

Recognizing an 'untapped resource'

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People with developmental disabilities are “an untapped resource” for employers, said Mary Strehlow, developmental disabilities program manager at the county’s Department of Community Services. “We see everybody as being employable,” she said. “Some have greater challenges than others, but all of them want to work.”

Breaking stereotypes

Clark County and social service agencies serve about 400 people with developmental disabilities enrolled in employment programs, and just under half of those are currently employed, said Strehlow. On average, there are 48 young people a year coming out of special education programs and entering the job market, she added.

The county contracts with social service organizations that find jobs and provide support for people with developmental disabilities. Employment consultants in the social service agencies check in regularly with the employees and employers to smooth out any issues that develop on either side of the relationship.

Many Clark County employers have stepped forward over the years to offer jobs to people with developmental disabilities, said Strehlow, who has worked at the county program for about three decades. Prior to the long economic downturn, about 70 percent of those with disabilities who wanted jobs were employed, she said. That employment number dipped to as low as 35 percent during the recession and has been steadily increasing during the recovery, she said.

Several employers were singled out for recognition at Wednesday’s awards ceremony. PeaceHealth, the county’s largest private employer, was recognized as the top employer of people with developmental disabilities among organizations with 50 or more employees. The Orchards YMCA Child Development Center, which has promoted a long-time employee with a developmental disability to teacher’s assistant, was named small employer of the year. Ryonet Corp. was named innovative employer of the year.

Those who work with employers say that the community is becoming more open and informed about people with developmental disabilities but that the very phrase “developmental disabilities” can create a stigma. Donna Gunnels, an employment consultant with Trillium Employment Services in Vancouver who provides support for workers with developmental disabilities, said she uses the term “alternative learners” to describe such people. The category is broad enough to encompass people with a range of developmental challenges, from dyslexia to disabilities that require the use of an “alternative communication device,” she said.

Gunnels encourages employers to examine their company goals for creating a diverse workforce and to consider their hiring of workers with disabilities as one element of adding diversity to their workplace. “I think I have the best job in the world,” she added. “Breaking down stereotypes is one of the best things I can do.”

'Like everybody else'

Jennifer Stephens, 44, has worked at PeaceHealth Southwest Medical Center since 2006, and her job has changed many times over the past nine years. Her duties have included stocking supplies in the hospital’s emergency department and filing patient charts. When the hospital completed its transition to electronic records, she went back to emergency services to perform office work and to stock supplies.

Stephens was diagnosed with cerebral palsy at age 2. She moved back and forth between her mother’s and her father’s homes, attending three high schools. She’s worked at McDonald’s and at a day care center. Now she lives with her husband, an employee in Clark County’s facilities management department, and their dog in a three-bedroom home they own in Battle Ground. She commutes by C-Tran paratransit van to Southwest Medical Center three days a week, working from 8 a.m. to 1:30 p.m.

Stephens says she loves working at PeaceHealth and hopes over time to work on projects with other departments. Generally speaking, she says, “employers get the wrong impression about us. People with disabilities are not really a high risk, but (people think that because of all the old stereotypes. They think we aren’t worth the time.”

Kelley Frenge, PeaceHealth’s director of human resources for the Columbia Network, says the health care provider has five employees with developmental disabilities, down from a peak of 10 employees. They work in jobs including stocking supplies, food services, weight management and emergency services, she said.

“This is not at all a burden on an employer, no matter what size the employer is,” she said. “Any employer, small or large, has tasks or duties that need to be done at a skill level that could be performed by a developmentally disabled worker.”

Chris Bergman, 22, grew up in Vancouver and attended Columbia River High School — “Home of the Chieftains,” he said quickly in a phone interview. He worked during high school at Burgerville and at Target, and it took him about a year to land his current job, at Ryonet, in March of this year. Because he has autism, Bergman said, “I sometimes need things explained differently. I sometimes get frustrated when things are hard to understand. I just take a deep breath and try again.”

Bergman, who lives with his mother, takes a C-Tran bus to and from work for a shift from 9 a.m. to 2:30 p.m. Among his duties are taking out the trash, recycling, shredding cardboard and packaging products. He mostly works alone, but socializes with co-workers at lunch time and keeps up with them on Facebook. “I’m Facebook friends with everybody,” he said.

Gunnels, his employment coach at Trillium, said Bergman is an exceptional employee. “Chris has the strongest work ethic of anybody I have had the pleasure of working with,” she said. “He is never late and he doesn’t call in sick. I’m super proud of him.”

In the phone interview, Bergman had expected to be asked what advice he would offer to employers who might be thinking about hiring a worker with a developmental disability. He’d written his answer in advance.

“Hire people with disabilities who can work at a real job,” he said. “We’re just like everybody else.”