

Final Grant Report

Project RISE (Reaching for Independent Successful Employment)

Summer Volunteer Experience Program

Program Summary

Children's Mercy Hospitals and Clinics utilized support from an Autism Speaks Family Services Community Grant to help ten teenagers and young adults with autism spectrum disorder acquire volunteer work experience within the hospital over the summer. Grant funds allowed the hospital to hire two job coaches to support the participants during their experience. The coaches helped orient the individuals to workplace expectations, trained them on specific job tasks and facilitated the development of social connections with hospital staff and other volunteers. The program was offered at two locations, our primary hospital in downtown Kansas City, Missouri and satellite hospital in Overland Park, Kansas.

We were fortunate to recruit two excellent job coaches. One is an experienced educator and author in the field of autism and mother of a son with ASD. The other is a college student pursuing a master's in social work, with experience providing individual instruction and athletic coaching to children with disabilities. The coaches worked on a 1:1 basis with participants and provided continuity of support throughout the summer volunteer experience.

Fifteen participants were recruited for the project, including patients referred from the hospital's Developmental and Behavioral Sciences Department, local school districts and through informal family networks. Two families did not complete the application process due to concerns about the immunizations required to volunteer at the hospital, one individual was interested only in paid employment vs. volunteering and two families did not complete the application paperwork by the deadline. Ten individuals completed the process and were assigned to volunteer one day a week from Memorial Day through early August.

Six males and four females, ranging in age from 15 – 21, participated in the program. Three individuals graduated from high school just prior to entering the program, one is in college and the remaining six are still in high school. The volunteers were placed in a variety of roles within the hospital, based upon their individual interests and skills. Assignments included Waiting Room Attendant, Pathfinder, Mail Delivery, Grounds Crew, Supply Chain and Ronald McDonald Family Room. Waiting Room Attendants provide creative play activities for children waiting for outpatient medical appointments. Pathfinders greet and escort visitors throughout the facility. Volunteers sorted and delivered mail to departments throughout the facility. The grounds crew is responsible for removing trash from the parking garage and attending to flowers, grass and shrubs. The Supply Chain department delivers medical and office supplies to clinical departments. Volunteers in the Ronald McDonald Family Room prepare guest sleeping rooms for the families of critically ill children.

Objectives and Results

Our first objective was to *provide a positive work experience for young people with autism spectrum disorders*, especially for the individuals who had no prior experience in a workplace. Three individuals entered the program with no formal work or volunteer experience. The remaining participants had some prior experience as volunteers and/or through high school

career exploration activities. We surveyed participants and families at the beginning of the summer to elicit their expectations and reasons for becoming involved in the program. The most frequent responses were: “To gain experience in specific job skills for a career in that area,” and “To gain ‘soft skills’ needed for any job (working for a supervisor, timing in/out on a time clock, working at an acceptable pace, communicating with others).” A few participants also noted their desire to earn service hours required for school credit or fill time and stay busy during the summer. Participants and families were surveyed again at the end of the summer and made favorable comments about their work assignments, job coach support and the individual career portfolios that they received at the conclusion of the program. Our volunteer orientation group was not rated as positively by participants. In an effort to facilitate inclusion of volunteers with disabilities, participants were scheduled to attend the general group orientation for new student volunteers. Families were invited to attend, as well. Several found the process to be overwhelming for individuals with ASD (the group was too large, too much information was presented at one time, etc.) In the future, we will return to the practice of offering an individual or small group orientation for summer volunteers that will be more comfortable in that setting.

Our second objective was to ***provide appropriate support services to departments within the hospital that host volunteers with disabilities***. In order to provide a successful opportunity for volunteers, we must address the needs of host departments by ensuring that volunteers are appropriately matched with job duties and that the presence of a job coach does not disrupt department operations. Managers of host departments were surveyed at the conclusion of the program to gauge their satisfaction with the process, volunteers and assigned job coaches. We asked them: “What was the best part of hosting a Project RISE volunteer?” Responses included: “The best part was that Matthias wanted to work in grounds and do grounds work, and having Kate as his job coach.” “Showing a young person what I do and hopefully giving him some idea of how working here would be.” “Watching a student grow and develop in this program.” We also asked departments: “As a result of this experience, would you recommend involvement with Project RISE to another department?” Responses included: “Yes, great experience”; “Yes, it went very smooth.” and “Most definitely! A positive experience for all involved in the program.”

Our third objective was to ***provide the participant with an experience that will enhance their future vocational success***. Job coaches rated participant work skills at the beginning of the summer and at the conclusion of the experience. Factors observed included the volunteer’s ability to manage the schedule independently, follow safety guidelines, retain instructions and interact with staff, patients and visitors. The majority of participants demonstrated observed growth of new skills, including the ability to work more independently and interact more effectively with others. At the conclusion of the summer, many participants were viewed as being independent enough to perform their volunteer tasks without job coach support. One individual desired to continue volunteering after the program concluded, but was unable to do so because he continued to need intensive job coaching support beyond what the hospital can provide on an ongoing basis. Participants were provided with an individual career portfolio (in paper and electronic format) that documented their experience. Included in the portfolio was a certificate of completion, letter of reference, copy of their service description and photos of the volunteer performing job tasks. We believe that this will provide a useful tool for future job interviews, as well as supporting a sense of accomplishment for the young person. A celebratory

reception was held for volunteers, families and host departments at the end of the summer to recognize the participants and thank participating staff members.

We are pleased to share the story of Matthias, a volunteer assigned during the summer to work with the Grounds Crew. Matthias is 16 years old and is just beginning to explore potential careers through his high school transition from school to work program. He and his mother identified two primary areas of interest during our initial meeting. He is an artist who creates drawings and folk art pieces with various materials. Matthias also enjoys working outside in the yard at home. We approached the hospital Grounds Crew supervisor, who had never worked with an individual with a disability. He was willing, but admittedly nervous, and shared that he had never met anyone before with autism. The manager was provided with educational materials about autism, in addition to information about what we anticipated would be Matthias' skills and support needs. The job coach worked alongside Matthias and the entire Grounds Crew on the early morning shift and in the heat of the summer. Matthias joined the crew on morning break in the cafeteria and soon made friends among the staff. The department director reported that the employees enjoyed mentoring Matthias, seeing him learn new skills and grow. He felt the experience enriched their jobs over the summer. At the graduation reception, the entire grounds crew came to shake his hand, wish him well and meet his family. A photo of Matthias at work is attached.

Dissemination of Information

Information about this project will be shared in a poster presentation at the Children's Hospital Association National Leadership Conference in Washington, D.C. on October 7 – 10, 2012, at the Bi-State Autism Summit sponsored by Children's Mercy Hospital on October 18, 2012 and at the Kansas Center for Autism Research and Training conference on November 30, 2012.