have discovered there are many, many types of stories and undercurrents that we can pull together and share through our unique role in the community — which is to bring different people and groups together.

“We cover a large variety of topics and themes, with no two alike,” explained Wonderlin. “Some depend on immediacy: there is an event or activity we want people to be aware of. We might pull out something little known that could use visibility. We try to bring out the story behind the story. Our goal is always to get information to people in a way that they otherwise might not get.”

E-bulletins come in many shapes and sizes, including community event announcements, profiles of residents involved in the community and short feature stories that cover a unique aspect of the *Making Connections* Des Moines neighborhoods.

The site also regularly sends out bulletins, newsletters and announcements from other community-based organizations. These include job announcements, workshops on health issues such as diabetes, furniture donations, training in subjects such as nonprofit advocacy, requests for support on specific issues such as funding for after-school programs, and much more.

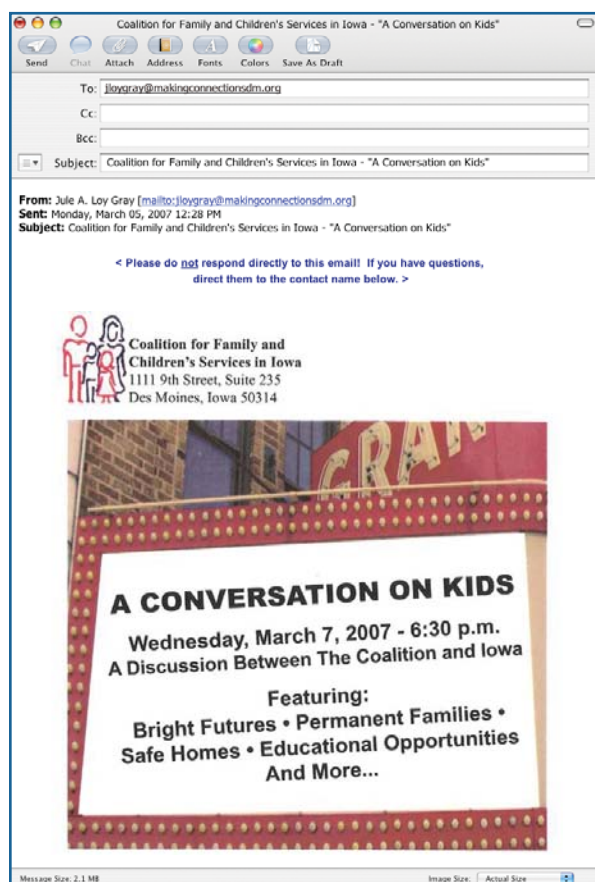
“*Making Connections* is essentially a conduit for getting people together, so it made sense for us to send out a wide variety of

E-Bulletin Topics

- ▶ Resident Groups Tackle Issues Facing Des Moines’ Low-Wage Workers
- ▶ Health Realization empowers Callanan Middle School students to improve school climate... and self
- ▶ AMOS medical debt story reaches national audience
- ▶ Making Connections Des Moines Website is All New
- ▶ Parents help bi-racial children embrace their heritage
- ▶ CCI’s new diversity committee spurs African American involvement in organizing

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Making Connections Des Moines also forwards announcements from other Des Moines-area organizations that residents might “find valuable or interesting,” in Ellen Wonderlin’s words.

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Tying these stories and announcements to the results and strategies of *Making Connections* is always the objective. Examples of e-bulletin topics include the

benefits of free tax preparation, the story of home caregivers seeking education on child development, and new changes in food stamp laws (see list of topics on page 2). Old e-bulletins are archived in an online library at www.makingconnectionsdm.org/library.asp.

“We try to use a storyteller’s ear to capture things that we otherwise might have missed,” explains Wonderlin. “It’s not just the facts, but why these things are important, and who is doing it. We try to highlight the hallmark of Des Moines, which is the variety of organizations working together, and all of the good things that are happening. This is really the main point – besides trying to get more people involved.”

The power of the e-bulletin to connect to and mobilize a broad audience became clear when *Making Connections* Des Moines organized a community engagement event surrounding the IPTV documentary “Waging a Living.”

Said Wonderlin, “If the e-bulletin contains a topic of interest to a particular leader they lift it up. We saw that most clearly around the ‘Waging a Living’ event. Through that particular e-bulletin, we let people know why we were having the event and why it was important to have a global discussion.

“That information showed up in a variety of different organizations’ e-mail services

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— *Melissa Nelson*

and lists, and I got three or four mailings from others. It proved that when a topic hits a key interest, it will spread — and we saw a good cross section and a number of people at that particular event.”

Melissa Nelson, *Making Connections* Caregiver Network Coordinator with the Child and Family Policy Center, has utilized the e-bulletin on a number of occasions to get the word out about her early child education programs for parents. “I like the fact that the e-bulletin is easy to read,” she said. “It really helped to bring in new participants to our programs who otherwise might not have known about them.”

Wonderlin and her team continue to fine-tune the e-bulletin. A text box summarizing key points was recently added to catch the attention of readers who prefer to skim information. As resources allow, she plans to break down and categorize groups on the list, then send out information targeted to those audiences.

“The goal is not to have *Making Connections* the focus, but to bring different parts of the community together who are working on issues common for all of us,” concluded Wonderlin. “As long as we get positive feedback, and people are interested in the e-bulletin, it’s a strategy we’ll continue to use.”

This is one of a series of stories and reflections about the work of Making Connections, a long-term community change initiative supported nationally by the Annie E. Casey Foundation. These publications have been produced by The Diarist Project, a new approach the foundation is using to learn from this initiative. This story was written by Kristin Senty, the diarist for *Making Connections Des Moines*. For more information about *Making Connections Des Moines*, contact Margaret Wright (515) 280-1502 (www.MakingConnectionsDM.org.) To see more diarist publications, go to www.DiaristProject.org.