

Individuals with disabilities find success with employment

ANDREW FICKES; of the Herald
Published: 04/03/13 12:05 am

At 21, Tim Heang, an Emerald Ridge High School graduate, feels confident he will soon find at least part-time employment.

Heang, who has a developmental disability, has been given a leg up with the help of the Puyallup School District's advance program, which prepares students with disabilities between 18 and 21 with the soft skills needed to secure employment.

"By federal law, public schools are required to have a transition plan for individuals with disabilities," said Gary Jeffers, the advance program coordinator and lead instructor. "The advance program is very specific and intentional in assessing their skill set matches in the community where they can be employed. We go into these work sites and we try to develop natural supports for the employer and employee. It's important in finding that employer that bridges the gap and provides that extra additional training."

In the advance program, training starts in volunteer work sites, where soft skills, like showing up to work on time, are built. From there, Jeffers said the advance program works with a number of agencies that specialize in securing living-wage jobs for those with disabilities once they graduate from the advance program.

For the first time this year, Pierce County is starting a school-to-work program that will be a partnership among school districts countywide, the Division of Vocational Rehabilitation, the Developmental Disability Administration and 15 county-approved employment agencies. One is Trillium Employment Services.

Within the past year, Trillium began a partnership with the Puyallup School District's advance program and, through the school-to-work program, it hopes to place nine students in jobs.

"Trillium Employment Services is a nonprofit that helps businesses recruit, train and retain employees with disabilities," said Karen Williams, program development director for Trillium. "We provide our services at no cost to businesses and provide ongoing support to ensure long-term success of the employee. We work individually with businesses to understand their operations and staffing needs to ensure we create a successful job placement.

"Across Pierce County, we are working with 33 businesses in all sectors from retail to warehouse and clerical to manufacturing."

Heang is one of the nine students with the advance program

who have qualified to enter the school-to-work program. They are among 22 students with disabilities who qualify county-wide.

To qualify, students must meet the criteria of the Developmental Disability Administration guidelines.

Heang said he felt unprepared after he graduated from high school.

"Mr. Jeffers has inspired me to dream of what jobs I'd like," Heang said. "I believe I will graduate school with a job."

Williams wants to build awareness in the business community of the potential that awaits them in hiring individuals with disabilities.

"These students graduating from their local schools are motivated and eager to work," Williams said.

Williams said individuals with disabilities might be the best candidate to fill a niche or entry-level position.

"When we find these students work in the business, they create a workforce efficiency for staff," Williams said. "We think if more businesses are aware of it, these students will have greater opportunities."

Paul Vista, the general manager at Old Country Buffet on South Hill, also looks to hire individuals with disabilities. Within the past week, Vista and his crew hired a second employee from Trillium.

"Employees start part-time, nothing more than 12 hours a week," Vista said. "It's something to get them experience and get them out in the public.

"Trillium is fantastic," he added. "They check in from time to time to make sure clients are doing their functions the way they're supposed to."

Vista said employees do a lot of maintenance work like cleaning high chairs, polishing the wood work and tile, and refilling and washing the sugar caddies.

"It's very tedious work, but they really enjoy it, and we enjoy having them," Vista said. "It helps to free up time for other employees, and better efficiencies are put in place.

Call Trillium Employment Services at 253-735-1553 or visit www.trillium.org if you are a business owner interested in hiring individuals with disabilities.