

## Proposal Summary

### Covid-19 Response Phase III Grant

#### Project Name: Expanded Mental Health Services for People with Disabilities

##### **Lead Applicant:**

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**Activity Eligible as:** Public Service  
24 CFR 570.201(e)

**National Objective:** Limited Clientele Activity (benefitting severely disabled adults)  
24 CFR 570.208(a)(2)

**Grant Amount Requested:** \$250,000.00

## ***Expanded Mental Health Services for People with Disabilities***

The Arc of Indiana Foundation was established in 2013 to create meaningful employment opportunities for people with disabilities. In 2016 the foundation opened Erskine Green Training Institute (EGTI), a postsecondary employment training program, housed in the Courtyard by Marriott Hotel Muncie at Horizon Convention Center, specifically tailored to train people with disabilities in the hospitality, food service and healthcare industries.

The unemployment rate for people with disabilities is 83%. Of the 17% who are employed, one-third are employed part time and only 4% live above the poverty level. Unemployment and underemployment impact every aspect of life, from adequate housing, to the ability to move on from government assistance to physical and mental health.

A critical component to achieving a better life for people with disabilities is employment and the benefits it brings beyond a paycheck. Employment provides people with a purpose and meaning to life. It boosts self-esteem, increases confidence and connects people with coworkers that can lead to friendships while learning and acquiring new skills.

This is especially important for people with disabilities who experience mental distress five times as often as people without disabilities. Having a job gives people with disabilities a reason to get up every morning. Employment helps them fight isolation, anxiety and depression, leading to overall improvements in both their physical and mental health.

People with disabilities are the largest minority group and the least likely to be employed. This is a population that wants to work-- to grow and spend their disposable income while at the same time supporting their communities by contributing to the tax base. More importantly, they want to move beyond relying on government assistance to become independent, contributing members of society.

EGTI offers a unique and innovative profession/career development program to people with disabilities. The students served meet the definition of severely disabled adults as defined by the Bureau of Census Current Population Report. They reside at the Courtyard Muncie for 10 – 13 weeks while they complete an intensive training program in their chosen area. The final four weeks are spent completing a full time internship. Upon graduation, students have mastered key job skills, earned industry recognized certifications and are ready to go to work.

Although “people with disabilities” sometimes refers to a single population, it is a diverse group with a wide range of needs. Two people with the same type of disability can be affected in very different ways. Some disabilities may be hidden or not easy to see. For this reason, EGTI provides more than just job training. EGTI staff works closely with students to address each

student's unique needs, including increasing independent living and social skills as well as establishing healthy mental health habits.

Health and wellness are incorporated into every aspect of EGTI's program. Students are introduced to and encouraged to adapt a healthy physical lifestyle and with the onset of the pandemic we have expanded our focus on mental health wellness with both our current students and alumni. Time is spent on a variety of topics including healthy eating, portion control, personal hygiene, exercise, appropriate social skills, time management, medicine management, and accountability. Students also receive assistance with developing coping mechanisms and self-control in a variety of employment and community settings.

In addition to working with EGTI staff, students spend time with Ball State University students who serve as mentors. The majority of the BSU students are special education majors. This partnership provides a tremendous benefit to EGTI students, while also providing valuable training opportunities outside of the classroom for the BSU students.

EGTI has also made a positive economic impact on the broader community. In the first four years of operation, through the program's connection with the Courtyard by Marriott Muncie, \$5.5 million has been generated in property, sales, innkeepers and payroll taxes. In addition, every graduate who goes to work saves the state a minimum of \$8,000 per year in public assistance. EGTI has saved taxpayers in Indiana over \$1 million and the number continues to rise.

Before the pandemic, 2020 enrollment was on track to break a record. More importantly, EGTI graduates were enjoying an 83% employment rate. In March 2020, everything changed. Session one, which began in January, was completed virtually. Session two, scheduled to begin in April 2020, was cancelled, and EGTI staff learned that 68% of EGTI's graduates had been furloughed or let go from the jobs they trained for and were hired to do pre-pandemic.

Along with the general population, EGTI graduates have faced isolation, disrupted routines, and diminished health services that have greatly impact their mental health. The EGTI team quickly jumped into action to address the anxiety, isolation and depression facing EGTI alumni.

Several virtual sessions addressing employment topics are being held each week (described below) to prevent alumni from being isolated and offer them a supportive environment that addresses their mental health needs. This mental health-focused programming with our graduates is a service we did not provide prior to the pandemic. The virtual programs have had a positive impact. By November 2020, the employment rate for EGTI grads was back to 78%.

The EGTI team have worked hard to be innovative and nimble throughout the pandemic. However, without support the program *is* in jeopardy due to COVID-19 and the exceptionally hard impact it has had on the hospitality and food service industries. Funding from this

proposal will ensure that EGTI can continue to provide critical outreach to graduates as well as continue its unique and tested training programs to new students.

### **COVID Impact on The Arc of Indiana Foundation**

Prior to the COVID pandemic, EGTI had seen tremendous success. In the first four years of operation, 173 students graduated and 83% were employed. Most were earning a living wage with benefits. Research shows that when a person with a disability maintains successful employment for two years, their employment trajectory is the same as for folks without disabilities. EGTI grads were hitting and surpassing that critical two-year anniversary mark.

The Arc of Indiana Foundation began 2020 on a solid financial footing and on track to hit budget with student enrollment numbers. In March everything changed. On March 18, 2020 they made the difficult decision to send session one students home two and a half weeks early and session two was canceled.

At the end of February, EGTI graduates were enjoying an 83% job placement rate. By mid-April, 68% had lost their jobs. EGTI's focus began to shift from employment to mental health. Emerging research shows that the coronavirus pandemic has increased mental health issues in all populations. However, there are unique stressors and challenges that can exacerbate mental health problems experienced by people with disabilities.

People with disabilities report higher levels of social isolation than their nondisabled counterparts. They often experience intensified feelings of loneliness, anxiety and depression in response to physical distancing measures. Social isolation and loneliness have been associated with increases in heart disease, dementia and other health problems according to the National Academies of Science, Engineering, and Medicine.

In addition, policies around rationing of medical care can intensify discriminatory attitudes towards people with disabilities. This can worsen their anxiety about getting sick and needing to seek medical care.

In lieu of session two which was scheduled to begin in April 2020, EGTI increased alumni activities and began expanding mental health services. Multiple weekly zoom meetings were held in addition to individual virtual meetings. Some were focused on employment issues like dusting off your resume, interview practice and how to file for unemployment. Others focused on keeping everyone active with weekly Zumba, yoga and cross fit classes. To maintain social skills and fight anxiety and depression, we held "happy hours" to discuss feelings and develop mental health plans. Over 70% of our alumni engaged.

Following strict reopening guidelines, EGTI welcomed students back on July 5. The lab and classroom space have been reconfigured, touchless hand sanitizers have been installed and the schedule reworked to ensure social distancing.

COVID has impacted EGTI financially in two ways. There are additional operating expenses due to purchasing personal protective equipment and needing to eliminate roommates giving each student a single room to ensure social distancing. While this move was necessary, students are more isolated.

The second impact has been on enrollment. Half of the students who were enrolled for 2020 deferred their employment until the second half of 2021 or 2022. Additionally, without the opportunity to bring potential students to EGTI, they have seen a decrease in applications from twelve to twenty per session to four to ten per session during the pandemic. The result is a decrease in revenue over 12 months of approx. \$400,000. This at a time when there is an increased demand from our clients for mental health services.

While the financial impact has been significant, the emotional and mental toll COVID has taken on our students and graduates is far greater. EGTI's clients are dealing with the fear of the pandemic, the feelings of anxiety over losing their jobs and depression from being so isolated.

It will take time to recover from the pandemic. In 2021, EGTI will be building on current mental health programs and expanding services for people with disabilities.

### **Grant Amount Requested**

The ETGI annual budget is \$1,014,479.

The grant request is \$250,000

The grant will cover partial staff costs and rent for the EGTI Program for a twelve-month period.