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MARLBOROUGH —

A local company is one of five Massachusetts agencies receiving major federal funding to help improve employment opportunities for people with disabilities.

Employment Options Inc., of Brigham Street, could receive up to \$500,000 from the federal Centers for Medicare and Medicaid Services. The Marlborough agency, which focuses on providing services for people with psychiatric disabilities, receives \$100,000 in start-up funding.

Purposes of the grant include looking at ways to streamline services for people with a cross section of disabilities and how best to match prospective employees with communities' business needs, said Toni Wolf, executive director of Employment Options.

"The intent is to increase employment for people with disabilities," Wolf said.

The five agencies, selected from 24 applicants, are each in a different region of the state. The grant supports the development of five regional employment collaborative under the new initiative "Work Without Limits." The Metro Southwest collaborative represented by Employment Options covers communities including Framingham, Natick, Hopkinton, Marlborough and Southborough.

The grant is managed through a partnership with the state Executive Office of Health and Human Services, UMass Medical School and UMass-Boston.

A year-long strategic planning process investigated how to improve employment opportunities for people with disabilities, said Dr. Jay Himmelstein, a UMass Medical School professor.

"We found that although there are a lot of services in Massachusetts, they are not as coordinated as they could be," said Himmelstein, the principal investigator of the grant.

One issue arises in the sheer volume of organizations, including employment service providers, employers, educational institutions, transportation companies and state agencies. Himmelstein said there's room for improvement in the way the groups work together.

Himmelstein wants to see more people with disabilities in jobs - and jobs that pay well.

"By better collaboration and coordination of services, these outcomes would be improved," he said.

The first six months will feature a lot of data gathering, Wolf said. Her group will need to figure out the needs of businesses - specifically emerging occupations such as environmental industry jobs. The group will also have to look at some of the skill sets employees would need to acquire.

"We're very happy (Employment Options) is going to be part of this,"

Himmelstein said. "We're very excited about working with them to help make this a successful model for the state and the country."

The other agencies are Berkshire County Arc of Pittsfield, Jewish Vocational Service of Boston, Riverside Community Care of Dedham and PRIDE Inc. of Taunton. After the start-up funding, an additional \$200,000 is available to the agencies for each of the next two years, contingent upon performance and availability of money.

"Every one of these agencies has proposed innovative and effective approaches to improving the employment rate of individuals with disabilities through a collaborative service delivery and business engagement model," said Jean McGuire of the state Executive Office of Health and Human Services in a press release.

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