

Employment Training Program prepares people with disabilities for responsible jobs in the community

If you've never held a job because of a developmental disability, how do you cope with the challenges of finding employment, acquiring the needed skills, and performing up to an employer's standards? The prospect of earning a living—or even learning how to ride a bus to work—can be daunting.

The University of Washington's Employment Training Program (ETP) has served people with disabilities, and the employers who hire them, for almost 25 years. Under the auspices of the Center on Human Development and Disability (CHDD) and the School of Medicine's Department of Rehabilitation Medicine, the program has a long record of placing people with developmental disabilities in competitive employment and supporting them as they become productive workers. It was the first such training program in the country.

"It's very exciting when one of our clients brings home that first paycheck," said Dr. Pat Brown, director of the program and a UW clinical assistant professor of rehabilitation medicine. "Placing clients successfully is very satisfying to all of us."



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The program includes seven employment specialists, as well as four additional staff working under the direction of Brown and Dr. Kurt Johnson, principal investigator for the ETP, associate professor of rehabilitation medicine, and director of the UW's Center on Technology and Disability Studies.

"Although most people with disabilities can work, and would prefer to work, they have often been excluded from the workplace based on presumptions about their disablement," said Johnson. "Our program provides support, advocacy, and teaching to assist people with all kinds of disabilities in achieving their goals for independence."

The program serves people who in the past have been considered unemployable because of disabilities such as mental retardation, Down syndrome, autism, traumatic brain injury, stroke, cerebral palsy and spinal cord injury. Currently, the program has almost 100 clients.

"Our clients range from students transitioning out of high school to people nearing retirement age, generally in their early to mid-fifties," said Brown. "We don't turn anyone away in the long term, although there may be a short-term delay of up to a month if our caseloads are at a maximum."

Clients come from a variety of sources. They may be referred from school transition programs serving students with disabilities, or from rehabilitation clinics at UW Medical Center and Harborview Medical Center. Some clients are self-referred, with the help of parents or guardians. Most clients have been accepted for services by the state Division of Vocational Rehabilitation and, if long term follow-up is needed, by the King County Developmental Dis-

abilities Division. Some clients pay for ETP services themselves, occasionally using Social Security Work Incentives such as Plans for Achieving Self-Support (PASS) or Impairment Related Work Expenses (IRWEs) to help pay for services.

Once a client is accepted into the program, an employment specialist does an assessment of his or her abilities, usually in concert with vocational rehabilitation counselors at UW Medical Center. After assessment, clients may spend about a month working at "job stations" on the UW campus, allowing them to sample various entry-level jobs such as filing, sorting papers, delivering mail, folding laundry, washing glassware in labs, preparing food, and dish-washing.

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During the work trial, clients are evaluated for various skills such as eye-hand coordination, motor development, ability to follow directions, social appropriateness, ability to cooperate, speed of learning, speed of movement, ability to adjust to changes in the work setting and decision-making capacity. These evaluations help the employment counselors make the most appropriate job matches.

"We work with clients' preferences," explained Brown. "Do they prefer to work alone or with other people? For example, in a restaurant setting, someone who prefers to work alone might choose a job in the kitchen over a job in the dining room. The clients understand that they do have choices."

"Perhaps for the first time, the person with a disability is being asked, 'What do *you* want?' The family is involved during the intake interviews, but we tell the clients the important thing is what *they* want. We teach them how to make those choices. They're actively involved in their own job searches, often making their own phone calls and setting up their own interviews."

Clients make their first visits to the prospective job accompanied by the employment specialist, but not by parents or other support people. "It is essential that the employer relate to his prospective employee as an independent person," the program reminds parents.

Clients are taught the important skill of getting to work independently. "Many of our clients have never gotten on a bus before," said Brown. "The first thing we do is ensure that they know how to take public transportation. Once they learn how to get to work by bus, they can also use a bus to go to a movie or shopping. For many clients, there's a blossoming independence."

After working in dentists' offices for eight years, Sharon Gowdey, a longtime ETP client who has Down syndrome, took a

new job last year as an office assistant at the King County District Court. She and her parents credit ETP for helping her achieve success in the workplace.

"The counselors train me in my jobs and help me to be more confident," she said. "I have a lot of independence. I can go to work by bus and I have a lot of friends at my job. I make my own mistakes and I learn from them. I can think on my feet."

"Sharon has been involved at (CHDD) since she was a year old," said her father, Dwight Gowdey. "As an adult, counseling from the Employment Training Program has helped her handle jobs effectively."

"Sharon is quite independent," said Scott Heartfield, her current employment specialist. "She's been in our program for 15 years and understands the work environment. Her supervisor at the District Court, Helen Grayson, has worked with our clients for a number of years. I may visit Sharon only every couple of months and hold a formal review every six months. Many of our clients need more support."

Brown notes that many ETP clients are working full time, and none is earning less than minimum wage. "These are people who can do the job," she said. "Sometimes accommodations are made, but disability shouldn't be an issue." Clients are employed in a wide range of entry-level jobs: in a bindery, delivering architectural plans, doing promotions for sports teams, doing office work, working in a veterinary office, in retail, in telemarketing. Employers include Nordstrom, Safeco, Xerox, Starbucks, Safeway, the UW, King County District Court and others.

Once clients' skills have been assessed and once they have job-sampled and gained a better idea of what type of work they would like, employment specialists assist with job placement. They look for full time entry-level positions with benefits, in stable businesses with supportive staff.

They contact various employers to find a good fit. ETP works with company employment specialists, helps with the interview process, and works with prospective co-workers and the person who would be the client's direct supervisor. Prospective employers are assured that ETP clients have been screened and assessed; and are given one-to-one training. "We promise employers capable, committed employees," the program tells clients. "When we place you in the job you choose, we expect you to honor this promise."

"We're a supported-employment vendor," explains Brown. "We place people first and then train them in specific skills in the job environment, where they can respond to the social cues and

other situations."

Once a placement is made, the employment specialist may initially work full-time with the client, accompanying him or her by bus to the work site and working alongside all day. The employment specialist structures the new worker's daily schedule, developing step-by-step procedures for each task. As the employee be-

comes more independent, the presence of the employment specialist is gradually reduced.

While each client is an independent employee, ETP continues to stay in close touch. "We're not standing next to them," says Brown, "but we do check in. As in any job, supervisors change, duties change, co-workers change. We help our clients get ready for transitions: job changes, promotions, new circumstances in their personal lives. For example, a client might have worked for a company for a long time,

then there's a merger and the local office is closed, leaving her without a job. Or a dishwasher might be ready to move up and do prep cooking; this is a big step for him."

Brown credits companies and other employers who make the extra effort to hire people with disabilities. She and others in the program are actively involved in outreach, making presentations to employer groups and civic organizations such as the Chamber of Commerce, Rotary and Kiwanis, as well as to parent support groups. For the last two years, they have taught weeklong workshops for teachers who run school-to-work transition programs as part of the Secondary Summer Institute in Bellingham.

"It's unfulfilling for people to sit at home and not be able to contribute meaningfully," said Brown. "Fortunately, employers and the community have come to believe that there is a place for everyone to contribute. It's very gratifying to be able to play a part in that effort." ♦



Employment Training Program client Sharon Gowdey works as an office assistant at King County District Court. Her employment specialist is Scott Heartfield.

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