

# Looking to Ontario:

## Reena Fills HR Gap with Specialized Curriculum



Reena will enable people with developmental disabilities to realize their full potential by forming lifelong partnerships with individuals and their families within a framework of Jewish culture and values.

### Overview and context

Reena is a non-profit organization based in York Region and Toronto, Ontario, with a primary function of providing community-based supports to persons with a developmental disability. In Canada, these individuals belong in the mainstream of society, and many people with developmental disabilities now live in the community. An important move toward integration in Ontario happened in 2009 with the closing of all institutions that had been specifically designed for individuals with developmental disabilities but that had resulted in segregating them from others. Advocacy efforts across the country are working toward equal rights and access to services for these individuals, including inclusive education efforts and employment opportunities and ensuring that all people can participate fully in the community.

In 1973, when Reena was founded, there were no Jewish community-based organizations offering residential supports to persons with a developmental disability in Toronto. To fill this void, Jewish families who wanted to ensure that their family members would have a place to live within the community where they could practice and adhere to the values of their faith came together. Through the hard work and perseverance of the founding families, Reena's president and chief executive officer Sandy Keshen, and the late Rabbi Joseph Kelman, Reena was born. Reena's Mission statement is a perfect example of the value placed on partnerships:

Reena will enable people with developmental disabilities to realize their full potential by forming lifelong partnerships with individuals and their families within a framework of Jewish culture and values.

Reena provides services to people of all faith and cultural backgrounds and has done so since the beginning. It is currently supporting over 300 individuals within its system, and over 1000 individuals access its services through respite, outreach, and other programs. With over 30 residential settings and approximately 60 persons residing in its Supported Independent Living (S.I.L.) system, it became clear that Reena would need to focus on developing a plan to ensure consistent supports. Reena was growing at a rapid pace, and its primary goal was and continues to be quality service delivery. This begins with a professional workforce and committed, dedicated employees who recognize the value in their role. A committed workforce means greater retention, resulting in less disruption to the lives of people with developmental disabilities.

Reena has become well known for its training, its dedicated Learning and Development Department, and a portfolio of over 30 trainings and workshops. It trains not only its own employees but also those of many other agencies and has been called upon by other community agencies to take the lead in sector-wide initiatives. For example, in the 2003 Non-Violent Crisis Intervention Crisis Prevention project, Reena took on the administration and coordination of training for almost 2500 developmental services employees from every residential service transfer payment agency in Toronto. Over 201 days, 114 courses were held at 16 different venues and 53 new trainers were trained for the sector. Karen Meehan, Ontario's Community Programs Manager Ministry of Community and Social Services (MCSS), noted that the success of this program was due to effective communication and coordination and would not have been possible without the expertise of Reena's Learning and Development Department. Reena's website ([www.reena.org](http://www.reena.org)) outlines its training partnerships and course offerings.

This case study describes Reena's Developmental Disabilities Counsellor Program – a Reena and George Brown College partnership aimed at recruitment to and retention in our sector. The program grew out of a specific need. The case study will be of interest to other organizations wishing to develop

specialized training programs that will attract and help to retain a workforce that has the specific skills to meet the needs of the people it serves.

## The story

Reena, and other agencies that had begun in the early 1970s, were established at a time when the developmental services sector was a relatively new entrant into providing community-based supports. The move toward deinstitutionalization was just beginning. Development services agencies were small and were linked to and supported by their communities. Some community colleges offered Developmental Service Worker (DSW) programs that did placements with agencies and provided them with employees. But as agencies grew, the community colleges did not keep pace, especially in urban areas where growth was more rapid and agency staffing needs were greater. This was compounded by the fact that the legislation in Ontario does not indicate a particular credential for those working in the field. This meant that agencies hired generalists and had to provide them with an intense training program. This was and is very costly and, for many agencies, not practical. There was also a need for retraining over time.

Early in 2000, Reena began to investigate a problem that all agencies were noticing – the chronic shortage of qualified workers in the developmental services sector. Community colleges offering the DSW diploma were unable to meet the demands of the sector because of low enrolment in DSW programs. At the time, it was estimated that there were approximately 250 DSW graduates in all of Ontario. This clearly would not meet the needs of all of the developmental services agencies in Ontario. Replacement agency staff had backgrounds in Personal Support Worker (PSW) programs; however, this training was not sufficient for the developmental services sector as it was not specialized and did not meet the needs of the people that the sector supports.

It was as a result of the shortage of skilled workers and of training and retraining programs that Reena's Learning and Development Department

became home to the Developmental Disabilities Counsellor Program (DDC), a Reena and George Brown College partnership. The DDC partnership includes two other developmental service providers, Kerry's Place Autism Services and Montage Support Services Toronto.

Like the Ontario Human Resources Strategy, which aims to develop a professional workforce through building competencies, recruitment, and retention, the DDC would focus on developing a well-trained, professional workforce so that a job in the developmental services sector would become a career.

With the support of Reena's board of directors, a sub-committee was convened which included members from Reena's Learning and Development Department, educators from Ontario colleges, special needs educators, district school boards, family members of persons with developmental disabilities, and a Ministry of Education representative. The goal of the committee was to develop a new strategy to create qualified frontline workers for this field by educating and retaining motivated personnel. Ultimately, this would have a positive impact on the quality of life for people with developmental disabilities by enhancing personal outcomes through decreased turnover and improved, consistent care.

The sub-committee began its work by looking at best practices and soon discovered that there was no other program at any agency-based level in Ontario like the one it envisioned. Significant research went into the design and development of the program. Training modules were developed from the existing 26 courses that Reena offered at the time. In planning the practicum components of the program, the committee decided that it was important to include an evaluative-measurable process. At the time of planning, Reena's Learning and Development Department had over 15 years of experience in course development and delivery, with training offered both internally to Reena's staff and externally to other organizations. Additionally, Reena was experienced in customizing training for other agencies. It had a strong team of in-house instructors who could be relied upon during the delivery phase of this program. Reena uses a

"train-the-trainer" model, which is a mentoring approach to training new instructors.

The resulting Developmental Disabilities Counsellor Certificate Program is a four-month job-training program with full-time study in 26 topic areas covering six modules: Introduction to Developmental Sector, Field Placement, Life Planning, Intervention Strategies, Occupational Health and Safety, and Pharmacology and Medical Supports. There is a placement component that consists of 72-hours of practicum placement in which students are placed in organizations within the partnership and rotate between three different support models in order to gain insight into various levels of support. DDC Students are also required to complete 192 hours of block placement in one set location, during which they integrate into a team setting. The DDC program placement experience allows for a total of 264 hours of hands-on, practical experience in the sector. A rigorous evaluation process is administered in the academic and placement portion of the program. Students enrolled in the program are guaranteed a job interview upon successful completion of all three areas: academics, practicum, and block placement. They are also evaluated on professional conduct. The expectations for this are embedded in the student contract. During both the academic and placement stages, students receive intensive training, hands-on experience, and thorough instructive supervision.

In consultation with the sub-committee, Reena launched the first offering of this program in 2003. It was initially named "Learn and Earn," allowing students to earn money while they were in the program, and was piloted for the first year solely by Reena. Because of its success and thanks to a recommendation by the Ministry representative who sat on the planning committee, Reena began to partner with George Brown College in 2004. The program's name was changed to the Developmental Disabilities Counsellor (DDC) Certificate Program. In 2006, Reena began partnering with other developmental service agencies.

The quality of the DDC program has improved over time through partnerships and collaborative approaches and with the help of on-going student feedback captured through course-by-course

evaluations. As well, at the conclusion of each program, students participate in a George Brown College focus group. In 2009, the decision was made to change the “Learn and Earn” component of the program from a paid placement to an unpaid block placement. Having students make this investment in their education and training has brought about greater commitment and success toward their future careers in the sector. Screening is also much more intensive, as Reena uses the Behaviour Based Interviewing Techniques that are recommended for the developmental disabilities sector through the HR Strategies, Core Competencies initiative.

## Lessons learned and insights

Several factors have contributed to the program’s success.

First, all partners are completely committed to the goals and process. This included a commitment of time, and investment in the students, and the appointment of agency leads who participate in planning and outcomes for students. For example, the preceptors from each organization receive intensive training by Reena to ensure that all students are supported in their learning and training, and the highly qualified instructors are all approved by George Brown College. As well, three Reena Learning and Development Supervisors provide the continuity for students: they audit and monitor students from the intake through to the final interview process, manage all aspects of each student’s success, and are the link between partners ensuring on-going and open communication. The DDC program has been a true collaborative.

Second, Reena’s commitment to the DDC program is based on a commitment to the people it supports. The end goal for this partnership is to ensure quality services by providing quality training to new sector employees. The DDC program structure and partnership with George Brown College and the relationship with Georgia Quartaro, Vice President of Academics, is built on mutual respect and a mutually shared vision for people with developmental disabilities. The college has been instrumental in guiding the initiative by approving

the curriculum and adding extra value to the program, thereby helping to place the program on the map as quality training and an educational option that is committed to high standards.

Third, Reena has shared many wonderful DDC partnerships with other community agencies in the sector. Each of these relationships has helped us to evolve. Partnerships build capacity for the sector. They also come with challenges because each organization is unique with its own identity. Mutual respect and a high level of communication are key components in a true and sustainable partnership. Reena has been successful in this partnership and greatly values the commitment of Kerry’s Place Autism Services – Regional Director Joe Persaud and his staff team – and Montage Support Services – Director of Services Susan McCart and her team.

## Impacts

**The DDC program is intensive and affordable.** Applicants are carefully screened and oriented. Placements are arranged, adding value and commitment and enhancing each student’s experience. Arranged placements allow for a better-fit and greater ability to monitor student success. Partners’ values are taught and the program itself is treated like a “four-month job interview” in which partners are potential employers. As each student is a potential employee, students are selected through an intensive process and go through several screenings before a decision is made to offer a space in the program.

**The DDC program is based on a three-pronged approach to success:** academic, practicum placement, and block placement. DDC students will not move on in the program unless they are successful in each area, in the order noted. Progress is evaluated weekly by supervisors and preceptors. As well, there is a variety of testing components during the academic portion of the program. The DDC program offers opportunities to those who wish to make a career choice, want to re-enter the workforce, are changing careers, or are newcomers to the field.

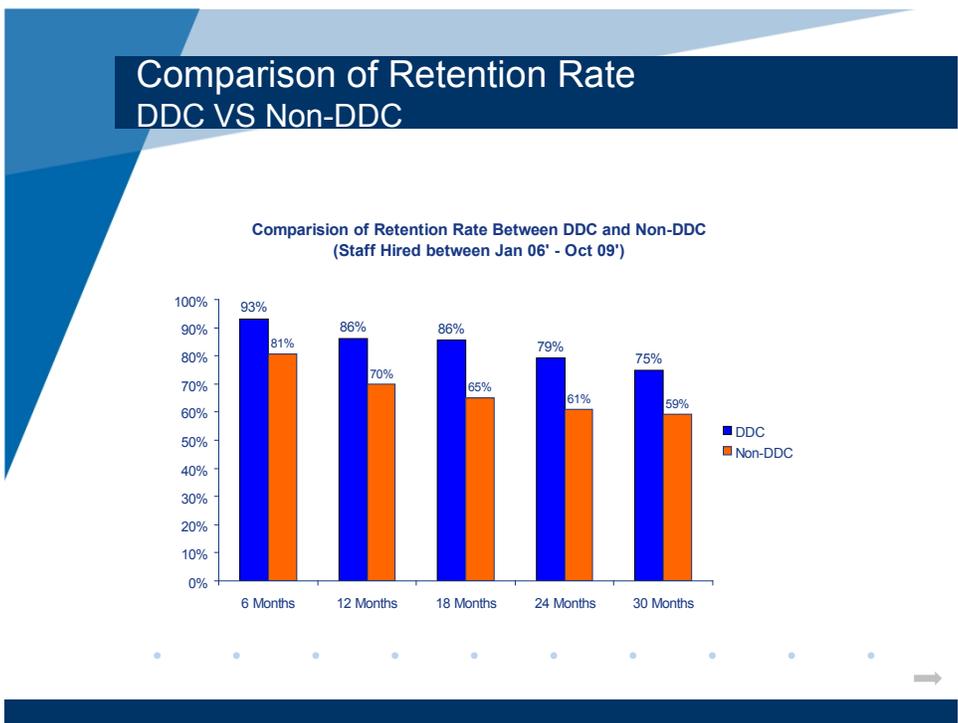
**The DDC program has boosted the number of trained employees in the developmental services sector.** The program has a 90% employment success rate. Successful graduates are interviewed for part-time positions. They enter the sector well trained and with Ministry-required training and certification. Students come out of the program with experience, a commitment to Person-Centred Planning, strong teamwork orientation, and with enthusiasm and energy to begin their careers in the field. To date we have graduated 249 students from the DDC Program, which translates into 249 trained and committed staff to our sector. Several graduates are now in supervisory and other senior positions with one of the three partners.

The DDC program has increased employee retention. We studied rates of retention among DDC certificate holders and those without DDC certificates. The statistics clearly identify that over time there is greater retention among DDC certificate holders; in other words, employees who are well trained and who understand the value of their role and position are more likely to stay in the field.

Reena has been successful in creating sustainable partnerships because of the committed leadership of its President and Chief Executive Officer Sandy Keshen, a visionary and strategic thinker. Sandy is the heart of our agency, a leader with one goal in mind ~ to provide the very best supports for people with developmental disabilities. As well, Executive Director Sandy Stemp is a critical thinker, driven by passion and committed to sustaining the same high quality service delivery as her mentor Sandy Keshen.

## About the author

Stacey Donaghy is the Manager of Reena's Learning & Development Department. She has been with Reena for close to 21 years and wonders if telling you this ages her. Stacey's background and education include Social Services-Gerontology, Palliative Care and Adult Education, as well as many courses and training programs related to the Developmental Services Sector. She believes in the on-going pursuit of learning and developing competencies. In her spare time, she is a fiction writer and Literary Intern.



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