

Dept. of Workforce Development: Project SEARCH promotes bright futures for young adults with disabilities

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Guest Column by Caleb Frostman; Secretary, Department of Workforce Development

Wisconsin's Project SEARCH recently concluded another remarkable year where 92 percent of program participants graduated from the program, gained valuable workplace and life skills, and put themselves on a path to economic independence and brighter futures. Nearly 230 individuals with disabilities graduated from the program this year, many of whom were hired by their host employer or another community business before or immediately after graduation. As my tear-soaked sleeves can attest from attending multiple Project SEARCH graduations, these students and their families, their employers, and their communities dedicate themselves to this impactful program, ensuring its participants' personal growth and future economic success.

Project SEARCH was developed in 1996 at Cincinnati Children's Hospital Medical Center. At the time, Erin Riehle was Director of Cincinnati Children's Emergency Department and felt that, because the hospital served individuals with developmental disabilities, they should commit to hiring people in this group. She believed it was possible to train people with developmental disabilities to fill some of the high-turnover, entry level positions in her department, which involved complex and systematic tasks such as stocking supply cabinets.

Since the program started in Wisconsin in 2008, it has expanded from a single site in Dane County to 27 sites across the state. The program is popular among healthcare facilities, manufacturers, distribution centers, and insurance companies. Participants enroll in the program and receive either high school or college credit, while also completing multiple 10-week internship rotations in different departments, which helps them identify their likes and skills, helping them make informed career choices. They also receive support from community organizations and DWD's Division of Vocational Rehabilitation (DVR) to assist participants draft their resumes and prepare for job interviews. The goal of the program is for the participant to earn competitive integrated employment that pays at or above minimum wage.

With strong collaboration among DVR, community-based service providers, local school districts, and great Wisconsin companies, Wisconsin has become an international leader in Project SEARCH. Multiple sites have been recognized for their employment outcomes, and this year the Children's Hospital of Wisconsin will receive special recognition, receiving the *Spotlight on Innovative Employment Award* at this year's Project SEARCH National Conference. The award recognizes the quality of jobs that a site's graduates obtain. Children's Hospital of Wisconsin was chosen because "... graduating interns consistently succeed in rewarding careers that make full use of the skills and experience they gained in their internships."

I count many highlights in the first six months as DWD Secretary, but among the top are the Project SEARCH visits and graduations. This program helps talented individuals overcome potential barriers to employment, grow personally and professionally, while also developing valuable, marketable essential job skills that today's employers are seeking. With life-changing results for the participants, their employers, and their communities year after year, Project SEARCH is a program deserving of continued high praise and significant investment.