

## PROJECT SEARCH NANTICOKE HELPS YOUNG ADULTS WITH DISABILITIES FIND JOBS AND INDEPENDENCE

Stephanie Tyler- Project SEARCH Instructor

The challenge of securing employment after high school is at the forefront of every young adult's mind as they prepare for graduation. This task, which can be difficult for anyone, can feel even more daunting if the young adult has a developmental disability. In 2017, the employment rate of working age individuals with a developmental disability was estimated at 18%-- significantly less than the 65% of those who do not have a disability.



2018-2019 Project SEARCH interns, from left to right-  
*Russell Snow, Alan Bahena-Toledo, Malori Hitchens,  
Deshawn Scye, Wesley Bailey*

What can communities in Sussex County do to address this serious disparity in employment? One solution is to create more opportunities for these young people to obtain authentic employment experience before they enter the community as independent adults, thus preparing them to seamlessly transition into the competitive workforce.

Project SEARCH is a high school transition program that is working to change the current employment culture for young adults with disabilities in Sussex County. Project SEARCH is a world-renowned one year high school transition program for young adults ages 18 to 21 in which the participants are fully immersed in the workplace. In Sussex County, this training occurs at Nanticoke Memorial Hospital. Project SEARCH at Nanticoke is a collaboration between multiple agencies that provide a multi-faceted approach to supporting the transition from student to adult. The other collaborating agencies include the Division of Vocational Rehabilitation (DVR), the Division of Developmental Disabilities Services (DDDS), Autism Delaware, Community Integrated Services (CIS), the Seaford School District, and the Department of Education. This inter-agency collaboration, unique to the program, provides a level of support to young people and their families that significantly improves the likelihood of employment after program completion.

The interns at Project SEARCH are held to extremely high expectations from day one. After a short week-long period of orientation, the interns interview for and begin working in their respective departments. The departments that currently participate as training sites are materials management, food service, environmental services, biomed, medical records, patient transport, and facility services. In the morning, they begin with one hour of instruction that covers topics relating to independent living (see website for details). After this hour, the interns proceed to work a full day in their department. Each intern completes three 10 to 12 week internships in order to diversify their skill set. Teamed up with a department mentor and a skills trainer, the interns learn valuable skills from navigating public transportation, to learning how to professionally communicate with customers and colleagues. This model of full workplace immersion alongside hospital staff ensures that the interns learn what it means to hold a job long term.

## UNDERSTANDING ITS IMPACT:

This training model, different than any other in Sussex County provides a truly transformative experience for everyone involved. Terri Hitchens, mother of intern Malori Hitchens, reflects on Malori's experience in the program and states:

“My family and I are so thankful that Malori was able to be a part of Project SEARCH. From day one, it has been an amazing journey. Everyone from her teachers to her mentors to the employees at Nanticoke Hospital have been a positive influence. We have seen Malori grow and mature in so many ways. We are so thrilled with her accomplishments. It has been a wonderful experience to see people encourage her and care so much about her well being and accept her. If anyone has the opportunity to be part of this amazing program, please do not second guess your decision. Go for it! You will not be disappointed. It is truly what we want for our children, to be happy, feel like they have a purpose in life, and to succeed as adults.”



*Malori, pictured above, counts inventory for the Emergency Department to replenish their stock.*



*Malori also preparing food to be taken to patients staying within the hospital.*

As Terri mentioned in her statement, the Nanticoke staff that serve as mentors for the interns are an integral part of the program's success. The mentors embody the high level of inclusion and acceptance that the program expects from its host business. Marlene Blake, Project SEARCH mentor with the Environmental Services Department shares her experience with the interns:

"I see constant change and progress with our interns. I think that they are eager to learn, and are willing to learn and work with us. I love working with our interns because I get to see the change. This program has come a long way for them, let's keep it going!"



*Deshawn Scye and Alan Bahena-Toledo training under the guidance of Marlene*

Barb Twilley, a mentor from the Materials Management Departments chimes in on this idea:

"I think this program has been beneficial for everyone involved--for us and for the interns. I know that the interns learn a lot of skills from us, but I can say that we have learned just as much from working with them. We have learned a lot about how we think about and do things here, and I know that has helped change us for the better. I think more businesses should be more involved in hiring our guys--I know they would benefit a lot from it!"



*Russell Snow (left) trained with Barb in winter of 2018, and Wesley Bailey (right) is receiving his training from Barb in spring of 2019. The skills they learn in the Materials Management Department will help them acquire jobs in their career path of choice.*

## WHAT'S NEXT?

To date, 80% of Project SEARCH interns have found jobs in competitive employment within a month of completing the program. The vision for the program is to continue offering this one-of-a-kind experience for as many young adults in Sussex County as possible.

## HOW CAN YOU HELP?

We are always looking for people to help spread the word and support our program! You can help by sharing this information with coworkers, friends, or family members! We are also looking for professionals in the community to join our Advisory Committee. Advisory Committee members can participate as mentors to our students by presenting about their industry, reviewing intern resumes, and even helping give mock interviews to help our interns develop interview competency. All activities are on a volunteer basis, and members can do as much or as little as they would like!

## WANT TO LEARN MORE?

If you are interested in learning more about the program please contact **Stephanie Tyler** at 302-339-5199 or [stephanie.tyler@seaford.k12.de.us](mailto:stephanie.tyler@seaford.k12.de.us). We do give tours periodically to families and students who are interested in applying to Project SEARCH at some point in their educational journey.



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