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Employment First program pushing counties to developmental disabilities find fulfillment

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NEWARK — Benjamin Meister sits at the kitchen table, holding his wife Stacy's hand.

Together they watch their dog, Buddy, and their cats, Snickers and Tootsie, playing around the living room.

Their Newark apartment is just large enough for them and their three pets. But they've got big dreams.

"We're working on saving up for a house or a trailer," Stacy said. "(Ben's) going to be a great dad someday."

Those goals would have been almost impossible two years ago. The couple was staying with Ben's parents and he was struggling to find a job.

Benjamin Meister, 24, has been working at Matesich Distributing as a janitor and in the recycling program for the past two years. / Michael Lehmkuhle/The Advocate

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Advocate Reporter

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Ben lives with a developmental disability that's made employment a challenge for most of his life. But through the Licking County Board of Developmental Disabilities'

Community Employment Services department, he was able to find work that fit his needs.

Since June 2011, he's done janitorial work at the beverage distributor Matesich Distributing Co. He recently was hired for another custodial job at Creative Minds Learning Center in Heath.

He and Stacy were able to leave his parent's house and move into their own place.

"It really dug us out of a hole," Stacy said. "It makes us feel more comfortable that we have something to fall back on because (the board is) always there."

For Ben Meister and other Licking County residents with developmental disabilities, the opportunity to be employed in the community makes a huge difference, said Nancy Neely, superintendent of the Licking County board of DD.

The board is working on putting new procedures in place to make sure as many people have that opportunity as possible, she said.

The change is part of Employment First, a statewide initiative to help people with developmental disabilities find jobs.

More than a year ago, Gov. John Kasich issued an executive order stating that community employment will become the preferred outcome for all working-age adults with disabilities.



Stacy and Ben Meister discuss Ben's job at Matesich Distributing Co. in Newark and the help he receives from The Licking County Board of Developmental Disabilities and their Employment First program. / Sara C. Tobias/The Advocate

Information

For more information about Employment First, go to ohioemploymentfirst.org. The Licking County Board of Developmental Disabilities' Adult Services Department can be reached at 740-522-8345.

About 50 percent of Ohioans with development disabilities say they want a job, but only 12 percent have one, according to the Ohio Department of Developmental Disabilities.

It's up to county boards to create the support systems and training opportunities to change that, Neely said.

Raising the bar

Most people can remember a grown-up asking them, "What do you want to be when you grow up," when they were children, Neely said.

"We all expect we are going to go to work and support ourselves," she said. "Historically, people with developmental disabilities have been eliminated from that transition that the rest of us go through."

In the early 1900s, children with disabilities were usually sent away to institutions, Neely said. When the E.S. Weiant Starlight School opened in Newark in 1952, students there didn't have many options outside the classroom.

Many counties built sheltered workshops where people could work after leaving school. The Licking County board opened a workshop in 1962 that later became LICCO Inc. Employees spend their days working on manufacturing projects.

During the past few decades, expectations of kids and adults with disabilities shifted, Neely said. They went from being isolated at school and at work to being a bigger part of the community.

By the mid-1980s, many boards were starting supportive employment programs to help clients find and keep jobs outside the workshop, said Robert Cimera, an associate professor of special education at Kent State University who focuses on employment and policy issues.

The Licking County board started its community employment program in 1985. This year, about 166 of the 375 adults it serves are employed outside the workshop. About 177 work at LICCO, and

many attend adult day services, said Kyle Miller, director of adult services.

Although the program has had many success stories, its procedures have become outdated, Neely said. More clients, especially young adults, have the desire and family support to go beyond LICCO.

"We assumed that most (clients) would be served by day services or a sheltered workshop and a small portion would get an opportunity to work in the community because they pushed us and said, 'Hey, I want a job,'" she said. "The whole thought process needs to change."

Employment First is one way to help county boards restructure their community employment programs, said Monty Kerr, deputy director of the division of policy and strategic direction for the Ohio Department of Developmental Disabilities.

"Our system has been a good system for 30 to 40 years, he said. "But what we are saying today is, 'How do we move forward?'"

Kasich's executive order on March 19, 2012, created an Employment First task force of state agencies to come up with best practices, said Kristen Helling, a project manager for the division of policy and strategic direction.

After a year of planning, the program is ready for implementation. Kasich's proposed biennial budget includes \$1 million in fiscal years 2014 and 2015 to help county boards put new systems in place to increase employment, Helling said.

The main goal will be for local boards to identify what prevents their clients from finding a job and eliminate those barriers, she said.

Some boards might need to spend more time training clients, while others might need to educate local businesses or families about the benefits of community employment.

When his parents, Becky and Bob Meister, connected him with the Licking County board, he met with a job developer to discuss his skills and his interests.

In June 2011, Pintz received a phone call from the board, asking whether Matesich had any openings. He invited Ben in for an interview and immediately felt he would be a good fit.

"It helped us recognize we could (reassign) duties (to Ben) and have the people working on them do other things," he said. "We recognized that would help us as a company."

During Ben's first two weeks, he worked with Karl Yost, one of the board's employment specialists, to make sure he learned all his responsibilities correctly.

Yost taught him how to do each skill and created a check list that Ben could use to make sure he finished every task.

"They really fitted the job to his needs," Stacy said.

As Ben got more comfortable with the job, Yost stepped back and allowed him to be independent. But he still checks in every few months to make sure things are going well and to make sure Ben and Stacy have the resources they need.

"We never truly leave them," Yost said. "We want to make sure the employer and the employee are both satisfied."

Ben and Pintz said they have no regrets.

"He's done exactly what they said he would do," Pintz said. "It's benefited both of us."

'Just like you'

Although the county board is shifting its focus toward community employment, residents shouldn't expect to see LICCO close its doors, Neely said.

"If someone has been going to LICCO for 40 years, they are not leaving," she said. "We need to concentrate on the next generation. That's how you change the system."

Once young people with developmental disabilities go into a workshop setting, they are more likely to stay there, he said. Although they are gaining skills, they aren't learning the ones that will help them in the workplace, he said.

"People who skip the sheltered workshop after high school do far better than individuals who go to a sheltered workshop in between," he said.

As Employment First gains strength, county boards will have to show local businesses and residents why the initiative is important, she said.

From a taxpayer standpoint, helping someone leave the workshop and get a job in the community saves money, Cimera said. It's more costly to pay someone to supervise clients in a workshop than it is when a job coach trains them to be independent.

People with developmental disabilities have the same needs and wants as anyone else, Yost said. They like interacting with people and making friends on the job. They want to earn money so they can live independently and spend time doing the things they like, Yost said.

"A lot of us are defined by their work, and our clients aren't any different," he said. "(When you get them a job), you can make a change in their life."

Seeing more people with developmental disabilities working at local businesses will help break down stereotypes, Neely said.

"Once you get over the fact that they have a disability you see the person behind the disability," she said. "You realize life is the same for them. They are just like you."

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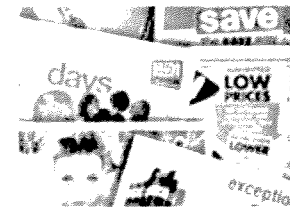
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