Dear Friends of ACT,

October is National Disability Employment Awareness Month (NDEAM).

If you will keep reading, I'll get right to it and do my part to raise awareness of some key ideas that bear hearing and repeating:

- The importance of work cannot be understated. Let’s face it, the lives of individuals with disabilities are often directed and controlled by others. But sometimes this changes when they start earning a paycheck. There is dignity associated with paying their own rent, buying their own food, and taking care of their transportation needs. There is joy in pursuing unique interests with discretionary money they earn.

- Unemployment among people with disabilities is high; in the double figures, and for people with intellectual disabilities, it is in the high double figures.

- We’ve come to accept this as a society. But it does not need to be this way. It can and should change. Once you see people with disabilities succeeding in the workplace and often outpacing their co-workers with no disclosed disabilities, you know that unemployment rates should not differ between the two cohorts.

- People with disabilities largely live in poverty. If you let that sink in, it can be nauseating and angering. We know from experience this can be reversed. We have to work harder and smarter to address this problem.

- It’s a mistake to believe that people with disabilities are “best suited” for work in the service sector. When I talked to Jessica Mahon, our ACT Career Services Program Manager, I discovered we’ve helped job seekers in the last year be hired into positions with these titles: data coordinator, IT technician support, medical sterilization technician, telecommunications operator, and dietary aide! This shows that the theme for NDEAM this year is not an ideal: “Because We Are EQUAL to the Task.” It is a reality. People with disabilities can do the job. And they will.

- People with disabilities do not need to be held to a different standard. Here’s the sub-title to an article published by Salon on August 7, 2013: “Walgreens actually prefers disabled employees because they’re more efficient workers...” Salon also reports that “[s]ince 2007, the drugstore chain has hired those with disabilities not out of magnanimous charity but for the competitive advantage in employing disabled workers.” Hiring workers with disabilities is a sound business decision.

- We save employers time, money, and hassle by helping them employ someone with a disability. If you’ve ever hired, you know it’s risky and costly. ACT takes some of the pain out of the process for employers by learning the details of their jobs and matching those requirements with ideally suited candidates in our job-seeker pool. This process is so satisfying that employers come back to us again and again.

Americans with disabilities are equal to the task of employment.

But we must keep changing. Agencies like ACT must continue to change our approaches. And employers must change their minds and actions to take advantage of this tremendous work force.

Until next month,

Mark Hassemer
Executive Director, ACT
Veterans United Opens Doors by Embracing Diversity

Workplaces that welcome the talents of all people, including people with disabilities, are a critical part of efforts to build an inclusive community and strong economy.

In this spirit, ACT is recognizing Veterans United in honor of National Disability Employment Awareness Month throughout October to raise awareness about disability employment issues and celebrate the many and varied contributions of everyone in the community.

Columbia’s citizens have watched in awe as Veterans United (VU) has grown exponentially in a very short time. There are many conspiracy theories to their success, but if you know anything about the company, you know it is due to the culture of the workplace.

They have wiffle ball games and breakout nerf gun fights during business hours. There is a massage therapist on staff and catered lunches on Mondays. You will also find off the wall position titles such as ‘Talent Acquisition Ninja’ and, much to ACT’s liking, ‘United Initiator’.

They have 3 Core Values: Be Passionate and Have Fun, Deliver Results with Integrity, and Enhance Lives Every Day.

A great example of someone who lives these values is Loreli Wilson, who fills the United Initiator position at Veteran’s United where she opens the VU doors to diversity, inclusion, and works to develop the United Initiative.

Loreli started in Human Resources where her passion for diversity in the workplace started to emerge. A supervisor gave her leeway to explore the benefits of incorporating this into the VU culture and thus grew her position. “It is so far a slow process based on diversity awareness,” Loreli says. “My vision for VU is that no one has any hesitation to say ‘I would fit in there?’. I want to do the initiative in a different way to get employees at VU to be open-minded and open to diversity.”

So, what does this position entail?

Loreli states that she has no typical day. She works on building relationships with diverse groups and making a presence in the community. “I have yet to touch all groups because the position is so new,” Loreli says. She goes on to say, “The best part of my job is I feel I am not doing a job, but working on my passion. I am not submitting reports but fulfilling a legacy.”

VU has created a Diversity Awareness Committee. They give feedback to Loreli about what the company needs to focus on to ensure the Diversity Initiative is a success. The goals of the initiative, Loreli states, “Is to know what the initiative is and for everyone to be aware of the value of diversity... It is really about respect and that people come from other backgrounds.”

Her advice for other businesses looking to be an inclusive workplace is to make it a natural process and in-line with the company’s culture to avoid resistance.

ACT’s vision is a community where everyone belongs, is included, participates, and is accepted. We are so glad that Veterans United “gets it” and sees that all play an important part in fostering a more inclusive workforce, one where every person is recognized for his or her abilities — every day of every month.

Thank you Veterans United!
ACT will participate in National Disability Employment Awareness Month, an annual awareness campaign that takes place each October. The purpose of National Disability Employment Awareness Month is to educate about disability employment issues and celebrate the many and varied contributions of America’s workers with disabilities.

NDEAM is led by the U.S. Department of Labor’s Office of Disability Employment Policy, but its true spirit lies in the many observances held at the grassroots level across the nation every year.

The theme for 2013 is “Because We Are EQUAL to the Task.” The theme reflects the reality that people with disabilities have the education, training, experience and desire to be successful in the workplace.

This year’s theme echoes the message of ODEP’s ongoing Campaign for Disability Employment to promote positive employment outcomes for people with disabilities and expand ideas about what youth with disabilities can do when they receive encouragement and support for their ambitions. Conducted in collaboration with business and disability organizations, the campaign emphasizes that it is what people can do that matters.

Employers and employees in all industries can learn more about how to participate in National Disability Employment Awareness Month and ways they can promote its messages — during October and throughout the year — by visiting the Office of Disability Employment Policy website at www.dol.gov/odep/.

“\text{It gives me a deep, comforting sense that things seen are temporal and things unseen are eternal.}”

\text{— Helen Keller}
ACT Works Promotes Two Employees

ACT Works is pleased to announce the promotion of two employees. Bob Meier, previously a supervisor, will take on the role of program manager. Davin Tipton, also formerly a supervisor, is now the employment coordinator.

Bob came to ACT from Nebraska where he was a home coordinator for an agency supporting individuals with disabilities. He was been with ACT for one year. During that time he has shown leadership and innovation by implementing an Excel spreadsheet that makes billing and payroll almost effortless and always up to date.

Davin has been with ACT for 7 years. He brings great experience and passion to the brand new position he will be taking on. Davin’s background in career services as a liaison to area businesses gives him an edge.

As employment coordinator he will be getting individuals who currently work in the ACT Works program ready for the next step professionally. This might be getting them connected with Vocational Rehabilitation or a career in the community.

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“Just because a man lacks the use of his eyes doesn’t mean he lacks vision.”

— Stevie Wonder

Job Opportunities

ACT is seeking positive and enthusiastic employees to provide assistance and instruction to individuals with disabilities.

If you are interested in a career supporting individuals with disabilities, join us and help make a difference in someone's life. You must be willing to embrace challenges and accept great rewards. We invite you to consider ACT when seeking employment and/or work experience in the human services field.

ACT is an equal opportunity employer.

Visit actservices.org/jobs to view a list of job opportunities.
Davin says, “There are individuals currently working in the program that are more than ready to hold jobs in the community, but they may have had a bad experience, and are therefore reluctant to take the next step.” In his new role, he will work to ease these fears and concerns about being successful by building confidence.

“This is a much-needed position. I had been looking a while for the perfect candidate. Davin really fit the criteria,” John said.

Davin will work one on one and in small groups preparing individuals for community employment. They will work on job exploration, identifying skills, and developing skills that might be lacking.

He is enthusiastic about helping defining the position and building something entirely new. “I will have a say in how this role develops. That is exciting,” Davin says.

Both men are anxious to get in to their new roles! They have worked well together as the first supervisors in the ACT Works program and have definitely helped it grow. Bob says, “We will [now] take the program even further!”

Davin working one-on-one with an individual

DSP - What’s in a Name?

For the many Direct Support Professionals (DSPs) who work for ACT, there is a lot in the name!

Direct – ACT provides many different services to over 400 individuals in a year, but all of those services are provided in a direct and personal manner. While a lot of work takes place in behind the scenes, non-contact ways, our DSPs are present in the lives of the individuals served.

Support – At the heart of the role for DSPs is relationships with those they are supporting. They are friends, coaches, mentors, aides, and more. DSPs are the front-line staff who provide the necessary supports, whatever those may be, to enable the individuals served to participate in their community.

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“Let the shameful walls of exclusion finally come tumbling down.”

— Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA),
signed by former President George H.W. Bush

Upcoming Events

October is National Disability Employment Awareness Month

October 16 is National Boss’s Day

For more events, please check out
actservices.org/about-us/events
Professional – ACT employees of all . . . . levels are in it to provide service to others and they bring that professional commitment to work everyday. As an employer, ACT has established mandatory training for all staff that exceeds what is required by the State. We are happy to invest in the professional development of staff so they, in turn, are well equipped to invest in the lives of the individuals they support.

One of the professional development opportunities available to staff is on-line training available through the Missouri College of Direct Support. When a direct care worker completes the first group of six classes (Individual Rights and Choice, Maltreatment: Prevention and Response, Person-Centered Planning, Positive Behavior Supports, Professional Documentation Practices, and Safety), they receive a Basic Training Certificate from the state of Missouri and a nice stipend from ACT to recognize their time investment.

Completion of the Advanced Training Certificate requires seven more classes (Introduction to Developmental Disabilities, Community Inclusion, Cultural Competency, and Direct Support Professionalism, plus 3 more classes chosen from the full list of 42 offerings). Employees reaching this level of achievement receive an Advanced Training Certificate from the state, another financial stipend, an increase in their hourly wage, and the privilege of being known as a CERTIFIED Direct Support Professional (CDSP).

ACT has staff working in all programs of the agency who have achieved the status of CDSP. We are grateful to all of the dedicated Direct Support Professionals whose names fill ACT’s staff roster...there really is a lot in a name.

Vacations Express Individuality

At ACT we strive for independence for the individuals we support. So as summer started, Community Living program managers and supervisors wondered, “What would the people in our program really like to do for vacation?” They asked, and there were no shortage of answers.

Minna had never stayed overnight in a hotel and ordered room service. So, she started saving money months in advance and made lists of what to pack and what to do. Kansas City was her destination!

Minna’s face lit up with the mention of her vacation. Shopping was at the top of her must-do list for her 2-day getaway. “It was my favorite,” she said.

She also went to the Crayola Store and The Kansas City Zoo where she kissed a polar bear, saw a tiger (another favorite) and watched the turtles. And to satisfy this shopper, the gift shop was scoped out and souvenirs were definitely purchased!

She also loved city life. “The buildings are so high!” Minna said of the Kansas City skyline. Community Living Supervisor Vicki Schulte escorted Minna and said, “I got a bruise on my shoulder from Minna tapping me with excitement over how fancy the hotel was. The word of the weekend was ‘fancy’!”

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And for the grand finale of this amazing trip (and another favorite), Minna ordered room service for breakfast! Biscuits and gravy with a side of hash browns was on the menu, and of course, she ate it in bed.

Kaia hit I-55 to Chicago with window markers and an iPod in tow to make the trip more enjoyable. Comic-Con, a comic convention, was the focal point of her trip. It was there that she met one of her favorite celebrities, the wrestler CM Punk.

In the Windy City she also visited The Cloud Gate (aka the ‘Bean’), explored the Jelly Belly Factory, and ventured to Six Flags for the first time. “My knuckles were white from holding on to the bars on the rides,” Kaia said excitedly.

She hadn’t taken a vacation in 8 years. This trip to Comic-Con had been in the planning for five years. “Every time we tried to go, something came up.” Kaia explained.

For many of us, the things we do regularly can be taken for granted. A real adventuresome vacation is a luxury not everyone has. Many of our participants go to camp every year just because they always have. As much as they may enjoy camp, we’ve had to expand our services to make sure individual choice is a top priority.

This is achieved simply by asking, “What do you want to do?”

As for Kaia and Minna, this is just the beginning of many vacations to come. Vicki says Minna is already planning her next adventure and Kaia said, “I’m going again next year!”

“I have learned that success is to be measured not so much by the position that one has reached in life as by the obstacles which he has overcome while trying to succeed.”

— Booker T. Washington
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