

## Trillium finds work for adults with disabilities

By Luke Stangel – Contributing writer  
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In 2012, Mark Schaefer had a problem on his hands: Nobody in his restaurant really liked rolling silverware.

It's a small but important thing, he says. Clean, tightly wrapped silverware sets the guest's expectation of the meal to come.

And no one seemed as obsessed with the quality of rolled silverware as he was until he met Heidi Scheibner with Trillium Employment Services.

Auburn-based Trillium is a nonprofit employment agency that specializes in placing adults with disabilities in purpose-built jobs tailored to their interests and strengths. Scheibner runs Trillium's Kitsap County office, and listened to Schaefer describe the daily tasks he needed help with at Hop Jack's, a fast-growing, family-owned restaurant chain with 17 locations.

Scheibner vowed to help Schaefer find employees to fit his needs, and she did, placing five people at the Hop Jack's restaurant in Silverdale within weeks. Today, Hop Jack's employs eight disabled people they found through Trillium in two restaurants, rolling silverware and preparing appetizers.

Of the original five employees Scheibner placed at Hop Jack's, three are still at the restaurant six years later. That's a high retention rate for an industry known for turnover.

"Work is good for your soul," Schaefer said. "Having a job sucks. Nobody wants a job, because a job is just about making money and paying bills. But work? If there's a fit for people, and certain things that they're going to do well and enjoy, that's good for people."

Finding the right fit has been the core tenet of Trillium's work, too.

### Trillium

- Founded: 1983
- Employees: 82
- Clients: 570
- Annual budget: \$6 billion

Launched in 1983 as a project out of the University of Oregon, the agency has grown to 82 employees, serving 570 people with disabilities in King, Pierce, Clark and Kitsap counties.

Today, 378 of the agency's clients are employed, in roughly 350

businesses across Washington state.

Trillium runs on an annual budget of around \$6 million, the majority of which comes from public funds.

"We have as broad a range of interests and skills as you would see in the general population," Trillium Executive Director Karen Williams said. "We have people who want to work with technology, we have people who want to work with people, people who want to be in a hospital environment, people who want to be in a quiet backroom at a library, people who want to work for the Mariners, and others who can't think of anything worse."

Trillium found success by understanding the interests and strengths of each person who walks through its doors, and then working to place that person in a job they'll find fulfilling. Recommended

The agency says 85 percent of the people it placed in jobs in 2016 were still employed at the same company a year later. Some of the agency's clients have been working in their positions for decades.

Introducing the idea to business owners for the first time can be a hard sell, Williams said. Trillium, one of several dozen disability-focused employment agencies in Washington state, identifies specific tasks that the business might be able to carve out into a job, such as rolling silverware at a restaurant or sorting mail.

A study from the Institute for Community Inclusion found 56,748 adults with cognitive disabilities were employed in Washington state in 2015. That's roughly one out of every four adults with cognitive disabilities living in the state that year.

Trillium is growing about 9 percent per year, and has placed people in jobs at Microsoft, Boeing, Costco, Starbucks and others. Williams says her focus is now bringing new businesses into the Trillium model.

"Every business owner and operator should understand that there is a business case to be made for employing folks that can fit and do the work that other people might not want to do," Schaefer said. "Every business has that piece of work, whether it be filing, silverware rolling, whatever it might be. The employer should understand there's really, truly a business case for supported employment."



Karen Williams is the executive director for Trillium.