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News

An Overlooked Workforce

Published Thursday, April 7, 2011 7:00 am
by CAROL ROBIDOUX

For the unemployed, it hasn't felt much like a recovery with unemployment hovering around 9 and 10 percent nationally. And there's one group that has been hit even harder-those with disabilities. Even before the recession, these workers had a more difficult time finding employment.

The unemployment rate among the disabled is 14.7 percent, but Jim Hinson, placement supervisor for the NH State Bureau of Vocational Rehabilitation, says that figure is a misleading snapshot of the greatest untapped workforce since women were recruited to factories during World War II.

"The other statistic you need to know is that it represents only 14.7 of the 30 percent of people with disabilities who are actually looking for work. There's a whole other 70 percent who fall into the category of disabled who aren't looking for work, or don't work at all-either because they're discouraged, or frankly, because they've gotten used to living on Social Security Disability," Hinson says.

Those statistics, brought to light by a landmark Disability Status report issued by Cornell University in 2007, served as a call to action, according to Hinson. As someone who works with state agencies, schools and training specialists to create meaningful employment opportunities for those with disabilities, he says the report was heard loud and clear by NH service providers.

Project Search

The greatest buzz is being generated by Project Search, an immersive job-training program that targets high school seniors with intellectual and developmental disabilities and helps them secure employment and provides education and training. The program was imported to NH in 2009 from a successful model that started in Cincinnati.

Jennifer LeDuc Cusato of LinkAbilities, a Nashua-based nonprofit organization that connects employers, job seekers with disabilities, and support services, says the success of Project Search is indisputable. Since launching at St. Joseph Hospital in Nashua two years ago, the program has gained traction within the medical community and is in place at Catholic Medical Center in Manchester, Cheshire County Medical Center in Keene and Dartmouth-Hitchcock Medical Center in Nashua. But it's beginning to expand into other business sectors.

"Right now we're working on a program within the insurance industry and for Sodexo, a food service provider. Beyond health care, it's about creating training programs for businesses based on what they need instead of what we think they need," says Cusato. "Instead of training people in a vacuum, we can train them appropriately so they're ready to work with just the right training and support."

That was key for Craig Beck, regional administrative director for Dartmouth-Hitchcock Nashua, which partnered with St. Joseph Hospital to develop a training program to meet their specific needs. "Our view is that there is value-actually, a number of different levels of value-in Project Search. First and foremost, we have individuals coming in that have been trained in health care related jobs using specific skills. They are quality oriented and very loyal. That's a good skill set when you come into an environment where sterilization is important.

We're looking for those who can focus, with attention to detail, on a task that is very specific," Beck says. Participating in Project Search has not only allowed Dartmouth-Hitchcock Nashua to find qualified employees, but also helped it reevaluate positions, Beck says.

"Project Search forced us as an organization to look at our jobs and their specific requirements in a different way. Even if these candidates didn't fit into a medical assistant job description, by breaking down the work our medical assistants are doing, and extracting certain processes for reinvention, training our Project Search candidates to do these tasks actually frees up time for our medical assistants to do something like discussing patient care. The true value is that it makes us more efficient, and that's a positive thing," Beck says.

Because of the success of Project Search at St. Joseph's, the program expanded in January 2010 to Manchester, where Moore



Today:
Sunny with a high of 55

Center Services partnered with Catholic Medical Center and the Bedford School District to replicate the program. "As soon as they heard about the program, CMC was on board because they felt it was in line with their mission," says David Jenkins, vice president of business services for the Moore Center, a Manchester-based agency that supports the rights of individuals with developmental disabilities and acquired brain injuries to make their own choices about the services they receive. "Then we needed a school district to commit, and Bedford was overwhelmingly interested.

They provide a dedicated teacher, and CMC provides classroom space within the hospital. It's all made possible with the help of Vocational Rehabilitation, which pays for the support staff needed, which includes two career trainers, which is key because this program is designed not only to help an individual learn a skill, but to help employers and educate them about how to communicate and make accommodations," says Jenkins.

Breaking Down Barriers

Maureen Valley, senior director of client services at the Moore Center, says programs such as Project Search are changing NH's employment landscape by bringing young people into meaningful careers before they age out of the social service system at 21 without skills or prospects, leaving them dependent on Supplemental Security Income.

"Employers have a lot of fears about hiring those with disabilities, primarily because of the way it used to be done. People with disabilities would be put into a janitorial or foodservice job and not find much success because there was no support system. For another reason, those were subjective jobs-what I think is a clean bathroom might not line up with what my husband considers clean, so there was failure built into that process," Valley says.

Project Search focuses on "no fail" tasks that can be taught in a systematic way, emphasizing the abilities that an individual brings to a job. Valley describes a success story from the Cincinnati pilot program in which a woman with a severe disability was trained to put together incubators in a neonatal care unit. "It is a multiple-step process that must be done perfectly, and this woman was so good at it that she became a consultant and actually began training others how to do it precisely," Valley says. "There are so many jobs like that within a hospital that, if in the right hands, bring efficiency to the organization, provide better customer service, and create a meaningful career for an individual who otherwise might have never had that opportunity."

Ultimately it's about creating economic opportunities not only for an underused segment of the workforce, but for employers as well, says Jenkins of the Moore Center. "Over the years, we at the Moore Center have emphasized looking at people's abilities- looking at what people can really do. We all have strengths and weaknesses. It's a matter of identifying a person's strengths, and then matching that to the workforce. In this way, New Hampshire is way ahead of other states and we've upped the ante when it comes to finding individuals with disabilities meaningful things to do," Jenkins says.

Americans with Disabilities Act

In the 20 years since the Americans with Disabilities Act was passed, little progress had been made toward providing equal opportunities for the disabled, says Hinson. The missing link, according to Peter Darling, vice president of employment services for Granite State Independent Living in Concord, was the kind of programming now in place that brings together service organizations and the business community. "When we saw the data in that Cornell study, it was clear that things were only slightly better than they had been prior to the ADA," Darling says.

New Hampshire is among those states at the forefront of creating job opportunities for people with disabilities through several innovative programs.

One of those is the Community Support Network Inc., a nonprofit that works to educate and reform public policy. CSNI supports 10 state area agencies that provide services to those with developmental disabilities and acquired brain injury and their families, says Roy Gerstenberger, executive director of Concord-based Community Bridges, a service-based nonprofit in the thick of the reform movement. Community Bridges links people with disabilities and their families with opportunities in their communities.

"It's the New Hampshire miracle, in terms of developing a model for community-based services. We're one of only 11 states doing community-based services," Gerstenberger says. "We've developed something here that's far superior to other states that are still struggling to do something that we were able to put together thoughtfully at the point we closed down our institutions 25 to 30 years ago."

New Hampshire's voice has been further amplified further by the nomination by President Barack Obama in December of Granite

State Independent Living's CEO Clyde E. Terry to serve as a member of the National Council on Disability. Terry was nominated because of his ongoing advocacy work for the disabled.

Terry says he recognizes the need for initiatives like Project Search to help create communities where all people are valued for what they have to offer, regardless of physical or functional disabilities. "With the changes in health care, technology, education and a greater awareness about the potential of people with disabilities ... we all have to work together to bring out the best in everyone so that everyone may contribute to the state's economic future. We can not afford to waste the skills, talents and knowledge of anyone because of outdated attitudes and stereotypes," Terry says.

Darling says another significant element linking businesses and the disabled community has been the 2001 Medicaid Infrastructure Grant, an 11-year federal funding source awarded to 30 states, including NH since 2006. The grant was meant to create a support network that will break down existing barriers to employment and health care opportunities for the disabled. "The state is about to enter its fifth year of the Granite State Employment Project, funded through these federal dollars, which has brought significantly more than \$1 million annually here to address infrastructure and employment services," Darling says.

He explains that the Granite State Employment Project brings together best practices from across the country, including Project Search and other sector-based employment projects, that allow individuals with a range of disabilities to train and find jobs within a diverse range of local businesses, from the medical field and the hospitality industry to manufacturing facilities and local supermarkets.

"We will soon have in the state of New Hampshire a certification process for all individuals who do employment-related services-in essence, those that provide support for individuals with disabilities as they return to work, so there will be a standardized set of competencies," Darling says. He cites a goal to develop a Web-based resource for individuals and businesses to dispel misconceptions about such issues as loss of Social Security benefits during employment, while providing tools for employers who need reliable information in order to successfully restructure operations.

While advocates emphasize the many benefits that come from hiring those with disabilities, perhaps the most rewarding benefit is how this process is changing the culture of the workplace in general, says Gerstenberger. "Something we consistently hear from employers who've taken the step to welcome someone with a disability into the workplace is how the culture of that workplace evolves and improves. They actually find there are improvements in retention of those in other positions because their workforce in general finds a new sense of purpose in the work they're doing, because they're working with someone they know brings a unique contribution to the work environment," he says.

In addition, such efforts send a positive message to customers. "Everyone within your customer base has someone they've known who experiences a disability. When they see an organization taking steps to treat all people with equal value, they will make the choice to shop at that supermarket, or do business with that hospital or manufacturing company," Gerstenberger says.

Editor's Note: In part two of this story later this month, we will interview NH companies who took a leap of faith and experienced remarkable results.

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