Low wages contribute to vacancies, high turnover

Yellow flags bring attention to DSP salaries

Yellow flags decorated the front of ACT’s main building recently in an effort to bring attention to the low wages of direct support professionals.

The flags were created and hung by ACT’s consumers during the National DSP Recognition Week of September 14-18 to show the public and legislators low wages are inconsistent with the amount of care and concern direct support professionals give to their consumers. This was part of a week-long celebration for DSP Recognition Week.

Flags were displayed throughout the country “to raise awareness that the work of Direct Support Professionals, or DSPs, is in many ways rewarding but not rewarded enough,” says Kalynn Ramsey, Activities Coordinator. She also says staff are essential to one of the most vulnerable populations yet aren’t compensated appropriately.

Executive Director of ACT, Mark Hassemer, told the consumers and staff placing the flags that their efforts are being noticed.

Two Congressional members have introduced a House resolution to address the workforce crisis, Hassemer says. He says the legislation would help provide funds to states to enable them to increase the wages paid to targeted direct support professionals who are providing services under certain Medicaid programs.

Without help, low wages will continue to “contribute to constant vacancies, high turnover and excessive overtime,” Hassemer says. “All of this threatens the quality of supports to people with disabilities. Without a reliable labor pool the lives of millions of Americans who rely on long-term services and supports are at risk.”

If you have not already done so, ask your Congress person to support the current resolution, HR 868. Direct support professionals in our community, and around the country are counting on your help.

Participants plan celebration

Program celebrates 100th participant

ACT’s Community Integration Program recently marked the century milestone in number of participants. In fact 107 consumers are now part of the program.

To celebrate, participants decided what they’d like to do best. They chose a part with a ring-toss game, food, music and dancing, explains Kalynn Ramsey, Activities Coordinator for Community Integration.

She gathered ideas for the event from her Consumer Advisory Board, her survey of consumers regarding a wide range of topics – from their care to plans for events like the recent party.

She also asked “if they thought if they are still being provided good service since we have so many people here, and if not, what needs to be done. And everyone said ‘yes’ they are still being served well. And nearly everyone wanted to celebrate,” she said.

Without help, low wages will continue to contribute to constant vacancies, high turnover, and excessive overtime. All of this threatens the quality of supports to people with disabilities. Without a reliable labor pool the lives of millions of Americans who rely on long-term services and supports are at risk.

Mark Hassemer
ACT Executive Director
Professional, business-like offices now greet job seekers when they come to ACT Career Services. The program recently moved into a two-office suite where all facets of job-seeking can be handled. A third adjoining office is dedicated to training and meetings for all ACT programs.

The new offices are located across the street from ACT’s main corporate office and is directly behind offices for the Community Living Program.

“It’s a nice professional location that really gives us an opportunity to focus solely on ACT Career Services,” says John Savage, director of Employment Services. “I’m very excited about this,” he adds. “I think it gives us an opportunity for growth. We’ll be able to support more people and give people more opportunities.”

In addition to the new space three ACT employees will move into new positions to meet the demands of job prospects and employers. “That gives us the chance to make things happen in a very positive way.”

Complete with business furniture, paint and carpet, the space makes a positive impression to employers says ACT Career Services Program Manager Jessica Boffa. She says that while “the primary focus of ACT Career Services is the jobseekers, just as equally important are the businesses we work with. It’s real important for us to have a professional atmosphere and really convey that to the businesses we’re working with. We also want the jobseekers to know what’s expected in a job site – how you interact, what kinds of things are appropriate.”

Boffa explains that when a job-seeker comes to the agency “they treat it like a job. You come on time. You’re dressed appropriately – anything you’d be expected to do on a job site.”

The investment in the new facility is necessary she adds because of the effort it takes to place someone in a job. “There’s a lot of work to do to get businesses to see the value of a hard worker whether they’re an individual with a disability or not.”

Vicki Schulte, a job developer, will use the new office to help jobseekers find a job. The new space is helpful to her because of a conference room, and her computer station. Being close to the training room will also allow jobseekers to apply for jobs online.

“I think this will give them a better opportunity to find jobs and be more capable to assist themselves. We always encourage each jobseeker to do as much as they can and then we just guide them along the way. We want them to be as independent as possible to find that job.”

Special visitor.

Bernard Simons, director of the Missouri Division of Developmental Disabilities, visited ACT and the consumers’ home on Hockaday recently. Simons, who makes a point of visiting facilities and homes when in an area, takes time to go over family photos with Dennis, one of three consumers at the Hockaday home.

Two homes recently were located for consumers by the Community Living Program.

One home for two male consumers is located in the Katy Lake subdivision in southwest Columbia. “The house is perfectly suited for the guys,” says Carrie Griffith, Program Supervisor about the Laketown home. The consumers “are very happy there.”

“The transition has been great.” She adds that the neighborhood welcomed the men and that they are enjoying all aspects of the home including the backyard. “When people come in they love to show it off and give a tour,” she says.

Another duplex was made available to two female consumers. The new home for the female consumers is located in north Columbia. “They’ve done very well,” Griffith adds. “They wanted no steps because we had some mobility issues and again we were able to find something that was very accessible. We were very fortunate.”

Of both recent moves she says “the moves have been very good for the consumers. The moves were made with the consumers in mind.”
A n innovative program is linking ACT consumers with many community activities. Unlike the past, it doesn’t require a building owned by ACT. All it takes is a computer or piece of paper for older ACT consumers to link up with a wide variety of activities.

The program is called Community Advantage and it’s designed with the older consumer in mind. “As people with disabilities get older they may not be interested in coming to a place with lots of people that is very busy,” says Michelle Saunders, Program Director for Community Integration. “Our building can be very busy at times. We have as many as 200 people at any given time in this building. That stimulation may be a little too much for some.”

Instead, the individual can register for a community activity on a computer from their home. Currently the program has computers in 10 Community Living homes. Eventually all Community Living homes will be equipped with a computer for consumers to sign up for Community Advantage activities.

Now “folks go to the Web site and see what activities are being offered,” says Saunders. Activities are color coded like brown for exercising, mall walking, bowling or going to Columbia’s recreation center, the ARC. Numerous other activities, from going out for coffee or lunch to siteseeing are also available.

“The feedback is that they really, really like it,” says Saunders. A big draw is the fact transportation is provided so the consumer is picked up and then delivered back to their home. Lunch, too, is a magnet for many to get involved. The program, while just a months old, now has about 10 regular participants.

“The baby boomer generation is retiring and leaving our work program,” says Saunders. “Now they want to do things during the day and we want them to be out in the community. There’s lots of choice for the person being supported. We’re excited.”

To view the Community Advantage website, go to www.actservices.org/ca.

For more information on the Community Advantage Program, please contact Michelle Saunders at 573-474-9446 or Michelle4act@socket.net
Katherine Adams knew years ago that she wanted to help special needs individuals. Her mother, a special education teacher for 30 years instilled in her the desire and work ethic to help others.

Today she relies on those qualities, plus graduate-level training, on her job as a behavior therapist. Adams is the second behavior therapist to join the ACT staff. As a behavior therapist she helps consumers learn new behaviors and coping skills when difficult period arises.

It’s challenging work, but Adams enjoys it. “I love it,” she says. “I love all the consumers I’m working with; I love the population. It’s tough but you need some patience and I’ve got lots of patience.”

Adams joined ACT close to the time she earned her Bachelor’s and Master’s degrees in social work from the University of Missouri-Columbia. Her practicums at two area institutions in gave her further experience and convinced her she had picked the right profession.

“I really like behavior therapy,” the Labadie, Missouri native says. It’s fun and it’s using your imagination and being creative. You really empathize with the person and try to know how they’re going to learn things.” From there she works with the consumer whatever amount of time is needed to improve their quality of life.

“Hopefully we’re making an improvement in their daily living,” she says. “I think it’s important to recognize even little successes because it’s important to recognize the little things. Not everything is going to happen at once.

It’s nice to appreciate the little things. It’s going to take time. You’re not going to see changes overnight as much as you want to.”

Despite the painstaking work, “it’s fun to work with our consumers,” she says. It’s all because ACT “definitely has the best interests of their consumers at heart. We’re all behind the people we’re serving.”

ACT’s newest board member provides a link to the City of Columbia and it’s many disability-related activities. Assistant City Manager Paula Hertwig Hopkins says “commitment to individuals with disabilities is a big part of the city’s focus and a lot of the things we do.”

“That fact makes a perfect fit between ACT and the City of Columbia, she adds. “There’s a real sensitivity within the city and the council for our residents that have disabilities,” she says. “I think it’s a nice fit.”

Hopkins has been Assistant City Manager in Columbia for the past 10 years. Before that the Chicago native worked in city management at Osage Beach.

While in the Lake of the Ozarks area she worked closely with a sheltered workshop and developed a strong commitment to those individuals with disabilities.

“I have a sensitivity to those folks and that sensitivity the whole community has, particularly the council and the commissions,” she says. “I think I can provide that kind of support to them.”

She adds that ACT could perhaps benefit from her knowledge of grants related to those with disabilities. “There might be some opportunities between ACT and the city,” she says, “grant applications or funding applications.”

She adds that she’s pleased to be a part of ACT. “ACT performs well. It’s a good operation. It’s a well-run organization highly respected in the community.”

Hopkins says that throughout her three-year term she’ll work to “provide that perspective or input,” related to those with disabilities. “I’ll let ACT know of ways they can benefit.”

Meet Katherine Adams
New behavior therapist finds pleasure in helping others

Katherine Adams, ACT’s new Behavior Therapist, has wanted to work with special needs’ individuals since she was a child. “I love all the clients I’m working with,” she says.

Fulfilling a dream.

Paula Hertwig Hopkins, Assistant City Manager

ACT to benefit from experience, knowledge

New board member a link to grants for those with disabilities

Well connected.

ACT’s newest board member is well connected to the City of Columbia. Paula Hertwig Hopkins is the Assistant City Manager and expects to bring many disability-related efforts by the city to the attention of ACT.

I have a sensitivity to those folks and that sensitivity the whole community has, particularly the council and the commissions.

I think I can provide that kind of support to them.

Paula Hertwig Hopkins, Assistant City Manager
Fontella Jackmon-Jones has a heart for youthful job seekers. She wants to help them develop the skills they can use throughout their life to have successful careers.

The new Assessment Coordinator, says she “likes developing more skills among our younger kids because I think that’s where our career based planning needs to start. It starts at a young jobseekers and then branches out. We want to give them the skills they need before they get older.”

She adds that she wants to help all her consumers and for younger consumers “instill the appropriate workforce skills before they are difficult to change or reverse.”

In addition to helping young job seekers gain skills, she hopes to also make the experience pleasant.

“I would like to see the goal, not only to help the people we serve, but to make it fun,” she says. “If you make it fun for the people you serve they’ll relax too. That makes easier for both parties involved.”

While her current position with ACT Career Services is new, she hopes to apply many of the skills she used working with geriatric developmentally disabled individuals.

“That kind of helped me,” she says, “but I’m learning more about the community and the business aspect of what I do.”

Added to her experience is her deep commitment to the people she supports. She says she makes it clear to her jobseekers know she’s there to help in any way. Her passion for what she does stays with her on and off the job.

“I’m kind of engulfed in my job,” she says. “I get deep into my job and try to give 110 percent doing what I need to do for the people I’m working for.”

Even when she’s away from the job ideas flow to help her clients and colleagues. “Sometimes the greatest ideas come to me away from work,” she says. “I’m always thinking how to help.”

I would like to see the goal, not only to help the people we serve, but to make it fun. If you make it fun for the people you serve they’ll relax too. That makes easier for both parties involved.

Fontella Jackmon-Jones, Assessment Coordinator

Best of friends.

Angela Erby recently moved one step closer to her long-term dream. Someday she would like to be a full-time Program Supervisor in the Community Living Program. As such she would oversee two consumer homes. She got closer to that dream by recently taking on the role of a Program Supervisor for one home, a home for Bill, Larry and Dennis. Erby is well familiar with the gentlemen because she also serves as a live-in staff member working with the many details of the home 20 hours a week.

The remaining 20 hours of her workweek are spent as the Program Supervisor. In that role she’s often busy arranging and taking her consumers to doctor appointments.

“My three guys, I love them. I wouldn’t trade them for the world,” she says.
Training center provides many benefits to staff, community

A CT’s new training center is ready for business. Equipped with seven individual workstations, each with a computer, the center will have many uses.

One of the biggest uses will be training for the College of Direct Support. The statewide college is an online training program which guides staff members to the Direct Support Professional designation. That designation is transferable to employers throughout the state.

ACT has been a leader in the state regarding the certification and has had 50 staff members complete the certification.

Even more Mid-Missouri direct-care employers are likely to use the training center, explains Michelle Saunders, Program Director of the Community Integration Program.

A leader in establishing the College of Direct Support, Saunders has helped establish a relationship with the Columbia Area Career Center for training and certifying individuals. ACT has been approved as one of 10 training sites in the state to train displaced workers through the Workforce Investment ACT.

“Obviously with what retention rates and turnover is in our field,” she says, “we thought it was a good pipeline for Direct Support Professionals. If we’re filling those direct care positions we can focus on more training for supervisory staff,” and enhanced training for DSPs.

Also, “this is all really new and very exciting,” Saunders says. “ACT is just ahead of the curve. We have the space available, work areas and computers.”

Saunders adds that ACT will be reimbursed for each trainee who attains the certification and is hired in the direct-care field that was referred through the Workforce Investment Act.

Another income source can be trainings for smaller provider agencies, she says. She cites the example of providing training for CPR and first aid, trainings that would be prohibitively expensive without the support of ACT.

“That will also help us because money will come back in and that will help with other training activities,” Saunders says.

ACT began to hold its seven-day block of training each month for new employees in the training center.

Trained Direct Support Professionals also are a quality source of new employees for ACT, she adds. “They’re certified and have all their trainings so we can offer positions here or refer them to other places.”

With what retention rates and turnover is in our field, we thought it was a good pipeline for Direct Support Professionals.

If we’re filling those direct care positions we can focus on more training for supervisory staff and enhanced training for DSPs.

Michelle Saunders, Program Director of the Community Integration Program

Meet Joel Jeffries, M.D.

Local physician heads ACT board of directors

The Board of Directors of ACT has elected new officers. President is Joel Jeffries, M.D., a physician and consultant. Serving as vice president is Cathy Atkins, sales and management consultant for Awareness Management Systems. And elected secretary/treasurer is Jonathan H. Tips, head golf professional at the Country Club of Missouri.

Recognized recently for their service to ACT was Trent Stober, past president of the board and president of MEC Water Resources, Inc., who received a plaque in recognition for this service.

Also recognized for two terms of service, or six years, was Kat Cunningham, president of Moresource, Inc.