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A new model of inclusion and opportunity: 21 and Able, United Way of Allegheny County launch Career Transition Liaison Project

“For students with disabilities, work experience during high school is a strong predictor of employment and higher wages after high school.”

-A Better Bottom Line: Employing People with Disabilities, Blueprint for Governors, 2012-2013 Chair’s Initiative, National Governors Association

The high school years are a critical period of transition for all kids, but even more so for students with disabilities. Allegheny County in Pennsylvania is committed to ensuring young people with disabilities have the best chance for success after graduation.

We are proud to announce a unique collaboration among Allegheny County, [United Way of Allegheny County’s 21 and Able Initiative](#) and Giant Eagle. Blind Vision Rehabilitation Services has been selected as the supported employment agency to work with us to address this very issue: the Career Transition Liaison Project.

In the majority of cases, the only supports for individuals with disabilities are provided from outside the organization. Through this two-year pilot program, a full-time Career Transition Liaison will be employed within Giant Eagle, a leading regional multi-format food, fuel and pharmacy retailer with a longstanding history of employing individuals with disabilities. At least 24 young adults will be newly employed by Giant Eagle while they are still in high school, and take part in employment activities preparing them for potential careers as team members.

With the initial idea from Allegheny County Executive Rich Fitzgerald’s office, the development team wanted to create a new, more effective model to offer young people with disabilities the best possible long-term outcomes. Plus, the program had to be conducive to participating businesses and support agencies. That’s when the idea of ‘embedding’ the liaison directly within the organization was born. This novel approach allows the liaison to intimately understand and consequently help support organizational culture and structure. Further, it allows for a process to provide individuals with disabilities the most effective support to aid in their professional and personal success.

To the best of our knowledge, this model is the first of its kind in our region.

The career transition liaison will travel between Giant Eagle sites, providing a number of support services, such as assisting in the development of an Employment Action Plan for team members who need support. In addition, the liaison will act as a consultant with Giant Eagle Human Resources to determine appropriate job placements for potential future employees, align with school and community job coaches, trainers and teams to support success, and

facilitate a training program for the Giant Eagle staff to provide a broad overview of the nature of disabilities and enrich their culture of inclusion.

The career transition liaison was selected from a pool of candidates proposed by human service agencies with established supported employment programs. In conjunction with the pilot program, we are conducting an independent evaluation to determine its efficacy. We then plan to share the model with educators and businesses. Our goal is for this model to be replicated in a variety of sectors, throughout our region and beyond.

We know youth with disabilities simply are not receiving enough services and support to find and retain jobs with good wages and benefits, and that inconsistencies exist among school programs. For those students interested in this type of work, who have already job shadowed and completed internships, this project will help to provide a more seamless transition to adulthood.

We look forward to sharing the outcomes.