

# The Altitude Initiative 2021 Business Plan

For the Building Innovative Service Models Grant [BISM]



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Submitted in collaboration with  
[NEXUS4change](#)

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## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The Altitude Initiative ['Alti'] exists to help individuals with disabilities experience self-directed lives through meaningful and inclusive employment, the development of skills and interests, as well as the creation of strong connections within their communities. Our individualized community-based approach includes the use of customized and supported employment best practices, person-centered planning, evidence-based skill development methods, and a focus on community membership through networking and social capital development. Alti is a smaller provider, serving less than 70 people currently, most of whom only receive 4-15 hours per week in support from the organization.

Alti serves people who receive any of the DD waivers available in Ohio, but we have created a service that is particularly attractive to people who receive the Level 1 waiver, who are more independent and desire services that are limited to one or two short visits a week, and that are focused on community access. We provide three primary services:

- Homemaker/ personal care (with the emphasis on community inclusion through recreation, socialization, and volunteering);
- Employment supports (strictly community based and individualized career exploration/ Discovery, job-development, and job-coaching/ follow along); and
- Non-medical transportation (NMT) for community-based employment. Alti's NMT service is focused on dedicated, individualized transportation to and from work that typically requires 1:1 (one driver - one client) trips. The funding realities to make this sustainable are challenging. Alti had to previously end NMT services due to lack of sufficient funding, making this service offering unsustainable.

Our NMT service is the main focus of this updated Business Plan – an effort that began with extensive research and assessment, the essence of which can be viewed in the report at [this link](#).

The Altitude Initiative's revenue target for 2021 is \$548,946.

## **Introduction**

This document is submitted as part of the 'Building Innovative Service Models' grant being implemented at The Altitude Initiative with a focus on building sustainable individual-focused non-medical transportation services (NMT).

The following outlines a comprehensive business plan and includes the transformation strategies identified to promote competitive and integrated employment options for the individuals served by The Altitude Initiative (Alti).

### **1. Business Overview**

The Altitude Initiative ['Alti'] exists to help individuals with disabilities experience self-directed lives through meaningful and inclusive employment, the development of skills and interests, as well as the creation of strong connections within their communities. Our individualized community-based approach includes the use of customized and supported employment best practices, person-centered planning, evidence-based skill development methods, and a focus on community membership through networking and social capital development.

#### **1.1. History of The Altitude Initiative**

The Altitude Initiative was founded in 2013 by Julie McComas, M.Ed., MBA, with the purpose of making community life and work accessible to everyone. Julie has spent her career in service to people with disabilities. Her early work involved Direct Support (1990-1999) as well as working for and serving in leadership at the Bureau of Disability Determination and the Bureau of Vocational Rehabilitation (1999-2011). She provides consulting and training for disability-related organizations as a Senior Associate with Griffin Hammis Associates, focused on small business development, Customized Employment, and Direct Support system change efforts. Julie serves as owner and CEO of The Altitude Initiative, with 100% ownership.

From 2013-2017 The Altitude Initiative exclusively offered Supported Employment services. At that time, the term "Supported Employment" applied to a wide variety of

work-related supports. Our focus is on integrated community employment. We have never provided any support for segregated or group-based employment. We work with people who want to get jobs in community-based businesses, to be employed fully by the business, with the individualized support needed to be successful.

For our early employment effort, we set up to work in Franklin, Coshocton, and Tuscarawas counties. While initially successful from 2013-2015, we found that managing these sites and building the needed relationships in the local areas was beyond capacity, so we limited our work to Franklin County. The service categories for employment have since changed, moving from one overarching “supported employment” offering to several specific services. We provide Career Planning services as well as Individual Employment Support services (IES). Our Franklin County program continues to thrive, and we currently serve 30 people for a variety of employment supports, including long-term follow along under IES.

In 2017, with the support of a grant from the Ohio Department of Developmental Disabilities, we launched a Homemaker/ Personal Care (HPC) service, with a focus on helping people get into the community for recreation, socialization, inclusion, and contribution. This service line now includes service to 49 individuals under the Level 1

Waiver, the Individual Options Waiver, and the Self-Waiver. We also sought to build a community-based small group Adult Day Service. We found that group services did not allow us to provide the truly individualized support that we were committed to, so we discontinued that service.

We have recently launched a Non-Medical Transportation (NMT) service, in response to the needs of the people we serve who desire safe and reliable travel to and from their jobs with community-based businesses. We previously attempted this service in 2017-2018, but found that we did not have the capacity to make it successful according to the high standards we aimed for at that time. Since growing our staffing levels, financial positions, and strategies for providing services, we are now building capacity to offer this service with more success and sustainability. Since launching the NMT service in a limited capacity in January, we are now serving 20 people for NMT.

## 1.2. The Services

The Altitude Initiative provides individualized, community-inclusive support to people who have developmental disabilities. We are committed to helping people engage in daily life in ways that are important to them and for them, with an emphasis on employment in the community and the development of community membership and full inclusion.

We provide three primary services:

- Homemaker/ personal care (with the emphasis on community inclusion through recreation, socialization, and volunteering);
- Employment supports (strictly community based and individualized career exploration/ Discovery, job-development, and job-coaching/ follow along); and
- Non-medical transportation (for community-based employment).

**Homemaker/ Personal Care** services are focused on helping each person we support to become a valued member of the community. Active participation and welcomed access to all the activities, resources, and opportunities that citizens without disabilities are welcomed into, is what we help people gain. To achieve this goal, we help people with a wide variety of tasks and activities. We provide some support for people at home, if wanted and needed, such as preparing meals, helping with household cleaning and maintenance tasks, reading mail, accessing the internet, planning schedules, caring for personal hygiene needs, and anything else required/ desired for health and safety. We also ensure that people are engaging in community life by helping them find, attend, and get involved in activities in the community.

**Our employment program** provides Career Planning and Individual Employment Support services. We work one-on-one with people to learn more about themselves as workers, and to better understand the unlimited opportunities work provides. We help to find meaningful, sustainable work that is a good fit with their skills, interests, and abilities, while also benefiting the employer. We utilize evidence-based practices in customized and supported employment. We also provide individualized job coaching and goal-oriented follow-along support. We have been successful in this venture, in both job placement and job longevity for the people we support.

**Non-medical transportation (NMT)** has been added recently to competently provide safe, reliable, individualized transportation for people who work in jobs that are integrated in businesses in the greater community. We drive people to and from work, aiming to keep drive times and any wait times minimal.

### 1.3. Funding Structure

The primary funding for our services are Medicaid- Home and Community Based Service waiver funds, funneled through the Ohio Department of Developmental Disabilities. Each person we serve has an individualized budget for services based on what type of support/ how much support they want or need. This budget is determined through a multi-faceted person-centered plan. People are awarded a specific type of waiver that provides a budgeted amount of funding for each of the services they will receive. Budget totals are broken down into “units”, which are 15-minute increments. There are 4 units in an hour. Each service has a dollar amount per unit that is associated with it.

Providers of services, like The Altitude Initiative, do not get to determine the amount per unit that is paid for a service. These amounts are pre-determined for each service by the Ohio Department of Developmental Disabilities and their federal partners.

The established per-unit reimbursement rates are as follows:

<b>Service</b>	<b>Reimbursement Rate set by DODD</b>
Career Exploration	\$13.55/ 15-minute unit
Job Development	\$13.55/ 15-minute unit
Individ. Employment Support (job coaching)	\$10.96/ 15-minute unit
Non-medical Transportation	\$19.70/ per trip (regardless of miles)
HPC- I/O and Level 1 waivers	\$5.92/ 15-minute unit
HPC- Self waiver	\$6.04/ 15-minute unit
HPC transportation	\$0.58/ per mile

Our secondary source of funding is grant dollars. These funds are an inconsistent source, typically competitive and tied to a specific project. During the 2020-21 span, Alti received pandemic grant funding at the state and federal levels that provided a safety net for the challenges associated with staffing and service delivery related to the Covid-19 crisis.

## **1.4. Service Environment**

Alti operates within the developmental disability service system in Ohio. This system generally operates within the health care services industry, but is unique in its structure and service delivery. The Direct Support Professional (DSP) workforce is interdisciplinary, providing a wide variety of services and supports to people with intellectual and developmental disabilities. Some examples of the services provided include teaching people daily living skills, medication administration, providing health care and behavior supports, driving people to work/ appointments/ community places, companionship, modeling social skills, needs assessments, service documentation, supporting self-advocacy, assisting with meal planning and preparation, keeping their homes safe and clean ... the list of tasks and supports is specific to each person receiving services and seemingly endless. Essentially any support for daily living that someone wants or needs falls under the scope of the Direct Support Professional.

The U.S. Department of Labor has no specific occupational title designation of “Direct Support Professional,” but many advocacy groups are working to change this. The closest classification of DSP services falls under the NAICS code 624120 ‘Services for the Elderly and Persons with Disabilities’ - part of NAICS 624100 ‘Individual and Family Services,’ which is comprised of many other job titles that are all related to work that a DSP does. The industry is facing a severe shortage of workers. The pay is low, estimated to average around \$11.00 per hour, often with no benefits and limited opportunity for career advancement.

The industry requires that direct support organizations be “rate settlers” instead of rate setters, meaning that agencies that provide support do not have any say in the reimbursement funds they receive from the funders (Medicaid, State Departments of Developmental Disabilities). The rates are capped, and agencies such as Alti must find a way to support their work within these limitations.

## **1.5. Corporate Structure**

Alti is established as a C-Corp and identified as a non-profit within the state of Ohio. Alti does not have a 501c3 identification and therefore must formally operate as a for-profit organization. However, Alti’s objective is more in line with a non-profit status, redirecting all revenue into the ongoing provision of services. No dividends are paid to the owner or any stakeholders. Instead, wages are related to work performed for the agency.



## 1.6. Organization and Staffing

Alti is a small business, with a flat organizational structure, meaning there is not an extensive hierarchy, but instead a very cooperative “team” approach to the work. When Alti was first launched, there were 2 employees - the owner and one staff person who provided employment support, since employment support was the only service provided. As the organization has evolved, staffing levels have grown to both meet the demand for services, and to create capacity for further growth. Currently, there are 19 people on staff. The majority of employees are part-time employees, working less than 20 hours per week. There are 4 full-time employees, and 15 part-time employees.

Opportunities for advancement include becoming a mentor for new staff and becoming an employment specialist. A new opportunity to become a supervisor will be established during the current planning period.

Alti’s structure of providing individualized services to people means that staffing levels are directly tied to the number of people who receive services. Alti has to have staff ready and able to work to provide the services, but there also have to be enough people needing the services to justify hiring staff - this reality can be challenging to balance. Staff do not want to be hired before there are people to work with, yet an organization can not take new referrals if there are not enough staff to meet the needs.

The organizational structure is as follows:

- Owner/CEO - provides the majority of the administrative functions such as scheduling, HR, billing, payroll, hiring, planning, and crisis management. When staffing issues arise, she fills in for any priority DSP duties.
- Direct Support Team Lead - one full time, provides Direct Support to several people, mentors new staff, leads the EVV (Electronic Visit Verification) and handles errors and corrections, assists with billing, assists with complex Direct Support issues such as benefits, money management issues, housing issues and setting up appointments.
- Quality Assurance/ Administrative support - part-time, currently provides QA for documentation compliance.
- Employment Specialist - one full-time and two part-time positions currently. They provide comprehensive employment support.
- Dedicated NMT driver - two part-time positions currently.
- Direct Support Professional - 18 part-time and 2 full-time DSPs.

In order to meet the current demand for services Alti needs to add the following positions:

- 1 full-time supervisor,
- 2 part-time DSPs for evenings and weekends, and
- 1 full-time, 1-2 part-time drivers.

## **1.7. Employee Compensation**

Currently, newly hired DSPs receive a starting wage of \$13.00 per hour. Employees receive a raise to \$13.50 per hour after 90 days, and annual raises thereafter, typically \$ .50/hour. Bonuses are offered on occasion for excellent attendance, or for going above and beyond typical work – such as offering to fill in for absent staff.

Career ladder opportunities exist. Staff can become new staff mentors. Staff also have the opportunity to become job coaches, which has a higher pay rate. Job coaches start at \$15.00/her and receive raises at 90 days and annually thereafter.

Mileage is paid to staff at the rate of \$ .45 per mile. This includes mileage for driving people who receive services, which is often reimbursed as “HPC” miles or NMT miles, as well as mileage for driving in between more than one person receiving services in a day, the latter of which is not billable to DODD.

During the 2020-21 Covid pandemic, a rate add-on of an additional \$3.00 per hour was paid for 4 months (March – June). Bonuses were also given on occasion. Funding for the additional pay was made possible due to BWC rebates, a PPP grant, and DODD extra payments to providers.

## **1.8. Hiring, Training, and Retention**

There is a shortage of people entering the DSP workforce and a remarkably high annual turnover rate. Nationally, approximately 45% of DSPs leave their positions annually – and Ohio is no exception. The 2020-21 Covid pandemic added to the significant challenge with recruiting, hiring, and retaining dedicated and qualified DSP, as Alti had several staff leave the organization during the year. Alti aims to rebuild staffing levels to meet current demand and then slowly grow to serve more people in all three service areas (HPC, Employment, and NMT).

Alti reaches out to potential job candidates through job boards, such as indeed.com and the student job boards at The Ohio State University and Columbus State Community College. Alti also engages current staff to share information about job openings with their networks and advertises openings on social media.

Training covers all of the elements required by the Ohio Department of Developmental Disabilities, under the Ohio Revised Code. This includes CPR and First Aid, the initial “8 Hour course,” Money management training, and Medication Administration (if applicable to the work). Alti also offers on-the-job training through job-shadowing where new employees work alongside an experienced staff member to meet the people they will support, learning about what they want and need. For 2<sup>nd</sup> year employees, Alti staff receive the required 8-hour training in the topics specified by regulation. Alti staff also

take part in continuous education opportunities that become available, including accessing the DODD-funded Direct Course training catalog. Employment specialists are trained on all of the aforementioned elements, plus they receive specific training on supported employment each year, and Customized Employment/ Discovery.

Retention efforts focus on the implementation of best practices. These include:

- Paying the highest starting wage possible, aiming to pay a “living wage”, considering funding caps, and then offering raises and bonuses;
- Adhering to the National Alliance of Direct Support Professionals Code of Ethics;
- Access to accredited training;
- Career Ladder opportunities – such as becoming a mentor or job coach; and a
- Positive work environment, which includes open communication, constant availability of support for the DSP, and a culture that values the staff.

### **1.9. Stakeholder Engagement**

The primary way Alti engages our stakeholders is through informal, yet regular, meaningful communication. Alti considers the following groups to be key stakeholders:

- People who receive services and Alti staff;
- Families and caregivers of people who receive services;
- Service Coordinators with the Franklin County Board of Developmental Disabilities (FCBDD) and the County Board of DD at large;
- Employers in the community; and our
- Partner organizations that provide other services to the people we support.

People who receive services are frequently asked for their opinions about the support we provide and family members are asked for input about what they hope and envision for their loved one. If we are meeting expectations; Alti staff are encouraged to share problem-solving strategies, ask for assistance, and lend their front-line input on how services are provided. Service-Coordinators at the county level are kept in the loop on the work we are doing, including highlighting any issues that are going particularly well or areas where assistance is needed. Alti employment staff meet with employers to ensure they and the person we are assisting have the individualized support that is needed.

Since Alti has always been a community-based organization, without any building-based or segregated services, our stakeholders are already aware of our commitment to providing individualized, inclusive support to everyone we serve. As we add new services, we share that information conversationally with our stakeholders. For example, with the addition of NMT services, we have been talking about what this service looks like, and how it might benefit the people we serve- we share this information during ISP meetings and during check-in conversations with stakeholders. We also engaged in an Appreciative Benchmarking process with colleagues at other agencies to share insight into building the most robust services.

## **2. Markets and Competitors**

Alti is a smaller provider, serving less than 70 people currently, most of whom only receive 4-15 hours per week in support from the organization.

### **2.1. Our Customer**

Our primary customers are people who received Home and Community-based waivers who are referred through the Franklin County Board of Developmental Disabilities (FCBDD) under the Ohio Department of Developmental Disabilities (DODD). Specifically, we seek to serve people who utilize the Level 1, Individual Options, and SELF waivers. We emphasize community inclusive support, so our aim is to primarily serve people who desire to be in the community for recreation, socialization, volunteering, and employment. We serve individuals from transition-age teens all the way to senior citizen aged adults. We do not currently have staff expertise/ capacity to serve people who require behavior support plans or complex medical interventions.

Our secondary customers are community employers and organizational leaders who partner with us, Service Coordinators at FCBDD, and family members/ natural supports of the primary customers.

### **2.2. Market Segment**

Alti serves people who receive any of the DD waivers available in Ohio, but we have created a service that is particularly attractive to people who receive the Level 1 waiver, who are more independent and desire services that are limited to one or two short visits a week, and that are focused on community access.

Alti receives new referrals (aka customers) mainly through two main channels: (1) Word of mouth referrals from current customers/ family members and (2) Continuous engagement with service coordinators who refer new people to us because they have previously worked with us, are satisfied with our work, and think our style may be a good fit for someone. Alti's ability to accept new referrals is dependent on staffing capacity. We do not accept new referrals if we are not certain we can provide the staff to meet the person's goals, needs, number of hours allotted for support, desired days, and times.

The Covid pandemic added to the significant challenges in recruiting new staff, so Alti has been very selective and slow to accept new referrals, preferring to ensure quality services to current customers first. As the economy and community health and safety improves, Alti is beginning to have more success in recruiting staff and can consider adding more new customers.

### **2.3. Market Trends**

The demand for HCBS services continues to be steady. The waiver system is the primary way that people with developmental disabilities receive the services and support they need. There continues to be a crisis in staffing in Ohio and at the national level. There are many factors that contribute to this and include primarily: low wages for workers, challenging working conditions, lack of employer-paid benefits, inadequate training and supervision, and high accountability/ responsibility tasks that are not commensurate with wages and status.

### **2.4. Competition**

The DODD Provider Search portal shows that in Franklin County, 379 agencies report they provide HPC services, 235 that report they provide NMT, 29 that report they provide Career Planning, and 53 that report providing Individual Employment Supports. These numbers may not be completely accurate, as some agencies stop providing services but are not removed from the portal. Organizations that have adequate staffing levels are able to stay competitive. They can readily accept new referrals, which is how an HCBS organization stays in business.

Larger organizations that serve hundreds of customers, or those that provide 24/7 services, or that staff group supported living homes have some advantages – primarily in that they can often have “floater” or on-call staff available in case of another staff’s absence. Larger organizations that provide some group services have more reliable funding streams, allowing for margins that support having extra staff. Extra staff equates to reliability, which is understandably attractive to customers. Some organizations offer specialized services such as behavior support and care for complex medical conditions – each of these services are in demand for certain customers. These services have rate “add-ons” that create an additional revenue stream.

Alti has carved out a segment and rises above competitors based on the following characteristics and services:

#### **2.4.1. Individualized, Customized, Integrated Employment**

Alti has always been focused on helping people find work in businesses in the community and provides strong personalized support to maintain employment. FCBD Service coordinators repeatedly tell us that there are no other organizations that use the focused personalized and hands-on strategies we leverage to succeed in helping people find a good job that fits their skills, interests, and support needs.

#### 2.4.2. **Community Access and Membership**

Alti provides HPC services that are focused on building community membership and access. Many people choose Alti because we are committed to getting out into the greater community to meet people and take part in activities that are not segregated based on disability status.

#### 2.4.3. **Serving Level 1 Waivers**

We are open to serving people who only have the budget for 4 hours a week in services. We are told that there are very few providers who will work with people who only have the Level 1 waiver.

#### 2.4.4. **Individualized Transportation**

NMT, as a new service, ensures our commitment to providing timely, safe, and hassle-free rides to and from work was built in response to demands from our existing customers and is garnering attention from service coordinators and potential new customers.

### **3. Sales and Marketing**

Alti meets our customers' needs by participating in person-centered planning and providing person-centered services – everything we do is related to each unique individual. We aim to keep the support focused on what is good to each individual and what is good for them. The tasks, activities, services, and outcomes can vary hundreds of times from person to person and will evolve throughout the person's life, so we aim to be continuously attentive and flexible to the infinite ways a person's wants, preferences, skills, and support needs change.

#### **3.1. Market Positioning**

Alti positions its services as being highly individualized; not only in the actual supports that are provided but also in an openness to having as much flexibility in scheduling, and an ability to accept people who want to use a limited amount of supports, like those who use the Level 1 waiver, or people who use other waivers for short 2 or 4 hour sessions with staff. Alti also focuses on community employment, access, and membership.

#### **3.2. Outreach and Referrals**

Alti attracts new referrals primarily through word of mouth. Individuals tell their connections about the supports they receive, parents share information, and service coordinators make informal recommendations to people looking for new service providers. Typically, people who are looking for services reach out to Alti staff by phone or email. We arrange a phone call, Zoom, or face-to-face meeting to talk about what the person is looking for, such as what their goals are and what kinds of support they need. We share ideas and examples on how Alti could provide the desired services. We discuss the person's preferred schedule, including time of day, days of the week, etc. Alti assesses whether or not it has the capacity and expertise to provide the desired services. The person also then decides if Alti offers what they are looking for. If so, they notify their service coordinator that they want to use Alti as a provider, and the service coordinator amends the Individual Service Plan and authorizes the budgeted services to be provided by Alti.

Alti engages in limited outreach to attract new referrals. We have had to be cautious about balancing the availability of staff with attracting new referrals. Alti does not usually have staff who are available without someone to work with, so when we get a new referral, we have to work on recruiting, hiring, and training new staff to meet that person's needs. This can take a couple of months in the current hiring environment. Alti typically has an informal waiting list based on word-of-mouth referrals.

When Alti is offering a new service or has availability to accept a new referral in a current service, we notify the Service Coordinators that we currently work with. They share that information with the people they support, and let us know when someone is interested, and we begin our conversation to see if we can meet their needs.

Alti has a basic website and a Facebook presence, but does not currently leverage these platforms for extensive outreach. One of Alti's strategic goals is to update and upgrade the website and become more active on social media.



## 4. Management & Operations

Alti is community-based. There is no company-owned building or space where services are provided. All services are provided either in a person's home or in community places. There are currently two company vehicles for transportation services, with DSP staff using their personal vehicles for the bulk of non-NMT transportation services, and for some NMT services. CEO Julie McComas provides the majority of the managerial and administrative tasks that are not delegated. Additional positions are as follows:

- **Direct Support Team Lead** mentors new staff, responsible for the EVV, assists with billing and individual benefits, money management, and housing concerns;
- **Quality Assurance/ Administrative Support** provides QA for documentation compliance;
- **Employment Specialists** provide comprehensive employment supports;
- **NMT drivers;** and
- **Direct Support Professionals.**

Everyone at Alti provides direct services as needed, including the CEO.

### 4.1. Administrative Tasks

The following is a listing of the key routine administrative tasks. Other less common tasks in this area involve purchasing supplies and dealing with vehicle maintenance, to name just a few.

#### 4.1.1. **EVV - Electronic Visit Verification (6 hrs/week)**

This involves processing regular updates, daily error corrections, staff training, reconciliation with timesheets, and preparation for billing. This task is ongoing and takes approximately 6 hours a week.

#### 4.1.2. **Recruiting and Hiring (5 hrs/week)**

Alti does experience both high demand and some turnover requiring a consistent effort in recruiting and hiring new staff, including posting job openings, reviewing candidate applications, arranging and conducting interviews, and making offers – requiring approximately 5 hours per week.

#### 4.1.3. **Payroll and Timekeeping (10 hrs/week)**

This involves gathering timesheets, reviewing for accuracy, inputting into the payroll system, reconciling with the EVV system, and making corrections.

#### 4.1.4. **Billing (10 hrs/week)**

This requires inputting individual “claims” for each person served, each day, for each service – including finding rejected billing and fixing errors, as well as investigating why what billing errors exist to resolve them. This typically takes about 10 hours a week.

#### 4.1.5. **Quality Assurance (10 hrs/week)**

This involves routine documentation checks to make sure documentation is fully completed and done well, requiring approximately 10 hours a week.

#### 4.1.6. **Individual/ Family Check-Ins (3 hrs/week)**

We conduct routine Individual/ Family Check-Ins to ensure satisfaction and gather input from individuals and their families on how service delivery is going. This also involves checking in with staff for their input and requires approximately three hours a week.

#### 4.1.7. **Person-Centered Meetings (3 hrs/week)**

This entails attending Individuals Service Plan (ISP) and similar meetings and providing suggestions and data input based on services provided.

#### 4.1.8. **Scheduling appointments (2-4 hrs/week)**

Scheduling appointments and follow up for individuals takes 2-4 hours a week on average. This includes appointments with doctors and social services, and then following up on outcomes and next steps.

#### 4.1.9. **Accounting (5-10 hrs/week)**

Accounting and tax preparation takes about 5-10 hours a week in-house for most tasks. It involves reconciling income and expenses with bank account and accounting software, and making corrections; as well as paying monthly, quarterly, annual tax obligations and filing related forms. A contracted accountant is utilized for more challenging and non-routine issues.

## 4.2. **Managerial Tasks**

The following is a listing of the routine managerial tasks.

#### 4.2.1. **Scheduling (15+ hrs/week)**

Given the kinds of specific services Alti provides in often only 2 or 4 hours blocks, a flexible and adaptable scheduling process is critical, and implementing it is a focal task at the Altitude Initiative. This involves developing schedules as well as managing the daily schedule changes that take place due to (1) staff availability changes; (2) individuals-served canceling or changing services, or needing to add an unplanned service. This task is ongoing and takes an estimated 15 or more hours each week.

#### **4.2.2. Staff Training (5-10 hrs/week)**

Ongoing training efforts include the onboarding of new staff as well as continued training for our existing DSPs. We are constantly reviewing new staff training needs, planning and processing payment for training, conducting new staff orientation, setting up and conducting job shadows and on-the-job training, reviewing and monitoring progress, managing annual training requirements, and continuing ed training plans for all staff. This takes on average 5-10 hours a week. On-the-job training is often delegated to senior DSPs who serve as mentors.

#### **4.2.3. Strategic Planning (4 hrs/week)**

The CEO completes a minimum of 4 hours a week for planning, developing, and working on new goals, action steps, and reviewing outcomes.

#### **4.2.4. Crisis Intervention (varies)**

Senior staff at Alti are often called to assist with any crisis that occurs and handling the safety and welfare of each person served as well as staff, notifying the appropriate parties, completing paperwork, and following up on outcomes. This includes facilitating the MUI (Major Unusual Incident) process that is highly structured and regulated.

### **4.3. Direct Support Tasks**

The day-to-day work of the DSP staff primarily involves meeting in person with the individual for a specific amount of time and engaging in the tasks and activities that they want to do and need to do. Some staff see more than one person in a day, so they travel in between the two or more individuals they support. The array of tasks and activities is vast, as DSPs can and do assist people with anything they might need to live a self-directed, safe, and healthy life. Examples of tasks include, but are in no way limited to:

#### **4.3.1. Assisting with Appointments**

Alti DSPs routinely assist with getting to doctor's appointments and then supporting the individual(s) served in communicating with the doctor, obtaining prescriptions, and implementing the doctor's instructions.

#### **4.3.2. Recreational Events and Activities**

Taking someone to recreational activities and providing assistance can range from kayaking to a wine-tasting or going to play golf. DSPs assist with social engagement while clients meet new people, helping with any paperwork or payment processes, providing companionship, driving to and from an event, and more – even assists with morning stretches, for example, by physically supporting leg stretches by applying stretching pressure.

#### 4.3.3. **Supporting Bureaucratic Processes**

DSPs regularly help with many bureaucratic processes from job or program applications to government support forms such as filling out Medicaid renewal applications, including obtaining all required documents and mailing those to the respective county offices as necessary.

#### 4.3.4. **Purchasing Supports**

We routinely help our clients purchase groceries, which involves making sure they have enough money, have a grocery list, have checked the home to see what is needed, driving to the grocery store, mentoring and talking about healthy food choices, and also making decisions related to the food budget, helping to reach things that the person can't reach, reading labels, helping with the purchase transaction, helping to unload and put away the purchases.

#### 4.3.5. **Additional Supports**

Additional miscellaneous supports include assisting with personal care, cleaning, cooking, organizing, companionship, mail, teaching technology, pet care, paying bills, and other support for any household tasks as needed.

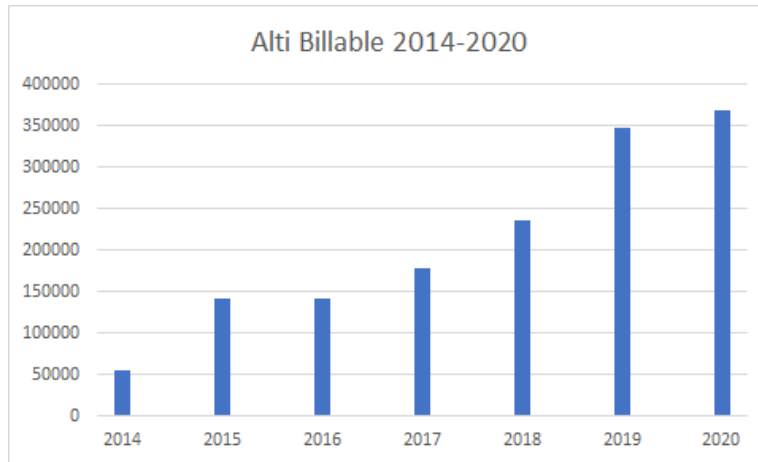
## 5. Financial Forecast

Alti’s financial position is very fluid, since pay rates are set, and providers do not get paid unless we provide the actual service. There is no reimbursement when individuals-served cancel their hours last minute, for example. The only billable time is directly tied to the staff being with a client.

### 5.1. Review of Finances

For Direct Support work provided by Alti, the reimbursement rates are established by the governing body (DODD). This rate structure is non-negotiable, meaning there is no way to bill for more than the established rate. This is true regardless of the cost the agency incurs in providing services.

The following provides an overview of Alti’s income since 2014:



**Alti Annual Income 2014-2020**

Year	Annual Income
2015	<b>\$ 142,231.49</b>
2016	<b>\$ 142,406.16</b>
2017	\$ 148,958.95 (plus \$30,000 grant funding) = <b>\$ 178,958.95</b>
2018	<b>\$ 235,636.56</b>
2019	<b>\$ 348,379.82</b>
2020	\$ 369,155.41 (plus \$ 122,022.98 pandemic funding \$) = <b>\$ 491,178.4</b>

## 5.2. Pandemic Impact on Revenue

Pre-pandemic, in the months of January through March, Alti was experiencing growth in revenue related to an increase in billable services as well as the increase in reimbursement for HPC services established by DODD.

Month	Revenue
January 2020	\$32,355.64
February 2020	\$37,103.73
March 2020	\$37,616.31
April 2020	\$41,545.11

April 2020 was Alti’s highest ever reimbursed month. Revenue each month does not always exactly reflect the work done in that month, as the billing cycles delay when funds are deposited, including funds from corrected billing errors from earlier months. Regardless, Alti was seeing consistent growth in revenue from month to month in 2020 and projected annual earnings from billable services were \$490k.

Like all other Direct Support providers, Alti experienced a major challenge to workflow and had to make substantial changes to services due to the impact of Covid-19. Alti experienced a substantial decrease in billable reimbursement during the second and third quarters of 2020.

One of the biggest financial impacts stemmed from the reduction in employment support work. Career exploration, job development, and job coaching are the highest paying services, per unit, and that workflow was suddenly and drastically reduced due to people being laid off from work or stopping their job searches.

Another consequence of the pandemic and related shutdowns was that our community-based recreation, volunteering activities, and social activities immediately halted. Similarly, some people we served decided that they did not want staff coming into their homes unless absolutely necessary. Alti experienced a sudden, substantial loss in billable business activity. To mitigate this, Alti offered additional services to those who wanted assistance at home. Alti staff also worked to get people involved in outdoor, socially distanced activities as much as possible, and helped people to learn to use technology to engage in virtual activities. Employment support continued to be provided to those people who were considered “essential workers” who still needed job coaching; in several cases, additional job coaching was provided to assist the workers in navigating all of the new procedures and tasks associated with work during the pandemic.

Alti was able to access pandemic funding from a number of sources (U.S. Small Business Administration, Ohio Department of Developmental Disabilities, Ohio Bureau of Workers Compensation, and Franklin County Board of Developmental Disabilities). This allowed Alti to maintain services at a reduced capacity and to meet the Revenue goal with an actual total income from all sources of \$491,178.40.

### 5.3. 2021 (Post Pandemic) Projection

Through the first half of 2021, as businesses and communities have begun to reopen and people who receive services re-engage with their communities, Alti is seeing a consistent increase in demand for services each month. This equates to an increase in revenue.

Month	Revenue
January 2021	\$30,081.07
February 2021	\$37,247.92
March 2021	\$41,200.21
April 2021	\$43,018.00 (accounts receivable)

The reimbursements for March 2021 are close to the pre-pandemic monthly revenues. As Alti increases direct, billable time performing all services, with the goal of surpassing pre-pandemic levels, it is projected that Alti will see growth in revenue. An increase in the performance of high-rate services, such as employment services, is needed to accomplish this.

A key factor in financial stability is to minimize costs, especially considering the only guaranteed income is from set-rate billable services. Future grant funding or other non-billable funding is not consistent, reliable, or guaranteed. A reduction in non-billable or “empty” trips is critical for both staff time and mileage expenditures. This type of expenditure can not be entirely avoided due to the nature of the work (one-on-one community-based services, working with people who receive low numbers of support hours). The Altitude Initiative’s revenue target for 2021 is \$548,946.

## **6. Financial Requirements**

Alti strives to maximize all resources. To build our capacity, the items outlined below are important. Identified are areas for improvements that we believe Alti needs to continue to build the services demanded by the individuals we serve.

### **6.1. Vehicles**

Alti currently has two company-owned vehicles. Some NMT is provided by HPC staff using their own vehicles. This sometimes makes more financial sense than having a larger fleet. For example, if an HPC staff member is in close proximity to a person needing NMT, either before they do HPC work, in between two clients, or after, then the HPC staff may be assigned and paid time/mileage at a lower cost than having to have someone travel with an "empty trip" a farther distance, using a company vehicle. That being said, the current goal is to have four company-owned vehicles to accommodate four FTE NMT drivers. The estimated costs of the vehicles would be approximately \$13,000 per vehicle. The goal is to pay cash for additional vehicles to avoid interest and financing costs.

### **6.2. Staffing**

A continued staffing shortage and a remarkably high annual turnover rate for DSPs continue to challenge Alti alongside other DODD providers. In order to pay wages that are both competitive and acknowledge the value provided by our DSPs, Alti continues to aim for consistent raises and would like to establish an additional cadence of bonus opportunities. Ideally, Alti would have funding for one non-billable FTE to assist with administrative duties, such as EVV, quality assurance, outreach to families and other stakeholders, scheduling, assistance with billing, and helping with payroll.

### **6.3. Web Presence**

Alti needs to invest in upgrading its overall web presence by updating the current website and improving its social media engagement through increasing posting frequency and a consistent cadence of our social media presence. Hiring and/or training staff for this effort has been a budget challenge.



## **7. Assessing the Risks**

The Altitude Initiative is currently facing a variety of challenges, many of which are amplified by continued and prolonged pandemic-related issues that include limited access to some community places and resources that had been available prior to COVID-19, as well as employment and socialization opportunities that are not currently available. Alti had temporarily reduced employment services to focus mainly on job-coaching/follow-along services during the pandemic. As we are now slowly emerging from those limitations and restrictions, we are lacking some pre-employment/ job development focus and staff expertise.

Several 'uncontrollable' factors, such as staff call-offs, customer cancellations, customer last-minute requests or emergencies, traffic delays, etc. create another set of routine challenges for the dependable provision of services.

### **7.1. Inadequate Staffing Levels**

Alti's services are in demand. However, this means that we are experiencing general staffing shortages even to cover current commitments. There is a severe shortage of qualified DSPs in Ohio and nationwide. This means our experience is not unusual, yet remains challenging, especially as we enter into a 'post-covid' service environment. This poses a threat to most, if not all, areas of business operations and sustainability, such as our ability to provide reliable support, available time and funds spent on recruiting/ hiring/ training, stress on current staff, loss of relationships between customers and the staff they know when that staff person leaves, all the way to the CEO filling in to deliver direct services and transportation to fulfill our existing service promises.

### **7.2. Recruiting**

The "short shift" and sometimes on-demand nature of Alti's services is a recruiting challenge. The structure of our day-to-day operations, in providing some on-demand type services and serving people whose needs, locations, and timing changes is somewhat unconventional and not attractive to all potential job candidates. Given Alti's focus on community engagement and integration, the regular 9-5 or 8-4 hours do not make sense: A majority of community engagement and shared leisure activity falls into after work and weekend hours. This is when some of our non-employment-focused services are in demand. Combined with a lacking value perception of the direct service profession this makes recruiting challenging at best.

### **7.3. Flat Structure and Lack of Mid-Level Positions**

The lack of mid-level leadership means the majority of administrative and managerial duties are completed by the CEO. This often includes extensive time spent on managing day-to-day adjustments due to individualized customer requests or staffing changes. Without floating or on-call staff, the CEO is routinely also involved in direct service delivery and therefore limited in fulfilling leadership and administrative responsibilities in a timely manner for those time periods. Addressing the high staff turnover and hiring process is additionally lengthy and time-consuming.

Alti's intentionally flat structure is in part addressing a systemic issue in that supervision is never billable. The only billable time is that spent with individuals-served, or working directly on their behalf. Our greatest challenge is that individualized services do not bring in the same kind of funding as segregated and congregate services, therefore larger organizations that offer congregate care can afford supervisors while Alti cannot.

### **7.4. Reimbursement Rates for In-Demand 1:1 Support Services**

While HPC rates have increased and the State made some temporary additional funding available, the long-term issue is that funding structures are not adequate for most services that are provided on an individualized basis and insufficient for sustainable, growth-focused, individualized, community-based work. This affects Alti on various levels, especially as with current capped reimbursement rates, staff pay rates are not a living wage, and are often not competitive with other industries. This is making it difficult to attract quality candidates to providing DSP services for Alti.

Currently, the only dependable funding stream (Medicaid waiver funding) does not promote career advancement, nor attractive wages for qualified staff, despite the fact that Alti pays over \$2 per hour more than the average DSP wage in Ohio and about \$3-4 per hour more than the national average. This is a system-wide issue.

### **7.5. Technology**

Alti currently leverages Google- based office products and has created documentation and person-centered planning templates using Google docs through a paid, secure service. These are low-cost and easy to learn to use. They are easily accessible from phones or computers. The Google docs provide real-time access to shared notes between staff members. Alti also uses Teamup, which offers a team calendar that has proven to be very useful for scheduling and providing information about locations and activities for each session, particularly as this schedule so frequently changes and adjusts to serve individuals' changing needs. Alti uses the free Sandata technology for the required electronic visit verification (EVV).

Our challenges include having multiple platforms that do not link data (ie. the Google docs does not sync data to Teamup; Sandata EVV and the Google docs do not link information such as start and end times). This means that staff have to look at up to three different technology platforms to get all of the information they need, and to complete their clock in/out procedures and documentation requirements. Other systems are available, but the cost of better programs is prohibitive at this time. Many of these platform alternatives require a start-up fee as well as a monthly cost per person. For a provider that serves many people who only receive a few hours a week in services, the monthly fees are too large of a percentage of the per-person income.

## **7.6. Alti's Reputation**

We are challenged by occasionally unreasonable requests or challenges with customers not respecting necessary boundaries. This creates tension for staff and can potentially damage our reputation. We are not always able to accommodate last-minute and short notice requests for support and can not always take on new referrals or expand time with current referrals due to staffing, or specific needs of the customer that are outside of our expertise/ capacity.

## **7.7. Sustainability of Alti's NMT Service Offering**

Drive time and 'empty trips' in between customers (for both NMT as well as HPC-related travel) are not reimbursed and the current reimbursement rate does not provide enough funding to support these service offerings sustainably.

Thus far, Alti has worked on this NMT service along the following timelines and benchmarks that are in part captured in the assessment work reviewed in [this report](#):

- 1) Jan. 31, 2021: Determine demand for NMT;
- 2) Mar. 15, 2021: Conduct Appreciate Benchmarking Interviews with existing NMT providers to research best practices;
- 3) April 1, 2021-June 30, 2021: Research 'networked' NMT delivery options such as the Onseen Pilot program;
- 4) May 1, 2021-June30, 2021: Determine service delivery options: Dedicated drivers vs. DSP serving as NMT drivers or a combination of both;
- 5) May 15, 2021- June 30, 2021: Determine whether staff are driving their own or company-owned vehicles for NMT (or both);
- 6) If Alti will leverage company vehicles, determine additional vehicle purchases:
  - a) Sept. 30, 2021: third vehicle
  - b) Dec. 31, 2021: fourth vehicle

Alti is currently on track with the timelines identified for this service offering, however, there is continued concern whether Alti can secure the 'right' referrals for NMT that fit into the time-slots currently available, in the right location where Alti is already providing NMT, so as to reduce empty trips. A partnership with other NMT providers as proposed in the DODD pilot with the Onseen Network Transportation network could address this challenge, however, substantial training, as well as implementation costs, are involved that would further reduce the billable rate. The process and certification steps are also not entirely clear as to how providers would be authorized to provide NMT services within this framework. Nor is it clear how providers would secure reliable, scheduled trips through such a program, to ensure driver availability.

Alti had to previously end NMT services due to lack of sufficient funding, making this service offering unsustainable in past efforts. However, the current availability of additional resources, such as grant funding, mitigates some of the prior concerns related to opportunity costs.

## CONCLUSION

At The Altitude Initiative, we are dedicated to dedicated individualized 1:1 employment and support services. The greatest challenge is that individualized services do not generate the same funding that can be obtained by providing segregated and congregate services.

This holds true for our non-medical transportation (NMT) services. The Altitude Initiative is in demand for dedicated individualized services, this means that we do not provide transportation for 5-7 or more individuals in a large van, instead, most often we drive one individual to/from work in a community-based business. NMT reimbursement rates seem to still be modeled on transportation to/from group homes to congregate vocational settings - NMT can be profitable for multiple one-route passengers but is challenging for NMT services the way we envision them. Therefore, the sustainability of this in-demand service offering is at risk.

Additionally, current funding does not promote career advancement for direct care staff and wages for DSP staff are often not perceived as competitive, despite the fact that The Altitude Initiative pays over \$2/hr than the average DSP wage in Ohio and about \$3-4/hr. above the national average. It can be truly challenging to recruit qualified staff when many individuals receiving services from our DSP have greater incomes at their disposal than the DSPs supporting that employment.

The Altitude Initiative looks forward to continuing to work with DODD and the local county board to address these challenges and build innovative services for the individuals we seek to empower and engage to be fully integrated members of their communities.