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"People With Disabilities Are Working Too"

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Andre Taylor of Sicklerville loves to do dishes.

"I'm a single guy. I don't have many at home," said Taylor, 36, smiling as he wheeled himself around the cafeteria of the Abilities Center of Southern New Jersey in Westville, where he works.

Taylor is among about 220 employees at one of South Jersey's leading providers of jobs, occupational training, and educational services for people who are born with disabilities or who acquire a disability through an accident, illness, or injury.

The center wants to expand, but the state has slashed its contribution toward the operating budget, and fund-raising has been crimped by the recession. The waiting list for jobs has about 50 names, said president and chief executive officer Susan Perron.

Nationally, the unemployment rate for workers with a disability was 16.2 percent in September, compared with 9.2 percent for workers without disabilities, according to the most recent data from the Bureau of Labor Statistics.

But that figure, which measures people in the workplace who lost jobs, tells only part of the story, experts say.

The total number of working-age people with disabilities without jobs nationally exceeds 70 percent, said Bill Ditto, New Jersey's director of disability services. The Garden State has 1.9 million residents with disabilities of all ages.

In Pennsylvania, about 530,000 working-age individuals receive Social Security disability benefits. In 2008, about 5 percent of them also had

a job, said John Miller, vice president of AHEDD, a nonprofit placement agency based in Camp Hill.

"The prevailing attitude in society is that if you're a person with a disability, you're unable to work," Ditto said.

Workers and supervisors at the Abilities Center know that's not true.

"One of the reasons I like working here is that people like coming to work," said Taylor's boss, food-services manager Wendy Ubil of Franklinville. "They're hard workers."

Nationally, about 44 percent of Social Security beneficiaries with disabilities surveyed recently by Mathematica Policy Research said they wanted to find a job - or a better-paying job - within five years.

"About 90 percent of people with a disability live on or below the federal poverty level," Ditto said. "They're not going to achieve what most people want: home ownership, travel, assets."

Beyond raising their standard of living, people with disabilities seek the personal satisfaction of working, Perron said.

"When you meet someone for the first time, the first thing you ask is what they do for a living," she said.

Many employers see people with disabilities as an untapped resource, Ditto said. But a barrier is fear by workers or their families that a salary could jeopardize federal benefits, especially coverage of vital medications, equipment, and personal assistance.

"Teachers were telling me that I could be anything I wanted to be, but then my parents were scared I'd lose my benefits," said Michele Leahy, a former Miss Wheelchair Pennsylvania and a work-incentive planning coordinator for AHEDD in Jenkintown, which serves Philadelphia and four neighboring counties.

Two programs - Works for Me in Pennsylvania and DiscoverAbility NJ - are among those helping workers negotiate the federal bureaucracy and connecting them with job coaches and employers. Both are funded by Medicaid Infrastructure Grants.

In August, David Beckford, 20, became cleaning captain at a Taco Bell in Northeast Philadelphia.

The new job "is going pretty smooth," said Beckford, who has a learning disability. "I need it. I have a baby to take care of." Beckford's daughter is 18 months old and lives with her mother.

His coach, Judy Shear of AHEDD, said the restaurant was training Beckford, a Frankford High School culinary-arts graduate, in food preparation. She sees potential for management.

"If I had 20 of David, my job would be easy," said Shear, who manages from 30 to 50 clients.

In 2008, AHEDD placed 350 new clients for an average of 119 days each. As of June, 57 percent were still employed.

Depending on the job, workers with disabilities' federal benefits may be adjusted or suspended, Miller said. Sometimes workers negotiate to retain Medicaid, which may be better for them than private insurance. The particulars are so complicated that a job search usually begins with a benefits consultation.

AHEDD and Community Integrated Services helped Adolfo Burgos, 20, open a printing business in Philadelphia four years ago. He looks forward to getting up each day to customize magnets, golf balls, bags, and business cards.

"Being your own boss is a big responsibility," said Burgos, who described himself as bipolar and intellectually challenged. "But you can clock out whenever you want." His goal is to open a store in his garage.

Ditto said he hopes most workers with disabilities find jobs in community settings, especially as assembly-line work for employers such as the Abilities Center disappears. He foresees job growth in food service, green energy, and medical labs.

To learn more about the Pennsylvania AHEDD's "Works for me" campaign, call our Toll Free Hotline at 1-866-902-4333 ext. 192 or visit our website at www.WorksForMe-PA.org.

Portions of the article not pertaining to AHEDD's "Works for me" campaign were not included.