Community Employment is here to stay...  
by Jake Jacobs

October is National Disability Employment Awareness Month. Employment for individuals with a developmental disability has become something of a hot topic nationally the last couple of years. There have been serious cases of abuse of people at sheltered workshops; with claims of workshops taking advantage of employees to fill their own pockets while paying workers sub-minimum wages. The Department of Justice has filed lawsuits and forced the closure of sheltered workshops in several states, hoping to move people with disabilities from a segregated and low paying environment, to one where people can explore employment in the community, in integrated settings with supports that will help them to be successful and make at least the minimum wage.

Supporters of sheltered employment talk about the positives people experience at work—a sense of worth; a place where their loved ones can make friends and earn a little extra money. It gives them somewhere to spend their time instead of sitting alone at home. They “fit in” better with people who are more like them. They cite that many people have been in sheltered employment for most of their lives and could not adapt to another type of work.

But the fact is change is upon us whether we like it or not. Whether through lawsuits, or the Olmstead Act, or state systems moving away from sheltered employment—its days are numbered. The sheltered workshops we have today will not be the dominant employment venue in years to come. We will need time to change and adapt, it will not happen overnight, but it will happen. Too many voices are crying for equality and equity for all persons in the workplace.

Currently, there are far too many adults with developmental disabilities who are fully capable of succeeding and thriving in a community job. Despite having disabilities there are many people who have a wide range of strengths and skills that make them very well-suited and qualified for a variety of jobs. Our workshop system is on the cusp of change. We have the opportunity to guide that change and bring about services that support people in the job they choose and the one that fulfills them. It will take time, patience, and a person-centered approach that is individualized. It is my honor to be serving on a new statewide committee made up of SB 40 directors and sheltered workshop leaders that will begin to explore options and changes for Missouri—that make sense for our citizens with developmental disabilities. We will seek input from individuals, family members, guardians and advocates to insure a system that is fair and equitable for all. Change will come, but it is my sincere hope it will be a carefully executed change that considers the needs of all.
New faces in Support Coordination at eitas

Porsche Elkins, Support Coordinator

Shannon Wittman, Support Coordinator

Lyndee Willoughby, Support Coordinator

Hilda Hill, Support Coordinator

Rosalee Foster, Support Coordinator

Jillian Smith, Support Coordinator
Kevin is a man with developmental and behavioral disabilities who spent many years as a segregated facility-based employment setting (a sheltered workshop) before enrolling in a community employment project funded by the state Developmental Disability Council. Kevin’s interest in being a mechanic became clear, but no jobs were available for a young man without experience.

After many attempts, a local small engine repair shop agreed to have Kevin disassemble and clean a few motors every week. Because the single owner did not want employees, a business-within-a-business was created for Kevin to do disassembly and parts cleaning. In return for the space to operate this complementary service and for mentoring in mechanics from the host business owner, Kevin paid a small percentage of his earnings to the shop. VR support, general fund expenditures from the local developmental disabilities agency, and an SSA PASS plan provided Kevin with hand tools, work benches, a parts washer, and work clothes. Over seven years later, Kevin works 20 to 30 hours a week and charges approximately $30 an hour for his services.
The Lens

Helen’s Story

Helen is a 25 year old young lady who has lived at home with her mom her whole life. Helen’s father passed away when she was just 10 years old and she and her mom have had some difficult times since then. Over the past couple of years Helen has struggled with moving out or staying at home with her mother. Helen finally decided that at her age she needed to move out and be on her own; however, she was not comfortable in leaving her mom behind with the fear her mom would not be able to make it financially. Helen has been helping her mom pay the mortgage and the bills.

Since January 2012, Debi Gregor, Helen’s Support Coordinator, has been assisting Helen with applying for SSI/SSA, obtaining a comprehensive waiver slot, and finding an appropriate ISL for her to live. Helen was finally approved for social security in July of 2013, and a waiver slot as of 9/2/13, and she moved into an ISL with NOVA on in September.

Being on her own has been a definite struggle: getting her SSI payments straightened out, getting furniture and accessories for her own place, and learning to live on her own with the help of NOVA staff.

Emotionally too, it was difficult to move out and leave her mother. But with help of her support team and encouragement from friends she is making it on her own day by day.
“Because We Are Equal to the Task”

News Release

US Labor Department’s Office of Disability Employment Policy announces theme for National Disability Employment Awareness Month October 2013

WASHINGTON—“Because We Are All EQUAL to the Task” is the theme of this year’s National Disability Employment Awareness Month. Chosen by the U.S. Department of Labor’s Office of Disability Employment Policy, the theme reflects the reality that people with disabilities have the education, training, experience and desire to be successful in the workplace.

“When I was growing up, many people doubted what I could do just because I was blind. But because I had people in my life who instilled in me an expectation of work and showed me opportunities to be successful, I completed college and became known for what I can do,” said Kathy Martínez, Assistant Secretary of Labor for disability employment policy. “I urge all employers to benefit from the skills of workers with disabilities by giving them, including our returning veterans, a chance to show that they, too, are equal to the task.”

This year’s theme echoes the message of ODEP’s ongoing Campaign for Disability Employment to promote positive employment outcomes for people with disabilities and expand ideas about what youths with disabilities can do when they receive encouragement and support for their ambitions. Conducted in collaboration with business and disability organizations, the campaign emphasizes that, at work, it is what people can do that matters. More information about the Campaign for Disability Employment is available at http://www.whatcanyoudocampaign.org.

Recognized in some form since 1945 when Congress designated a week in October as “National Employ the Physically Handicapped Week,” National Disability Employment Awareness month is a culmination of ODEP’s year-long efforts to raise awareness about the value of employing people with disabilities. The theme is announced well in advance of October to enable communities throughout the nation to plan announcements and activities to recognize the month and celebrate the many and varied contributions of America’s workers with disabilities. Such activities include proclamations, public awareness programs and job fairs that enhance awareness, create opportunities, or show case the abilities and talents of workers with disabilities. Resources for participation and more information are available on ODEP’s web pages at http://dol.gov/odep by selecting NDEAM from among the topics listed.

Kathleen Martínez was nominated by President Barack Obama to be the third Assistant Secretary for Disability Employment Policy and was confirmed by the U.S. Senate on June 25, 2009. As head of the U.S. Department of Labor’s Office of Disability Employment Policy (ODEP), Ms. Martínez advises the Secretary of Labor and works with all DOL agencies to lead a comprehensive and coordinated national policy regarding the employment of people with disabilities.

Blind since birth, Ms. Martínez comes to ODEP with a background as an internationally recognized disability rights leader specializing in employment, asset building, independent living, international development, diversity and gender issues.
The Lens

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