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## EYD NEWSLETTER FALL 2021 EDITION

### In this Newsletter:

[Project Update](#) | [Interview with EYD Advisory Board Member- Dr. Catherine Ipsen](#) | [Business Survival through Pandemic](#) | [Introducing new team members Joanna, Sarah, Madeline, Mihir, Brittani](#) | [Subscription Details](#)

### Project Update: Promoting Entrepreneurship Among Youth with Disabilities

Our project is entering into the second year of the formative phase of the program. This new school year has brought in new partnerships with several local high schools and organizations. We are currently engaged in the recruitment of students and will start the classes very soon.

We are also welcoming Dr. Joanna Keel as the new project coordinator in our EYD project. Joanna has a Ph.D. in Education from UIC and extensive experience as Project Coordinator in several research projects, including our transition project with the IL Division of Rehabilitation Services and the UIC College of Education's Project SET: Seamless Effective Transition, a personnel preparation program that trained transition specialists. She has been an Adjunct Assistant Professor in UIC's Department of Special Education and Elmhurst University's College of Education teaching graduate coursework in inclusive education, professional collaboration in education, and secondary transition. We are very glad she is able to join our team! We are also sad to see Sumithra Murthy, our current project

coordinator leave our project. She is finalizing her dissertation and was invited to coordinate another project that is closely related to her dissertation work. We wish her well on her future endeavors.



## **Interview with EYD Advisory Board Member- Dr. Catherine Ipsen**

Dr. Catherine Ipsen is the Director of the Research and Training Center on Disability in Rural Communities (RTC: Rural) at the University of Montana Rural Institute. Over her career, Catherine has conducted multiple research projects related to rural VR service delivery, with the goal of maximizing opportunity for rural people with disabilities. Her research and product development focused on self-employment represents this goal. She can be reached at [catherine.ipsen@umontana.edu](mailto:catherine.ipsen@umontana.edu)



### **1. When did you become interested in promoting entrepreneurship for people with disabilities, and why do you think you have sustained your commitment in the field?**

I became interested in self-employment during my early work with the Research and Training Center on Disability in Rural Communities (RTC:Rural). My mentor, Dr. Nancy Arnold, recognized the disparity between self-employment rates among people with disabilities in the general population and those receiving Vocational Rehabilitation (VR) services. Because self-employment is

an important option for individuals who reside in small or limited economies, Nancy and others recognized that it was important for VR to build capacity in this area. I have been fortunate to build on this research foundation and have learned a great deal in the process. Training and resources to support self-employment of individuals with disabilities have decreased in recent years, and initiatives such as The Abilities Fund and Business Assessment Scale are no longer supported. The time is ripe for rebuilding this capacity using improved tools, including online resources.

### **2. What do you think are the most important skills for rural entrepreneurs to have when starting a business?**

Entrepreneurs need to have a deep passion for the business, strong people skills, and an understanding of business operations beyond the product or service they provide. While skills such as accounting and bookkeeping can be purchased, day-to-day business operations fall to the business owner. This includes developing strong positive relationships with customers, suppliers, and workers; tracking inventory and receipts; and advertising to develop a customer base. Maintaining strong relationships is particularly important in rural communities, where community members know one another, and word of mouth takes precedence.

### **3. In what ways have business owners been creative in promoting and sustaining their businesses during Covid-19?**

Covid-19 has impacted how businesses operate. Ability to transition services to a remote format has been instrumental. This includes reconfiguring how you advertise, make sales, and engage with customers. Some businesses have been successful in using creative ways to transition in terms of no-contact deliveries, online payment systems, web-based store fronts, online classes, and remote service delivery.

**4. What supports do you think are most important for new business owners to be successful?**

New business owners have a steep learning curve, and it is easy to forget or overlook things that should be considered. To minimize issues, business owners should have a well-developed business plan that continues to be used as a working document. Business plans are a road map for business start-up and growth. They lay out expectations and provide benchmarks for measuring business success. When differences between expectations and reality emerge, these signal the need for adjustments, such as cutting costs, increased advertising, improved relationships, or other modifications to the business. It is important to have supports to develop a comprehensive business plan and assist with follow-along as the business gets started. As part of my RTC: Rural work focused on self-employment, we have developed resources to assist consumers explore self-employment and develop a comprehensive business plan. We welcome readers to check out the VR Self-Employment Guide ([www.vrselfemploymentguide.org](http://www.vrselfemploymentguide.org)) to learn more.

Another strategy to support business start-ups and follow-along is identifying someone who operates a similar or complementary business who can provide mentorship. Mentors have gone through the business start-up phase and know the ins and outs of running a business, such as evaluating financials, filing taxes, assessing growth, and developing a customer base. Setting up periodic meetings with these experts, and coming prepared with questions and potential strategies, can go a long way towards stability. Small Business Development Centers (SBDCs) also offer services to assist with business start-up and are located throughout the U.S.

**5. What have you learned about yourself and your work during this 18-month (and counting!) pandemic?**

For better or worse, the pandemic has allowed some people to re-evaluate employment goals and pursue new opportunities. For instance, some people have exited the service industry to explore entrepreneurial activities such as teaching music lessons, writing fiction and poetry, or sewing masks. For me, work in self-employment is more important than ever. It has always been an important alternative to address limited economic opportunities, and the pandemic has contributed to this.

**Business Survival through the Pandemic**

As the pandemic continues, small businesses are transitioning to new methods to attract new customers. Social media platforms allow for more engagement and interaction with new customers. Linking and connecting with customers whether new or existing, generates more personal contacts with the brand. Hosting virtual events also brings insight and visibility to the brand, including opportunities to offer incentives to draw new customers in. Many businesses are also adopting add-ons to entice customers with new offerings supporting their brand.

Effective communication with regular updates to staff, customers, and vendors, is important to reassure them that the business is still running effectively. Taking the time to build confidence back in the business is necessary and this includes transparency in communication about the status of the brand.

Some business trends have emerged through the pandemic. Cashless and contactless commerce reinforce the ways of social distancing. Delivery options are becoming a common alternate option. Pronouncements about sanitation also appeals to customers' sense of safety.

## Introducing our new teammates

### Sarah Deangelo

Sarah Deangelo is currently pursuing her Ph.D. in Special Education at the University of Illinois at Chicago. Sarah's research interests focus on developing effective interventions for students with the most significant disabilities, inclusive post-secondary programming for students with significant or multiple disabilities, and transition programming for students with intellectual disabilities and challenging behavior.

Sarah received her bachelor's degree in Early Childhood Education from Iowa State University, with an endorsement in Early Childhood Special Education. She received a Master of Arts in Teaching in Special Education from Morningside College with a focus on students with significant intellectual disabilities.



### Madeline Demo

Madeline Demo's personal and professional endeavors surround the health and safety of people, process, product, profit, and planet. She currently serves as a Safety/Continuous Improvement Coordinator at Carlisle Construction Materials, Associate Board member at Delta Institute, and MBA/MPH Candidate at UIC. Maddie is a Research

Assistant for the Disability and Rehabilitation Research Project in the UIC Department of Disability and Human Development.



### Mihir Kurdukar

Mihir Kurdukar is a graduate student at the UIC College of Business Administration, pursuing Masters of Science in Management Information Systems. He holds a Bachelor of Engineering degree in Electronics and Telecommunications from India.

He is a graduate research assistant for the Disability and Rehabilitation Research Project in the UIC Department of Disability and Human Development.



## **Brittani Molina**

Brittani Molina is currently earning a Bachelors of Science in psychology at the University of Illinois at Chicago and will begin working towards a graduate degree next fall. She has worked with adolescents with disabilities for 5 years. Brittani is currently working as a Mental Health Associate and a Research Assistant for the Disability and Rehabilitation Research Project in the UIC Department of Disability and Human Development.



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**1640 Roosevelt Rd #436, Chicago, IL 60608**

**PI: Dr. Fabricio E Balcazar**

**PC: Dr. Joanna Keel**

**[jross7@uic.edu](mailto:jross7@uic.edu)**

**<https://eyd.ahs.uic.edu/>**