

# With Southwest's Support, a Chamber of Commerce Helps People with Disabilities Reach Their Dreams

This blog was originally authored by Rogue Gallart, president of the Central Florida Disability Chamber, who unexpectedly passed away prior to its publishing. The legacy he created will continue with the CFDC and the community and he will be remembered as an exceptional diversity/disability champion. Rogue will be missed as a great leader and friend.

In 2009, local business leaders and I set out to do something revolutionary: to start a Chamber of Commerce that specifically addresses the needs of people with disabilities in the Orlando, Florida area. We noticed a gap between businesses and disabled business owners and want to change that. We focused on increasing connectivity and driving economic growth by helping our business partners increase their inclusion of People with disabilities in Central Florida.



Ten years later, we are now called the Central Florida Disability Chamber of Commerce ([CFDC](#)) and our mission is to provide information and education on business creation and growth to

businesses with operations in the Central Florida area. We partner with hundreds of companies, including Southwest Airlines, to support entrepreneurs through all stages of business development. This includes networking, identifying potential business concepts and opportunities, and determining potential funding sources for business educational events and seminars. The CFDC also works to advance economic opportunities for entrepreneurs with disabilities; including service-disabled veteran-owned businesses. It's all a part of our goal to increase the inclusion of all people in our society.



Joining Forces for our Veterans

One of the programs that the CFDC is most proud of is our Veterans Business Initiative. Every year we invite 100 military veterans, spouses and family members to attend a 10-week rigorous career training program. During the program, we mentor veterans to help them find that perfect job that aligns with their career goals and career strengths. We review their resume, provide training for job market literacy, and prep them to enter the workforce. We also help disabled veterans and those with PTSD navigate through the job application process and prepare for upcoming Employment opportunities and entrepreneurial pathways.

To date, nearly 750 veterans have completed the program and over half have been hired directly from the companies brought in during the sessions looking to hire new talent. Our Veterans Business Initiative is not a job fair, companies are interviewing and actually making hiring decisions on the spot. Companies realize that veterans offer value to their organizations by bringing unique skills and a work ethic second to none.

For our most recent career training class this year, Southwest provided complimentary round-trip airfare as a ‘thank you’ to each graduate of the program. Plus, Southwest Recruiters are present at the kick-off of the event and ready to help along the way. Southwest’s generosity as a company is inspiring to not only CFDC but to our participants as well.

“We recruit at the Veterans Business Initiative because we at Southwest Airlines cross all types of diversity. We stay connected and guide program participants on how they can fit into roles at Southwest. Our business is ever-changing; as it grows and expands we need to add to our diversity, and these hard-working veterans have a lot to offer, and we can help support them,” said Darnett Carey, Team Leader on Southwest Airlines’ Orlando Employment Team.



Bringing Lessons Learned to Southwest

In Spring 2020, the CFDC will launch its Disability Inclusion Education Program which will create a safe and open space where business professionals can have an open dialog about dispelling assumptions and biases toward people with disabilities to create an inclusive work environment.

Southwest is a People-first Company and is regarded as “a Company with a Heart,” so the People Department (Human Resources) jumped at the opportunity to join this effort. Southwest will be our

first partner for this initiative. We will help Southwest share ideas, receive feedback, and develop training so that the Company's Leaders know the best practices for accommodating cognitive disabilities.

"Southwest Airlines strives to make a positive difference in the communities we serve and our partnership with the CFDC allows us to do just that," said Alison Hoefler, Regional Leader of Community Outreach, Southwest Airlines. "We are committed to helping this unique organization continue its mission of helping people and this new education program has the potential to have a big impact on our Company."

### Helping our Society

The work we do every day helps connect and supports individuals to be contributing members of our society. Support and partnership from Companies like Southwest that really value diversity and inclusion at the core have a huge impact in helping the Central Florida Disability Chamber of Commerce fulfill its mission today and into the future.