

Supported Employment Network Provides Meaningful Work and Loyal Employees

The mission and purpose behind Better Community Living is to provide opportunities that support independence for adults with disabilities. In order to fully accomplish this mission, BCL emphasizes the importance of integrating skilled individuals into the workforce.

For more than 20 years, Better Community Living has collaborated with the New Bedford Area Chamber of Commerce to provide work opportunities through its "Supported Employment Network." The program bridges a connection between chamber members and job seekers with disabilities who wish to secure employment.

The program has found tremendous success, assisting hundreds of skilled adults with disabilities to obtain meaningful employment. In addition, the program has achieved great strides by simply educating the business community on the benefits of hiring a person with disabilities.

Joanne Rego, Coordinator of the employment program, assists BCL consumers, as well as others served by Lifestream, M.O.Life, and the Department of Developmental Services.

"My role is to link the Chamber membership with the agencies, and to try to inspire businesses to hire an individual with developmental disabilities. Part of that process is we have an article in every Chamber Focus newsletter. We either highlight an individual who's looking for employment, or someone who has been successfully employed."

When asked about the benefits she communicates, Joanne says, "I let them know we have a very skilled and eager workforce

that is looking to be a valuable employee to businesses. Individuals with disabilities receive top job support and job development training.”

“They’re eager, very loyal, and we don’t have a high turnover. A lot of times they’ll work in positions that typically do have a high turnover, whether it’s packing in a supermarket or working in a fast food restaurant, or general maintenance. Many will stay for 20 years... so employers aren’t constantly training and retraining for a particular job.”

Joanne says that the program provides incredible value to the individuals it serves. “For the same reasons that you and I want to have a rewarding job,” she says, “There’s a feeling of self-worth... and everyone likes a little money in their pocket.”

Many jobs also fulfill the individual dreams and wishes of BCL consumers. “There’s one lady with BCL that said she always wanted to work in a bakery, in a restaurant, and she’s doing that... which is exactly what she wanted. She wanted to be in food service.”

Not only has the Supported Employment Network impacted individual lives, it has made a major impact locally, nationally, and even globally. Over the years, the program has received widespread recognition and has even been used as a model program for other locations.

The development of a video highlighting successful job placements titled, Supported Employment: Make it Work For You, was shown at the ADA’s 10th Anniversary Celebration resulting in the Network receiving an Outstanding Program Award. In addition, the program was reviewed by the National Technical Assistance and Research (NTAR) Leadership Center to which it was then listed as a “STAR” program and utilized as a case model in the U.S. Department of Labor’s Handbook on hiring employees with disabilities.

The Network was also highlighted in an issue of the United States Chamber of Commerce's newsletter, and a collage of photos in the New Bedford Chamber of Commerce's newsletter highlighted 46 employees with disabilities that had been employed for five years or more.

The Supported Employment Network Program also had the opportunity to provide a presentation to Rotary members who were visiting New Bedford from Russia. The visiting Rotarians were so impressed with the Supported Employment: Make it Work for You video that they requested to use it in Russia during seminars in the larger cities in Russia, including Moscow, St. Petersburg and Novosibirsk.

To learn more, contact Joanne Rego, Supported Employment Network Coordinator, at 508-999-5231, ext. 28 or email jreg@newbedfordchamber.com