

Developmentally disabled still a vital part of workforce

Auburn-based company's job-finding mission is a win for businesses.

by Robert Whale

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For four hours a day, Monday to Thursday, Anthony Billings runs the can-crushing machine for Valley Recycling on West Valley Highway, sorts ferrous from non-ferrous metals, separates wires, drives a forklift.

Newer hire Aaron Baker comes in for two hours each Friday and sorts metals, cleans up the yard and more.

Billings and Baker, said Christine Soltero, Valley Recycling's cashier, "have a great attitude, and are always willing to help out and do anything that needs to be done."

As Baker and Billings are to Valley Recycling, so to Tahoma Montessori School on Military Road is Steve Brajas, though in a different way.

"Mr. Steve" the pre-schoolers call him, and smile. And why not? He's the guy who reads them books like "The Very Crazy Bear," leads them in games of Simon Says and tells jokes.

Brajas cannot talk, but from his wheelchair directs his eyes to the words on the computer screen in front of him, which detects where he is looking and reads to the kids.

"When he comes into the classroom, all the kids love him and want to shake his hand and tell him the jokes that they've memorized," said Kim Adams, director of Tahoma Montessori and one of its teachers. "He loves it when they laugh and get the joke."

All these young men are developmentally or physically disabled. And the jobs they hold and the services they provide are vital to their employers.

Behind them and behind the 656 others like them across four counties — 270 in King County alone — is Trillium Employee Services of Auburn. For more than 40 years, it



Steve Brajas reads a tale to preschool children at Mt. Tahoma Montessori, aided by a computer that detects where he is looking and speaks for him. Photo courtesy Mt. Tahoma.

has assisted businesses in King, Pierce, Clark and Kitsap counties hire and keep men and women like Billings, Baker and Brajas and helped them get permanent jobs.

Karen Williams, executive director of Trillium, said that despite all of the pandemic-engendered constraints for businesses, they are as committed as ever to workplace diversity.

"We believe our work is mission critical in that we are supporting employees, many of whom are essential workers, meaning they are working in businesses that are deemed essential," Williams said. "We want to make sure that in a pandemic, we don't lose sight of our ultimate goal of inclusive, community employment."

Including people with developmental disabilities, Williams said, should not be seen as a special thing. It should be woven into how all companies think about

their workforce, she said.

“We feel pretty good that around 50 percent of our clients are working,” Williams said. “Usually, we’re closer to 70 percent at this time of year, but we’re happy that so many people have returned to work. We’ve even had 45 new job starts in the last few months. What’s important to us is that we understand the changing business needs, and that we are there to remind them that we can be a resource for helping with creative staffing solutions.”

Like countless organizations in the world, Trillium Employment Services knew when COVID first hit that it would have to adjust.

“We were really eager to keep people working,” Williams recalled, “and our staff spent a lot of time retraining on safety and PPEs or working with businesses to understand that maybe they were one of the companies that had to shift their primary focus, or start a side-gig to be able to survive economically, and they needed all of their employees to be on board and trained.”

So Trillium got creative and started to research which industries were in high demand, and worked hard to diversify the workforce opportunities by connecting to as many industries as possible. So, its focus in the last six months has been on essential employers, places like Amazon and Fred Meyer and Target and grocery stores.

Trillium’s message has not changed: businesses could have more efficient administrative teams if they had personnel dedicated solely to tasks like sorting mail and running around the building or campus to deliver it, freeing up valuable time for others up the chain. It takes time to find out what the business needs, then go back to the talent pool for candidates who would fit.

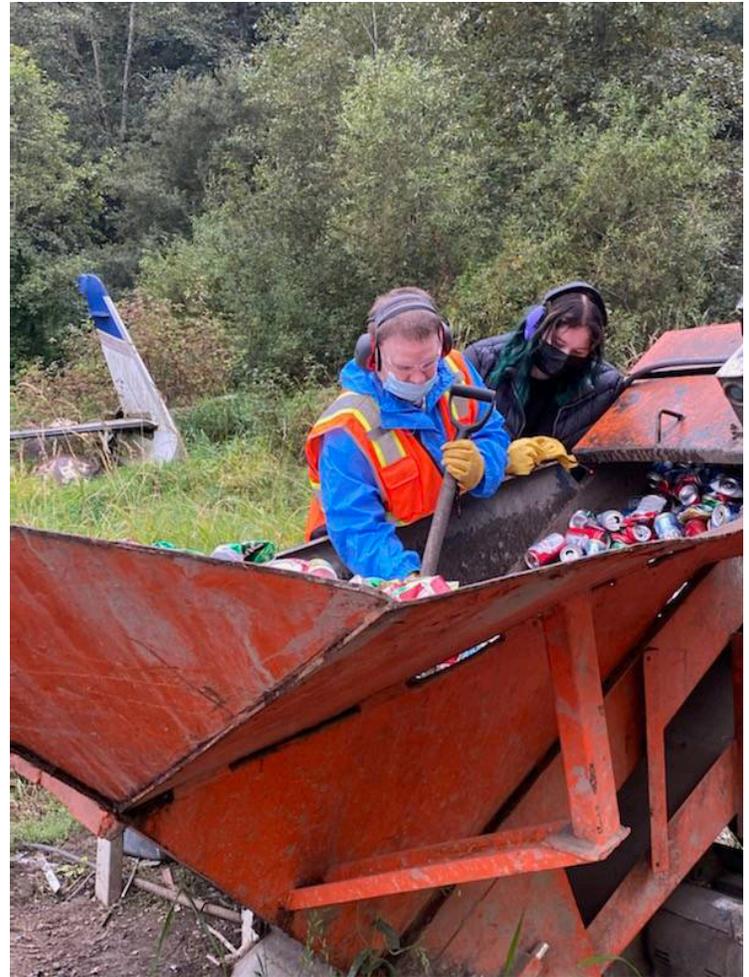
Williams emphasizes that these are not feel-good hires.

“One of the things that we really want to avoid is a charity hire because when the rubber hits the road, and the company has to make the big decisions, it’s not going to keep them. We’re not here to help people feel good. We’re here to get people into the workforce, and help people be better business.”

Trillium’s belief is that communities are stronger when

people with developmental disabilities are working because they have skills to contribute. When they’re working, they’re adding value to a business, so it is absolutely committed to value-added jobs.

“It’s a positive story because it’s something great that’s happening,” Williams said, “and one of the ways we are celebrating is by saying thanks to employers for continuing their commitment to inclusion, even amidst this pandemic.”



Aaron Baker sorts metal for Valley Recycling. Photo courtesy Michelle Hernandez