

## Colorado Office of Employment First Conference Proposal

**Bio:** Alejandra Fontes, OTD, OTR/L received her Doctorate degree in Occupational Therapy from Washington University in St. Louis, Missouri. She is currently a JFK Partners Leadership Education in Neurodevelopmental Disabilities (LEND) Fellow. During her fellowship she has specialized in working with children with developmental disabilities both within Early Intervention as well as on transdisciplinary autism diagnostic team at Children's Hospital Colorado. Growing up with a brother on the autism spectrum has fueled her passion for working with this unique population. After her fellowship, Alejandra plans to continue advocating for occupational therapy's role in addressing the employment crisis impacting youth on the autism spectrum.

**Title of Session / Presentation:** Promoting Employment Outcomes through Community Partnerships for High-School Students on the Autism Spectrum

**Brief Description of Your Session:** This is what will be shared with attendees and will only be 2-5 sentences. We want to hear why attendees would want to attend your session!

Young adults on the autism spectrum are underrepresented in the workplace and often face exclusion due to the lack of autism specific environmental accommodations and adaptations. This presentation is designed to provide employers and community stakeholders with a foundational knowledge of how create an inclusive workplace for neurodiverse individuals as well as advocate for occupational therapy's role in promoting positive employment outcomes for individuals with Autism Spectrum Disorders. Attendees can expect to learn about my partnership with The Joshua School's High School Transition Program, the development of an autism specific community partner and employer training program, how to implement autism specific supports and accommodations within the workplace, and the impact of COVID on employment outcomes for individuals with neurodevelopmental disabilities.

Session Proposal (up to 500 words). **Please describe your topic and how it will expand the knowledge of Employment First, engage new stakeholders in Employment First, or empower job seekers with disabilities and those who provide services to people with disabilities.**

Young adults on the autism spectrum are **underrepresented** in the workplace and often face **exclusion** due to the lack of autism specific environmental accommodations and adaptations. Furthermore, the application, hiring, and interview process can be **inherently inaccessible** for adults with autism who experience significant social and communication challenges. The primary goal of my presentation is to contribute to the development of more **diverse, equitable, and inclusive workspaces** by **expanding the knowledge** of autism specific accommodations for current employers and community partners, provide a model of how to connect with community partners, and promote **engagement of new stake holders** in Employment First.

I will accomplish these goals by describing my recent partnership with The Joshua School's Transition Program. Through this partnership, I developed a training program for the program's current community partners who provide employment opportunities for their students (18-21 years) with Autism Spectrum Disorders (ASD) and other Intellectual and Developmental Disabilities (IDD). The primary purpose of these community partnerships is to provide students with valuable work experience and training opportunities in order to improve their employment outcomes after graduation.

My proposed presentation for the COEF conference will not only include a description of my partnership with the Transition Program, but also describe my process of connecting with the community partners to obtain diverse input necessary to inform the development of the training program. It will also include an overview of topics covered in the training program, the impact of COVID on employment opportunities for individuals with ASD, and a discussion of occupational therapy's role in promoting employment outcomes for individuals on the Autism Spectrum.

Specifically, I aim to highlight the strengths of the Transition Program and describe how it upholds many of the values of Employment First through the collaboration with its community partners. For instance, school staff work in **partnership** with their students and community partners to identify employment opportunities that best align with the student's **strengths, interests and future vocational goals**. Frequently this process involves the employers developing **customized employment opportunities** in collaboration with the student in order to provide the student with greatest potential for success within the workplace. Although these are not paid employment experiences, core values of **competitive integrated employment** are reflected in the many opportunities students have to interact with other persons who are not individuals with disabilities as well as through opportunities for advancement within the organization as their skills develop.

Through my presentation, I hope to provide employers and community stakeholders with the foundational knowledge of how create an inclusive workplace for neurodiverse individuals as well as advocate for occupational therapy's role in promoting positive employment outcomes for individuals with ASD. Occupational Therapists (OT) are uniquely skilled in their ability to perform task analysis, identify individual strengths and challenges, and develop individualized environmental accommodations to promote independence within the workplace. However, OT's role in working with young adults with ASD on employment remains relatively limited. Through this presentation, I aim to engage OT's as **new stakeholders in Employment First** as well as to promote awareness and understanding of the scope of OT to current community partners.

Word Count: 514

Course Objectives:

1. Participants will learn about the development of a training program for community partners who provide employment opportunities for neurodiverse high school students at The Joshua School.
2. Participants will gain knowledge on how to implement individualized supports and accommodations for neurodiverse individuals within the workplace.
3. Participants will gain insight on Occupational Therapy's role in addressing employment outcomes for individuals with neurodiversities.