ACT home creates family

Independence the goal

Casey, Blake and Ernie are like family. Together the three young men live successfully in an almost-new red brick home in southwest Columbia.

A lot of the success at the home is due to the consumers’ individual efforts, plus the assistance of long-term staff.

A person who believes in organization, Lynnette Kidwell-Austin and the gentlemen have developed a weekly chart that outlines what activity each resident should do on the specific day. That way cleaning, laundry and other tasks are taken care of.

The system, most importantly, equips each individual with skills they may use someday when they live in their own apartment.

“It’s rewarding,” says Charlie Burge, Community Living Program Supervisor, about the progress of the young men living at the house. “They’re reaching goals. It’s equipping them toward getting their independence to live in their own apartment. I attribute a lot of that to the staff.”

For Blake, cooking comes easy. He likes to cook and barbecue since his parents taught him years ago. Complementing that skill is his interest in shopping.

Blake also is busy with his job at ACT and Boy Scout activities. A member of Troop 701, Blake is getting close to earning his Eagle designation. “It’s a lot of work,” he says, “but I like it a lot. He particularly likes the troop’s annual summer camping trip to Iowa and attending Camp Wonderland, a camp for individuals with developmental disabilities.

He also attends every home Mizzou football game and many Mizzou basketball games.

Casey, Blake’s brother, also likes to watch basketball and other sports. The first thing he does in the morning is read the sports news in the Columbia Missourian.

During the workweek he’s employed at Central Missouri Sub-contracting, Enterprises. Having worked 14 years, Casey has refined the art of saving money. “I like to put it in the bank,” he says, “and save it.”

Ernie, the home’s third consumer, is active like his housemates. One of his interests is the Central Missouri Rock and Lapidary Club. Ernie joins the group for each monthly meeting. And in between meetings, he collects, sorts, and labels his rocks. Soon he’ll take to the club his collection of mussel shells he collected in Kentucky this summer. His passion for rocks goes back to elementary school, he says.

His excellent memory also is put into use to memorize every bus route in Columbia. Landmarks throughout the city help him locate the specific bus route for the area.

Like his housemates, his ultimate goal is to have his own apartment. And, he says, “My mom would like me to have a real job.”

“The parents of all the consumers play a big role in creating a family atmosphere at the home," Burge says. Parents include all the housemates if they’re doing activities. The parents also have joint family meals at the house from time to time.

“It’s a lot better for the guys," says Burge. “The parents know each other. They’re really close.”
ACT Career Services assists nearly 200 individuals with disabilities every year in their job search efforts. But getting started requires more than just a phone call to ACT.

The first step is determining if a person is eligible for services. If a person considering employment has a visual impairment, they should contact Rehabilitation Services for the Blind (RSB). If the job seeker has any other disability, they should contact Vocational Rehabilitation (VR).

Once an individual has applied to RSB or VR, those agencies will determine eligibility for services. For example, VR has established basic eligibility requirements for services:

- Does the individual have a qualifying impairment?
- Does that impairment make it difficult for the individual to be employed?
- Can the provided services assist the individual in gaining or returning to employment?

If the potential employee meets all three requirements, a VR counselor will determine if he or she is eligible for services within a reasonable period of time, usually within 60 days after the application for services has been submitted.

“The key to independence is employment, so if a person is wanting employment, we’re the right place to start,” says Duane Shumate, District Supervisor for the Columbia-area VR office. “Do you have basic things taken care of, such as medication and transportation, or do we need to assist with arranging transportation or other services?”

The Columbia office of VR works with as many as 1300 job seekers a year. Some will go back to school for further education while others will go straight to seeking employment with a local business.

That’s where organizations like ACT Career Services come in. The job seeker works with Career Services staff and the VR counselor to develop their Individualized Plan for Employment (IPE). The IPE identifies the job seeker’s goal for employment and the support that they will need to be successful on the job.

“That support from ACT Career Services varies from person to person. Some individuals need assistance with getting their foot in the door with a prospective employer, others need assistive technology, and others still may need on-the-job support to help become familiar with their job duties,” says Jessica McNally, Program Manager of Career Services.

Job seekers work with a Career Specialist to develop and implement their career plan. Once the plan has been developed, they work with the job candidate in creating a resume, searching for job leads, contacting potential employers, practicing interviewing skills, developing strategies for addressing employment barriers, and other tasks associated with gaining successful employment. They also utilize ACT’s wide network of business contacts to find the best possible employment fit for the job seeker. If a job seeker is looking for a job in a field for which Career Services does not have any established contacts, the Career Specialists will help develop relationships with businesses in that field.

“We work with individuals who have a wide range of skills, abilities, and interests,” says John Savage, ACT’s Director of Employment Services. “We serve people who are looking for their first job right after high school as well as some who have advanced degrees and years of experience.”

“Work makes a positive difference in a person’s life,” says Shumate. “It makes a difference in so many areas—purchasing power for housing and transportation, plus they can follow their own interests, needs, and desires. It’s all about independence.”
ou can rest assured that every consumer at ACT is receiving the highest quality care possible. That’s the conclusion of an intensive evaluation by CARF, the nation’s leading accreditation organization for agencies like ACT. CARF is based in Tucson, AZ.

For every consumer, the three-year CARF accreditation means they can know they’re getting high quality services in the state of Missouri,” says Don Lafferty, Program Director for the Community Living Program. “They’re getting exemplary supports from dedicated professionals that are here to ensure our consumers’ lives and characteristics are respected.”

To earn the accreditation, managers and others at ACT compiled hundreds of records and documents. The three-person CARF review team then spent two and one-half days examining the documents and contacting key individuals related to ACT. “They don’t just look at paperwork,” says Lafferty. “They meet with funders, consumers, visit ISL homes, employment sites, ACT Works, the Community Integration Program as well as many other facets of ACT.”

In the final CARF report, 20 specific areas were cited for excellence. A few are:

“The management team and direct care staff members demonstrate a commitment to the mission, vision, and values of the organization. This is demonstrated by a genuine respect for persons served. Staff members assist persons served in attaining their personal goals and in fulfilling their desires. Staff members are conscientious and respond quickly with insightful problem solving.”

“In recent years, the organization has made a considerable commitment to improve information technology by going to more paperless methods and automated information software. This has resulted in more efficiencies and more accurate information being in the hands of all staff members who need it and has had environmentally friendly consequences.”

“ACT is recognized for providing excellent competency-based training for all staff members upon hire. The seven-day intensive training results in staff members having a clear understanding of their job requirements and thorough understanding of the mission, vision, and values of the organization.”

ACT’s training program, for new staff, was a standout feature, the CARF representatives said, according to Lafferty. With the certification process occurring every three years, “I thought three years ago it would be hard pressed this year to do better, but we did it,” says Lafferty. “Three years ago was outstanding; this one was extraordinary and that’s because of the work of our direct support professionals and our frontline supervisors.”

ACT has received CARF certification every three years for 24 years when its review of ACT began.
Ashley McGee & Josef Felten

Meet Career Services’ two new Specialists

Two young professionals recently joined ACT’s Career Services program. InterACTion had an opportunity to sit down and discuss their expectations for their new positions.

What background do you each have for social services like ACT provides?

A I’ve been in this field for a while. I was a psychology major at Mizzou and worked at TouchPoint, which serves children with autism, all the way through college. I then worked for MU for about two and one-half years doing a survey about disabilities and then assisting students with disabilities. I look forward to putting my knowledge and experience to good use in Career Services.

J My major was sociology. I finished my degree in 2009 and worked for the federal government in Kansas City. I’ve always believed in public service; it’s where I want to be. I’ve always thought working with people with disabilities would be a rewarding career. I like the idea of working on a smaller, local level.

What do you think of working for ACT Career Services?

A I love it. ACT is by far the best place I have worked. At ACT, everyone helps each other—and not just in their own department. You can go around and look at the rest of ACT and see people willing to help each other. It’s a great environment where everyone is working for our consumers.

J I definitely get the impression that everybody at ACT puts great pride in what they do, be it the Career Services staff or others. People really buy in to the mission of the organization. That’s very encouraging—especially as a new employee—to be in an environment where people are excited about what they do.

What challenges do you see ahead for your job?

A The main challenge is having the time to go out and develop relationships with local businesses. Getting to know local employers and their needs is what is important. People can apply all day, putting applications everywhere they read about in the paper, but it’s relationships that make it successful. Getting our job seekers out to meet with local business people is critical to developing those relationships.

J The challenge is time. People are busy running their businesses. Developing relationships, getting business leaders’ attention, and showing how we can help them save time by providing qualified applicants will be one of the greatest challenges.

Is there anything you hope to see change in your jobs?

A Getting people past the stereotypes that society has about people with disabilities is a challenge, but that is why we’re here. We want to advocate for our job seekers so that others see a qualified worker, not a person with a disability.

Any goals?

A I want to help maintain the level of work that has gone on before me. I want to help find the right job for the right worker. I don’t want anyone to fall through the cracks.

J I hope to be effective and contribute as best as I can to meet the high expectations everyone else has here at ACT Career Services.

What does getting a job mean for your clients?

A It’s going to make their lives that much better. Work helps improve people’s well-being and gives them a chance to be fully participating members of their community. It helps their entire life.

J Empowerment. In our society, our personal identity is so tied to the work we do. It gives people a chance to say “I have a job and I’m proud to do it.”
When you see five or six ACT consumers in a store, a restaurant, or a bowling alley, they’re doing more than having a good time. Each consumer is working on his or her specific personal goals.

An ACT staff member leading each group is prepared to explain to any bystander the purpose and meaning of the activity.

“We want to make sure that folks are integrating into the community and reaching their goals,” says Michelle Saunders, Director of Community Integration and Community Advantage. “We ask ourselves, ‘What sort of enhancement of this person’s life are we reaching?’”

Saunders and Kalynn Ramsey, Activities Coordinator, say there are goals tailored for each consumer that may include washing hands, integrating in the community, volunteering, writing skills, purchasing skills, cooking and many others.

“Going out to eat is always a big one,” says Ramsey. Other favorites are getting coffee, shopping, fishing and movies.

While many activities are in the community, some like “Snack Shop,” where snacks are prepared and sold, is an activity performed at the ACT cafeteria.

While all activities have a purpose, “We also want to get them into their wants and desires,” she says.

An activity is held each day for the 118 consumers participating. A total of 14 vans are on the road taking the participants to various parts of Columbia and the region.

In addition to in-town trips, a one-day trip occurs once a week that usually involves a greater distance from Columbia.

The big emphasis is volunteering. “Our goal is to really give back to the community,” says Michelle Bell, Community Integration Program Manager. “It’s great getting out and delivering Meals On Wheels, for example, and going to other sites, including the Central Missouri Humane Society, a new partner.

The effort is important. “We want people to have meaningful days. There are many things to do,” says Saunders.

Recently the consumers purchased and mailed off a care package to tornado-ravaged Joplin. The package was meant for similar consumers in Independent Supported Living (ISL) facilities. The care package included sheets, toiletries and food.

A team of consumers went shopping for the supplies and sent them to Joplin. The ACT team received a thank-you card in return.

“They’re happier because they’re doing things they want to do, and surely they notice their goals are being completed,” says Ramsey. “It’s a very good thing.”

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Michelle Bell, Community Integration Program Manager
ACT helps statewide staff training effort
Has played an integral role since program began

Act is doing its part to train direct-care professionals to the highest standards for working with consumers who have developmental disabilities.

Michelle Saunders, Program Director for Community Integration and Community Advantage, has taken the lead in Missouri to train staff professionals to Direct Support Professional status awarded by the College of Direct Support. Her involvement is a natural outcome from ACT’s role from 2005 to 2008 in a pilot program for staff, sponsored by the College of Direct Support.

“We’ve always supported it,” she says of the training. Moreover, ACT supports those who get the DSP, Direct Support Professional, designation with an hourly salary increase.

Currently Saunders is connected with the University of Missouri-Kansas City to assist with statewide efforts for College of Direct Support training. Her task is to increase the number of DSPs using the College of Direct Support learners throughout the state. The training program already has certified with the statewide certificate 3,183 individuals. The maximum of persons that can be trained according to the UMKC contract is 8,888. Also, participants across the state have completed a total of 75,000 lessons.

“That’s getting a lot of good knowledge in a lot of folks’ hands,” says Saunders. To increase the number of participants she hopes to encourage more agencies like ACT to adopt the computer-based training program.

In other training related activities, Saunders:
• Facilitated a 90-minute webinar over the Internet to members of the American Network of Community Options and Resources in numerous locations in the state.
  “We really got good feedback,” she says. “The participants had a lot of questions. It was a very interactive session.”
• Spoke at several conferences on the subject of staff training and certification as a Direct Support Professional.

Saunders adds that there is increased demand to train staff adequately in order to retain them. National studies show it costs $4,400 per staff member to prepare them for his or her job. “With funding restraints and budget cuts, she says, “it’s so important to be smart about how you run a business.”