Dear Friends of ACT,

Probably every culture has a well-known story that is repeated as a cautionary tale warning young people to build their futures on something solid, a firm foundation.

A stormy day will come, or the wolf at the door will huff and puff; you know what happens next. What you’ve built comes down. A tragic loss.

Hardships and challenges will shake any structure or any organization. But a solid foundation does just what the words say, it serves as a platform for stability, longevity, and productive growth.

I feel today like we have a little distance—not much—between us and a whirlwind of upset ACT first faced in March.

We got news from the State that definitions we’ve been relying on for 25 years, which are (or were) key to funding services we provide in ACT Works (AW), have changed. (You can read in more detail about this change elsewhere in this newsletter.)

It can be complicated. But what became clear was this: we must change. If we don’t comply with the new rules we could be forced to pay back money we’ve already spent to provide services.

Our administrative team met hurriedly to consider the impacts and choices. We engaged our Board of Directors, too. Reactions were intense. Shock. Anger. Outrage. A desire to fight. Bewilderment. Confusion. Denial.

But we managed to turn our attention away from the upset and on to our Mission, the foundation upon which our organization is built. This is our Mission: ACT provides opportunities to individuals with disabilities as participating members of the community.

We decided that if we focused on our Mission, our firm foundation for growth, we could not only survive, but thrive in the face of drastic change.

We focused on our Mission and then chose to concentrate on an array of services that lets us achieve even more.

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We focused on our Mission and we moved away from despair to hope.

I’ll tip my hat to John Savage, our Director of Employment Services. He observed we’d just been through all of Kubler-Ross’ well-known stages of grief (denial, anger, bargaining, depression, and acceptance); and it happened at a rapid pace none of us had ever experienced before.

Once we arrived at acceptance, we could more calmly evaluate our options in light of our fundamental principles and move forward.

Focusing on our Mission made some choices easier. The suggestion of converting ACT Works into a sheltered workshop was crossed off our list. It’s not consistent with our Mission of participation in the community.

We could also see areas of our operation in which we’d become complacent. We weren’t holding fast to our commitment. We’d let ourselves and those we serve get comfortable in a routine that wasn’t leading to greater community participation.

That won’t be possible under the new rules.

We’ve now got a temporary solution in place. And, consistent with our person-centered value that everyone should choose for herself or himself, we’re in a process of meeting now with those we serve and their families and support teams.

So...not everything is settled. Not everything is crystal clear.

Changes remain. Some difficult choices must be made.

Frankly, one of those choices might be to divest ourselves of ACT Recycling. Or for the first time we may charge a fee to recycle media.

There is much we don’t know about our immediate future. But I am certain more people will be seeking and obtaining community employment because of this. That’s good. That’s inspiring.

Plan as we might, even using reasonable caution and preparing diligently, we really don’t know if our foundation is solid until it’s been tested with a good shake.

This test proves to me that the foundation we’ve laid for ACT and the people we serve is a solid one. I’m energized and ready to move forward in a new way, with a new array of services, that really makes a difference for people with disabilities.

Until next month,
Mark

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**Big, Exciting Changes in the ACT Works Program**

ACT Works (AW) can no longer provide facility-based, special-minimum-wage employment under Community Employment Group funding. This comes as a major change to state service guidelines is implemented following a federal review. Undeterred, ACT will explore other options with individuals who receive services through AW.

John Savage, Director of ACT Works (AW), received an update in March detailing new guidelines for the Medicaid Waiver under which AW operates. Medicaid’s rules for providing services must be followed. Failure to comply puts agencies like ACT at risk of losing funding.

The federal government conducts a review of the state manual every 5 years. Sometimes, changes are required. This was one of those times.

Until now, AW was funded under a service definition in the waiver called “Community Employment Group” (previously, Supported Employment Group). That definition was revised.

The new definition prohibits AW from providing services in the manner it has employed for decades.

Two components of the new definition conflict with the way AW worked.

First, under the new definition, employment services must be provided in a community setting;
facility-based services are not allowed. AW is facility-based. (AW is also an integrated work setting, employing workers who have disabilities and those who do not.)

Second, under the new definition, everyone who receives Community Employment services must be paid minimum wage.

The old definition said workers could be paid in compliance with the Fair Labor Standards Act (FLSA). FLSA Section 14(c) allows employers to pay workers with disabilities a special minimum wage, based on productivity. Until now, all AW employees with disabilities were paid a special minimum wage.

The goal of AW has always been to prepare individuals for work in a community business. This will continue to be the focus. But a shift must occur.

“This is an exciting time!” said Savage. “This gives AW an opportunity to do things we have been talking about doing for awhile. It opens the door to change.”

Over the next couple months, the AW management team will meet with each person who receives services and his or her team to discuss service options available under the new waiver system.

There are three service options individuals could choose from under the new AW approach.

For those who are ready to explore work in the community, ACT will provide a referral to Vocational Rehabilitation (VR). VR assists individuals seeking community employment. While they are looking for a community-based job, these job seekers will continue to be employed by ACT Works.

Some may be recommended to continue developing their work skills. The waiver service known as “Job Preparation” allows ACT Works to pay employees a special minimum wage and provide services in a facility-based setting while they develop work readiness skills.

Job Preparation is limited to two years. Its goal is community-based employment. At some point during the two-year period, individuals who are developing these work readiness skills will be referred to VR to explore community employment opportunities.

Some individuals and their teams may choose to seek unpaid opportunities to participate in the community. These options might include continuing to develop work skills with a goal of community employment, or they might be more social in nature.

Until this round of meetings is complete, individuals will receive funding under a time-limited service definition that allows a special minimum wage in a facility-based setting.

The future of AW will be defined by individual choices each current AW employee makes about his or her own employment goals. Savage and staff are ready to assist with the option each person chooses.

“Our focus has always been on the individual and what we can do to give him or her community employment opportunities. My staff is motivated now more than ever to be a part of this change and the great things that can come of it.”

One outcome is certain. Across Missouri the number of people with disabilities actively seeking and finding community employment will increase.

Though change is hard, and sometimes jarring, we are now moving one step closer to an inclusive community where everyone belongs, participates and is accepted.
Boone County National Bank’s Teri Cantwell, an Outstanding Liaison for ACT’s Career Services

ACT’s Career Services (ACS) program has a rewarding relationship with Boone County National Bank (BCNB). And it happened by chance.

Teri Cantwell, BNCB Human Resources Officer, describes a meeting with ACT about banking needs. “I was listening to a representative from ACT talk about the agency, and I said, ‘I can help you!’”

Cantwell began conducting mock interviews with individuals who receive services from ACS. This benefits job seekers tremendously. BCNB has also hired a qualified candidate through ACS as an Electronic Banking Specialist.

Cantwell also helps ACS Job Coaches. Recently, she offered an informal presentation from the perspective of a recruiter. “In the end, [the recruiter and Job Coach] are both trying to find the right fit,” says Cantwell. “I wanted to give them insight on using the right language to best represent the client and to talk to potential employers.”

ACS Career Development Manager David West says, “We really appreciate the relationship we have with BCNB and, more specifically, Teri Cantwell. She is a great partner with ACT and an asset to the whole community.”

Cantwell is happy she stumbled on ACT. “It’s is a great place,” she says. “ACT does so much for people with disabilities. I want to build on my experience with ACT to make a difference by raising awareness among other recruiters so they see the potential in this population.”

Puppies with Purpose

Everyone loves a cuddly, playful puppy. Individuals who participate at ACT are no exception.

For the last several months, Puppies with Purpose (PwP) has been visiting ACT’s Community Integration (CI) program twice each month. And that’s not enough!

“Most people love it!” says CI Program Manager Michelle Bell. “The individuals always want to visit with the puppies.”

PwP is an organization that allows University of Missouri students to raise puppies to become service dogs. They work under a parent organization, Canine Helpers Allow More Possibilities (CHAMP) Assistance dogs.

Together, they provide service dogs to people with disabilities who otherwise would never get a dog due to cost or who would wait for years without assistance. CHAMP is one of a few groups that provides service dogs free of charge and to children.

PwP does more than socialize and prepare puppies for service. Students also use the puppies to raise awareness about disabilities across campus and throughout the
Community.

“The student volunteers for PwP are neat people,” says Bell. “They have a passion for what they are doing—the dogs and the cause.”

In addition to the regularly schedule visits, PwP planned and organized a Puppy Carnival for the CI program.

Games such as pin the tail on the puppy, bowling, a puppy relay, and the adorable PwP puppies made the carnival a huge success.

“The purpose of the carnival was a dual one,” Says CI Activities Coordinator Kristin Cummins. “To let the individuals enjoy the puppies through the games, and allow the puppies more exposure to different environments, noise, and events.”

Individuals in the CI program proudly created dog themed posters for the carnival with supplies provided by the PwP volunteers. These posters will be used at other PwP events.

If you are interested in learning more about PwP, or would like to get involved with their work, please visit www.puppieswpurpose.com.

Larry Livens Up His Plate and His Conversations with More Than a Little Cajun Spice

Larry’s story is a remarkable one.

Six years ago, along with his family, he fled what was left of his hometown after hurricane Rita ravaged it. Now, he is flourishing at ACT.

He brings his love of everything Cajun, including cuisine, into his home, and everywhere he goes. He taught Tina Hill, a Direct Support Professional in Community Living, the ins and outs of cooking southern classics like red beans and rice, gumbo, and crawfish.

Mark Pickett, Community Living Supervisor, says, “Larry is constantly bragging about what he used to eat back home in Louisiana.”

Those who know Larry now would never believe that conversation was not always his strong suit. His replies were usually brief and to the point. He would rarely strike up a conversation.

Now Pickett says not a day goes by that doesn't include Larry bumping into a friendly face at the doctor's office or at the grocery store. “The only conversation concern for Larry now is that he starts talking too fast and the Creole starts rolling off of his tongue,” jokes Pickett.

Advocating for himself comes easily these days, too. He doesn't hesitate to say when he wants to listen to music, watch movies, shop for clothes, fish at the park, and, of course, eat some down-home Cajun food.

His work story is also an example of tremendous successes.

Larry has held the same job in ACT Works for five years! Monica Ganaway, Production Mentor, is proud (justifiably so) of Larry's accomplishments at work. She's confident that he is ready for employment in the community.

And almost everyone in the Community Integration Program has a soft spot, a special fondness, for Larry. They have watched him grow from being shy and timid into a leader who
is first in line to venture out into the community.

This is only the beginning for Larry. Like everyone else, he has goals and milestones he wants to accomplish. He reviews and updates them every year along with a group of others who are committed to Larry’s wellbeing and the accomplishment of his goals.

We are looking for amazing things to come for Larry! ●

### Tip from Tara- Get Out There and Have Some Fun


Television. Video Games.

All of us are guilty in this day and age of spending a significant amount of our time involved in “screen time” activities. We have also started utilizing screen time activities as teaching tools for individuals we serve at ACT and many families are doing the same.

I even wrote a tip a few months back about several apps that are out there for iPads and tablets that assist in teaching individuals certain skills.

Often times, individuals that we support tend to become overly-engaged in scripted scenes and pictures from movies, video games, and other technology and they are missing out on practicing and learning many social and daily living skills in natural settings.

I think it is important to remember that it is easy to take a fun activity outside and turn it into a teaching opportunity. Yesterday my family decided to go mushroom hunting and it provided many teaching opportunities, and more importantly, it was a lot of fun.

We did utilize technology by finding a picture of a morel mushroom on the Internet to provide a visual tool of what to look for and we researched some ideas of where to look. We also learned the meaning of a new word – bramble.

Bramble – a prickly, scrambling vine or shrub with thorns, especially a blackberry or other wild shrub of the rose family.

While hunting in our top-secret location, we practiced the skills of waiting, listening, and identifying potential safety concerns. We also used the new word we learned by yelling out “bramble” every time one of us got stuck by a thorn.

We were also able to work on dealing with frustration and other emotions while hunting for mushrooms. Much like fishing, sometimes you have luck right away, and sometimes you have no luck at all.

After an hour or so of practicing these skills, and getting some exercise, we finally had some success! Tucked away in a large bramble we found our reward for all of our hard work.

We had a lot of fun as a family and we used the opportunity to talk together about what we liked and what we didn’t like.

When we got home we learned two more daily living skills together – how to remove thorns safely and how to kill a tick!

Teaching and practicing skills with individuals we support does not have to be all business all the time. Remember to make learning fun and take a break from screen time activities. Learning skills in settings where they will be used provides many teachable moments, motivation, and natural positive reinforcement.

Get out there and have some fun! ●
“Although the world is full of suffering, it is also full of the overcoming of it.”

— Helen Keller

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<td>Acts of Kindness Week</td>
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