

Program builds jobs blueprint

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REAL WORK FOR REAL PAY: Thomas White has worked at Safeway for close to one year. White found his job through a PRACL employment program.

Best practices will be documented and available for use provincially

A Powell River organization is creating a blueprint for finding employment for people with developmental disabilities. Powell River Association for Community Living (PRACL) has been awarded \$148,700 per year for three years by the ministry of housing and social development and Community Living BC.



The funding is part of the three-year provincial Customized Employment Demonstration Project aimed at building a support system for people with special needs. PRACL will use the funding to create Steps to Employment, a customized employment program. Once finished, best practices arising from Steps to Employment will be documented and made available for use as an employment model province-wide.

According to the ministry of housing and social development's news release, the goal of customized employment services is "to help developmentally disabled people find and keep employment uniquely tailored to their individual needs."

Jobs will be created based on the strengths, needs and interests of the person with the disability, as well as the needs of the employer. A customized job is a set of tasks based on the employee's skills, not on the employer's standard job description.

Steps to Employment will begin in mid-September with a pilot study of 10 individuals. "The 10 [participants] in the pilot group will be the 10 we're looking at on the provincial level in terms of evaluating success rates," said Liz Kellough, program manager. "We want to ensure that we

have a really broad spectrum of people. We want a broad diversity of need, age and job interest,” she said.

Steps to Employment will customize employment by considering job duration and identifying the skills and support needs of each participant in the program. Support needs, for example, the needs of a person with limited physical mobility, are recognized and integrated into the workplace. Job carving, the extraction of components of a job in areas where the participant has strengths, will also be used to create a position that the employee can perform well at and keep.

PRACL will develop Steps to Employment by spending funding on building resources like workshops and training sessions for program participants and coordinators. Funding will also be spent on accommodating program participants’ different workplace needs and on doing functional assessments for participants, “whether that be done by an occupational therapist or psychologist,” said Kellough.

Steps to Employment is composed of a series of stages, or stepping stones, that lead participants towards a job. “The beginning stage orients participants to the world of work by having them imagine themselves as a worker,” said Kellough.

The second stage involves “testing the waters.” A job at this stage would not necessarily be a paid position; rather, the participant would be “testing a whole bunch of different kinds of career areas.” Participants will likely be doing work experience at school, so Steps to Employment will extend that experience by finding employment that takes place on weekends or evenings.

Establishing a participant in the workplace by setting up paid work placements is the program’s third stage. Steps to Employment’s ultimate goal is that the participant becomes independent.

“The goal is maximum employment. For each individual that will look different,” said Kellough. When asked what types of jobs participants can expect to find, Kellough said, “I don’t want to say because I think that limits us.”

Kellough pointed out that PRACL’s intent is not to duplicate existing employment programs, but to add to what already exists. Steps to Employment differs from PRACL’s current employment programs partly because it serves younger people, giving them an awareness that the expectation of employment is a ‘given’ when they become adolescents. Customized employment differs from supported employment because it creates jobs that are uniquely suited to the individuals performing them, does not accept wages below minimum wage, and includes business ownership.

Steps to Employment will be staffed by a variety of people in the community. PRACL staff already employed in family, residential and employment support programs, as well as the Crossroads Program and Community Life Program, will be involved.

Employees from the School District 47, Career Link and Vancouver Island University will also take part. “We’re going to be training and working with lots of the staff [at PRACL] to learn this new model,” said Kellough. “We will hire a primary case manager as well as access existing support staff.”

Businesses supporting Steps to Employment are the Rotary Club of Powell River and the Powell River Chamber of Commerce. Kim Miller, chamber of commerce manager, said the chamber will support Steps to Employment by giving it access to their business contacts, and potential employers. “We will get the word out on the program to the business community through our luncheons” which are attended by 50 to 60 community businesses. “We are 100 per cent supportive of [PRACL] in any way that we can be,” said Miller.

Kellough believes Steps to Employment has implications for other BC communities. She said Powell River demonstrates that it is possible to employ people with disabilities in real jobs for real pay in a small community with a limited job market. Steps to Employment “puts Powell River on the map once again as a model community that embraces and supports people with disabilities,” said Kellough.

She also believes the program has implications for Powell River. “We hope to build a new capacity within our community to both support and welcome individuals who have a developmental disability as members of our local workforce at a much earlier age,” said Kellough.

Potential participants in Steps to Employment must fill out a registration package and be eligible through Community Living BC. For more information and to register for a program information session, readers can call PRACL at 604.485.6411.