Dear Friends of ACT,

“Fill out your bracket for March Madness.” “March comes in like a lion and goes out like a lamb.” “Beware the Ides of March.” Much is said about March. But if you’re not tuned in to ACT or an agency like us, you’re probably not aware that March is Developmental Disabilities Awareness Month.

It’s a time each year when we make a special effort to talk about, think about, and engage others on the work that needs to be done to support people with intellectual and developmental disabilities (I/DD) and integrate them fully into communities.

This year’s theme in Missouri is “Everyone Wins When Everyone’s In.” It emphasizes that everyone is diminished when these wonderful people are marginalized and kept isolated. But everyone benefits when all of us are included and valued. There it is. That’s my reminder. If you’ve read this, I’ve raised your awareness.

That terse remark doesn’t seem quite right, does it? It’s incomplete. The words alone leave out a critical element of the solution we are seeking. That solution is action. Much gets said about that, too. “Don’t just talk the talk. Walk the walk.” “Be doers of the word and not hearers only.” “It is easy to sit up and take notice. What is difficult is getting up and taking action.” This year I invite you to move beyond awareness and do as our name (or acronym) suggests, ACT!

Here’s a simple two-step action you (people in Central Missouri) can take this month that can positively affect people in our community with developmental disabilities:

1. Tell people you know that we have a variety of employment opportunities available now. We’re hiring.
2. Invite someone you know who is seeking fulfillment (and maybe not seeking a job) to investigate the opportunities we have to work with people with disabilities.

ACT needs employees, people willing to work part time, at all times of the day. If you need a flexible schedule, we’ve got work on weekends and evenings. We’ve got openings.

Columbia’s unemployment rate a year ago was over 5%. Now it’s about 3.5%. Although our turnover rate is low when compared to ranges reported in national averages, vacancy rates fueled by low unemployment hurt our operations. Our vacancies for direct care positions have now crept up over 10%. That means we’ve got lots of shifts to fill.

Would you act on behalf of ACT and the people we serve today? Please ask someone you know who would find happiness working with a person with a disability, making a difference, to inquire about a job today. Thank you. Openings are listed on our website.

Until next month

Mark Hassemer
Executive Director, ACT
“It means people on crutches and in a wheelchair can do anything.”

— Hannah McFadden at the dedication of a statue showing President Franklin Roosevelt in the wheelchair he designed for himself

Chris and Mila: Missouri’s First in ISL

Last month, Executive Director Mark Hassemer spoke of a true hero, Maria Pinckney, in the opening remarks of this newsletter. Maria’s daughter, Mila, and her then roommate, Chris, were the first in Missouri to live in an Independent Supported Living (ISL) home funded by the Medicaid Waiver.

Today, these homes are scattered throughout neighborhoods everywhere. But 24 years ago, theirs was the first of its kind.

ACT, led by Maria, was a trailblazer. If you ask Hassemer and Cathy Terrell, Director of Howard County Service Coordination at Endless Options, Inc. in Fayette, MO, they’ll say they were just doing what needed to be done.

Here’s what happened:

In the early 90’s, group homes (10 or more in one home) or institutions were only options for people with disabilities. These living arrangements were not working for Mila and Chris.

Mila was transferred from one institution to another. Her family was frustrated and wanted her to live in a home in the community. Likewise, Chris was not satisfied with her living arrangements. She wanted a change, too.

By chance or design, their worlds came together; and that is where ACT came in.

“We didn’t know what we were getting into. We knew nothing about how to operate an ISL,” said Hassemer. “We had no base of knowledge to work from. But that meant too that we had no baggage, no preconceived notions to drag us down. We knew we wanted a home that was natural and right as a residence for Mila and Chris. So we started there.”

“We didn’t know of any rules,” Terrell said. “So we did as we saw fit. If it worked, it worked. If not, we changed. No one was upset if we did something wrong because there was no guide.”

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ACT is Striving to Fulfill Its Mission Through Its Programs and Services

We often feature and acknowledge ACT’s programs individually. But many of the individuals ACT supports participate in more than one program.

Barbi, Larry, and Abby each receive services from Community Living, Community Integration, and ACT Works. These three are a real-life example of how ACT helps fulfill its mission of providing whole-life opportunities.

Barbi came to ACT’s Community Integration program in 6 years. Soon, she got a job in ACT Works, and then moved into an ACT Individualized Supported Living (ISL) residence.

Barbi was shy at first. At home, little by little, she began showing her true colors. Playing cards and watching movies with her roommates. Getting outside to take a walk, or her favorite, admiring the sunset sitting on the lake.

Community Living Program Supervisor Vicki Schulte says, “Barbi now advocates for herself. She speaks up about what she wants to do and where she wants to go.” This year, she personally handed out invitations to her birthday party, which she planned and hosted at Golden Corral!

Monica Ganaway, Production Mentor for ACT Works says, “Barbie is a very hard worker. She has become increasingly more independent.”

Larry started participating in the Community Integration Program in 2007. He moved into an ACT ISL a year later. He then began working in the recycling operation soon after that.

Michelle Bell, Community Integration Program Manager, says, “Larry is a very honest and easy-going person. He has really come out of his shell in the past seven years.” Like Barbi, he was shy, too. Now he initiates and holds conversations all the time.

His work performance is also something to brag about. “Larry likes to work,” says Ganaway. “I believe he’s ready now for community employment.”

Abby started working with Ganaway in ACT Works during high school visits. She got involved with Community Integration 9 years ago, shortly after graduating.

She has literally grown up at ACT. She’s the one many seek out to offer a unique welcome to new staff and individuals in the programs.

“She is very helpful because of her experience and knowledge of the programs,” says Bell. “She is very sweet to everyone. She makes them feel special and welcome.”

Abby has enjoyed living in her own home. She has taken considerable responsibility in this phase of her life. From cleaning to living with someone else, she has worked hard on living independently.

One of ACT’s value statements is to celebrate successes: Congratulations Abby, Larry, and Barbie.
ACT’s Administrative Support Team is sometimes overlooked. But the hard-working men and women in Administrative Support are critical to our success. Among the many things they do, they create budgets, ensure employees are paid, negotiate health insurance plans, and design policies that make ACT a fair and effective place to work.

In the past year, this team added three new faces! ACT is pleased to welcome Rick McClure, Sarah Dunwoody, and Brian Tvetnes!

McClure comes from Missouri Department of Transportation, where he was a Supervisor in the Motor Carrier Services Division. He is originally from Marshall, MO but has lived and worked all over the country.

McClure is married and has three daughters and six grandkids, ranging in age from five to 15. His office is full of photos of his beautiful family. When he’s not skyping or visiting his family, McClure is dreaming about riding a motorcycle or planning a new activity for his church.

McClure is ACT’s Accountant. The main priorities of his job are billing, Independent Supported Living budgeting, and a variety of other accounting duties. “I love it!” he says. “My position puts me in a good place. I help people monetarily behind the scenes. But I also get to interact with the individuals here at ACT every day.” And that, he says, is his favorite thing.

Brian Tvetnes, a Columbia native, has experienced a lot of change in his life in the recent months. He celebrated a birthday, got married on a beach in Mexico, and then interviewed at ACT two weeks later. He started at ACT as the Human Resources Manager on November 25th.

He was previously the Human Resources Manager at Menards, where he worked 5 years.

So far, he appreciates the variety that comes with his job. “Every day is different. I handle employee issues, hiring, and recruiting,” he says.

But he enjoys most the satisfaction of helping people find jobs in which they excel. “I love finding quality candidates, giving them opportunities, and watching them succeed!”

He also enjoys the freedom he has to improve the agency for the better. “I get to help create and rewrite policies to coincide with what needs to be done,” he says. It doesn’t hurt either that ACT is just down the road from his gym. He now gets to squeeze in a workout during his lunch break, too.

Sarah Dunwoody started as Bookkeeper 1 October 15th. She processes Accounts Payable and posts receivable payments. Remarkably, she has over 30 years of bookkeeping experience!

Dunwoody was raised nearby in Moberly, MO but lived in Springfield, MO prior to taking this job with ACT. She worked as an Accounts Payable Clerk at another non-profit called Enactus (previously called Sife).

Dunwoody was nervous about leaving Enactus. She felt she was making a difference in that job and feared she wouldn’t be able to find that again. But now she says, “I am so glad and lucky to have found another place I can work and be passionate about what the agency is doing.”

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Five years ago, ACT Career Services (ACS) began partnering with Lenoir Woods. Since then, five people receiving services from ACS have been hired. All of them still work there!

Lenoir Woods is a faith-inspired, mission-driven care facility for seniors. Its mission is “Older Adults Living Life to the Fullest.” It has been in Columbia for 60 years and now its facility is so expansive, it takes up an entire block.

We believe Lenoir’s success is due at least in part to the dedication its management has to employees. That dedication shows in the training provided to employees and in how employees are treated. We can see it in how they position their employees, too. They are focused on success.

“We pay close attention to peoples’ strengths, weaknesses, and quirks in order to ensure they succeed in the role they are given,” explained Duane Miller, Manager of Dining Services.

If an employee is distracted easily, he or she will work in a facility that is not as hustle-bustle. One who thrives on routine, will work in the same facility every day. And if someone needs additional training, it is given.

Laura B. was hired by Lenoir Woods two months ago. She has a full-time position as a Dining Services Assistant in Care Center.

Her favorite part of the job is interacting on a personal level with the residents. “I really enjoy being around the residents,” Laura said. “A main part of our job is making their day better, always trying to make their way better.”

ACT is very grateful to cooperate so closely with Lenoir Woods.

“We’ve partnered with Lenoir for a long time,” ACT’s Fontella Jackmon-Jones says. “They are truly a great partner. Lenoir demonstrates clearly the idea that anyone and everyone can work.”

This belief is exactly what ACT Career Services looks for when exploring employment for the people it serves. Thank you, Lenoir Woods, for being a great role model for employers everywhere.
In last month’s “Tip” I talked about the importance of using the principles of Positive Behavior Support (PBS) to identify the function of an individual’s behavior by listening to what an individual is trying to communicate.

Once the possible function of a behavior is identified, the next step in changing the undesired behavior is to determine what we are going to teach an individual to do instead to better communicate their want or need.

More often than not the function of an individual’s behavior is to Obtain or to Escape attention, social interaction, activities, requests of others, tangible items or sensory input.

In order for an individual to learn a new skill I believe there are five essential rules of teaching that must be in place in order for an individual to learn, understand, and use a new replacement skill.

The Replacement Skill MUST be:

1. Clearly Identified
2. Understood completely by the individual learning the skill and by all individuals who are teaching the skill
3. Practiced in settings where the skill will be used
4. Meet the same function for the individual as the problem behavior
5. Highly reinforced

If these five rules are in place while teaching others, it is much more likely that an individual will find success in engaging in the newly identified replacement behaviors, and in turn, increase their quality of life and motivation to learn additional new skills.

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March is Developmental Disabilities Awareness Month

March 12th MAAIDD Annual Conference featuring Al Condeluci

Upcoming CMRO events and trainings for self advocates and their families:

Project Stir - Wednesdays starting March 12th from 3-4:30p

Relationships are For Everyone - Thursdays starting March 20th 4-5:30p
At ACT, we have 4 dedicated men shoveling the way for our cars and feet to make it through the parking lot and into the building.

John, Dennis, Davin and Billy have logged several hours making sure pedestrians at ACT’s are safe. These men rise before the sun after each snow filled night, arriving to ACT before anyone else to have the walkways cleared. You can barely tell it has been one of the snowiest winters by looking at our sidewalks!

Although they do not have to clear the parking lots, they have to move over 10 cars back and forth between the lots to ensure all of the snow gets removed.

If you thought you were tired of winter and the precipitation that come with it, imagine how these guys feel! They have miles of sidewalks and walkways to shovel.

And these men do not just graze over the snow, they ensure these paths are de-iced and accident proof so that the individuals we support can enter the building safely.

On behalf of ACT staff and visitors, thank you very much for your hard labor! You make getting to work on these cold, miserable days a little easier.

“A hero is an ordinary individual who finds strength to persevere and endure in spite of overwhelming obstacles.”

— Christopher Reeve