



Welcoming Motivated Workers!

ABILITIES

Promoting the employment of Vermont citizens of all abilities

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Dear Friends ~ Mental Illness



On behalf of the Governor's Committee on the Employment of People with Disabilities, I would like to welcome you to the latest issue of "Abilities"

This month we tackle the subject of mental illness and the challenges those recovering from mental illness have with employment. We are very pleased to shed a light on this important topic and encourage you to take advantage of the resources we provide here for you.

According to Nami-Vermont's website (National Alliance on Mental Illness), "there are over 42,000 adults with serious and persistent mental illness in Vermont." Statistics show that close to 85% of these people are unemployed. Ironically, the reasons for unemployment often have less to do with their symptoms and more to do with other barriers.

It is our hope that the stories and information we provide here will help to bring about a significant change in that statistic.

Best regards,

Fred Jones, Chair

Governor's Committee on Employment of People with Disabilities
and

Susan Chicoine

on behalf of the Vermont Business Leadership Network

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JEFF FIELD'S STORY - THE CRUCIAL ROLE OF EMPLOYMENT IN RECOVERY



Jeff Field of Rutland, 43, has been working at TJ Maxx since last fall. In addition, he owns his own business selling used guitars on E-Bay, called "No Strings Attached", started with the support of a Pass Plan. He takes great pride in earning his own income and is relishing the socialization and increased confidence that comes from working. Jeff says he feels honored to have the things he has and blessed by the support he receives from others.

Today life is looking good for Jeff, but it hasn't always been that way, because in the 1990s he experienced three of what he terms "nervous breakdowns". Since then, he has become intimately familiar with the lifelong process of recovery from mental illness.

It started for Jeff when he was in his early 20s and had the opportunity to pursue his musical dreams and join a band with friends in California. At first things went well, but eventually things soured and the pressure got to him. He couldn't see the light at the end of the tunnel. He returned to his home in New Hampshire to heal. Then another opportunity in California beckoned, and once again he experienced a breakdown with clinical depression and a psychotic disconnect from reality. He wondered if he would ever get well again.

Jeff's father and best friend brought him back from California to Vermont for treatment and his recovery began in earnest as he connected with the services and supports of Rutland Mental Health and its Vocational Opportunity Works! (VOW) program. He was quite ill but found medication that helped him. He also found that when he stopped taking his medication, he would have problems. It took him some years to truly get back on track, and he was been doing very well since 2001, when he dedicated himself to taking his medication religiously. He also sees his doctor and his counselor regularly.

In Jeff's words, mental illness can be debilitating. It can rob you of your self esteem and your confidence. When in the middle of the illness and so debilitated mentally, all you think about is getting through the day as fast as you can because you are hurting so bad, and you don't take care of yourself. You are too sick to care about your hygiene or appearance and unable to make wise decisions about your self care and presenting yourself properly.

However, gradually, and with the support of medication, doctors, counselors, and social services, Jeff began to feel better and things began to fall into place. Now, as his confidence has gradually returned, he cares about how he looks. The medication takes the edge off of his anxiety and depression, allowing him to more easily brush off those moments when his illness causes him to struggle with low self esteem and self doubt.

Returning to work when struggling with mental illness can be quite challenging. Jeff was able to find his position with TJ Maxx because of the assistance of the VOW program, which meets with

employers in advance to break down the barriers to employment. As his employer was aware of his condition in advance, there were no big surprises. So long as shyness and lack of confidence make it difficult for Jeff to job hunt on his own, he expects that employers will be aware of his condition. However, he also feels that should the time come that he is well enough to job hunt on his own, then there will be no need to share with an employer about his mental illness.

Among the challenges in returning to work for someone who has mental illness is relating to people. By the time Jeff returned to work after his breakdowns, it had been a long time since he had conversed with people in a work or public setting. Relating to people, therefore, was difficult, and he found it tough to find the confidence to carry on conversations and small talk that are needed to work in retail.

There are other times when he has felt like he was going to have a panic attack, but they passed fairly quickly. Jeff has come to learn that as long as he keeps his head on straight and takes his medication, he doesn't need to worry about them.

I asked Jeff what he would like an employer to know about mental illness. He replied that he would like employers to understand that there may be an occasion when due to his depression he may not be as cheery as his colleagues, but that doesn't mean he can't do his job. He is just struggling a bit but he can do his work

He also would like folks to recognize that he can do his job the same as others can. Sometimes an employer or co-workers who are aware of his illness have difficulty knowing how to talk to him. He has had bosses who were initially standoffish because they didn't know how to talk to him. He has also had co-workers who have over praised him and laid it on really thick in a misguided effort to be supportive because they don't know how else to relate.

In general Jeff doesn't need any accommodations to be successful in his work. However, he would like employers to know that people with mental illness sometimes have serious problems, and when you are at work and having a tough time, sometimes the best accommodation would be able to go home for the day. Sometimes, even though you are trying to do your best, it would be helpful when struggling to be able to leave, collect yourself, and return the next day. Jeff recognizes, however, that this may not be possible.

A very helpful alternative would be for employers to be educated about mental illness so that they can talk to and relate to an employee like Jeff and understand where he is coming from when he is struggling.

Jeff says he doesn't feel he will ever be healed, but rather will live his life in recovery. Mental illness is a type of disease that can be treated and you learn to live with it, like a chronic back problem. It doesn't go away but you get used to it. He says that in some ways he is always going to need the support of people such as the counselors and staff of VOW and Rutland Mental Health, for whom he has great praise. In dealing with his illness, his depression may tell him he isn't capable, and in those moments the praise, strokes and encouragement from his peers, counselors, and case workers is invaluable to him. They let him know he is going to be alright and help him manage the baggage that comes with mental illness.

For Jeff, having his job is crucial to his recovery as it is a major builder of his self esteem. As each

workday passes at TJ Maxx he gains more confidence, is able to socialize, and he gains good social skills. The job has made his illness easier to manage as he sees his ability to do a job and see it through - which makes him feel good about his work abilities. It also helps him socially and financially. He has come to realize that when he is confident in himself and true to himself, taking his medication and working on his self esteem, then there is nothing he can't accomplish.

Correction

In our January 2009 issue focusing on Assistive Technology some incorrect information was provided in the Assistive Technology Resources section. We apologize for this error. For a corrected list of resource information, please refer to the archived copy of the newsletter found [here](#).

[Join Our Mailing List!](#)

On the Radio

Interested in hearing more about autism and disability issues? Tune in to Anne Barbano's new weekly radio show, The Next Frontier, from The Radiator. For more info and past shows, please click [here](#).

Quick Links

[The Governor's Committee on Employment of People with Disabilities](#)

[Department of Labor Disability Program Navigators](#)

[Vocational Rehabilitation](#)

[Vermont Association of Business, Industry and Rehabilitation](#)

[Division for the Blind and Visually Impaired](#)

[Job Accommodation Network](#)

[Vermont Developmental Disabilities Council](#)

[Vermont Department of Health on Autism](#)

[Guide to Services in Vermont for People with Autism Spectrum Disorders](#)

[VocRehab's Deaf Services Program](#)

[Vermont Center for the Deaf and Hard of Hearing](#)

[Vermont Interpreter Referral Services](#)

[The Vermont Center for Independent Living](#)

KEYS TO SUCCESSFUL SUPERVISION OF PEOPLE RECOVERING FROM MENTAL ILLNESS

Supervision of people with mental illness is not that much different than supervising anyone else. First of all, everyone is an individual, so each person's needs are unique. These are just a few considerations that tend to help the person be more successful on the job.

1. Treat people "normally", meaning with respect and basically the same way you would treat your other employees.

- **DO:** Speak to them as if you were speaking to another adult (You are!). There is no need to speak down to them or address them like children.
- **DON'T:** Raise the volume of your voice. They are not hard of hearing.

(People do these things all the time. If you catch yourself, don't worry, just try to correct it in the

future)

2. Be patient. It may take people a little longer to learn initially. They are not stupid. More than likely they are just overly nervous and want to do a good job. Nine times out of ten, it will be worth the investment of your time.

- **DO:** Be willing to repeat yourself when needed and offer strategies if things don't improve.
- **DON'T:** Expect people to hit the ground running at 100%. Some can, but many are returning to the workforce after some traumatic life experiences. It's often a matter of just giving them a little extra time to adjust/ pick things up.

3. Provide lots of positive reinforcement. People are taking a big risk and often are very afraid of failure. A little positive feedback can go a long way.

- **DO:** Let them know how much you appreciate their efforts and compliment them on their successes.
- **DON'T:** Do so in a way that is placating or draws too much attention. People want to fit in, not stick out as being "special" in a way they know has negative connotations.

4. Let them know you are available or else make sure they have a contact person. Having someone to go to with a question can relieve a lot of stress. If you're not the best person, make sure that the person who is their "go-to" person understands these premises.

- **DO:** Be, or designate, a person that the person can ask questions of/ address concerns.
- **DON'T:** Assume that if you haven't heard anything for a while that everything's "O.K.". A quick check-in takes a second but can make a big difference.

5. Respect, patience, positive feedback, and communication - these four things are essential managerial components for any worker/ workplace. People who are recovering from mental illness are people first. They are no different than you or I, except for the fact that they have struggled with an illness that they initially had no control over. Once people are able to regain control of their lives, they often want to return to work and can do so with a little support.

- **DO:** Call VOW (Vocational Opportunity Works!) anytime with questions - 802-786-4935

VOCATIONAL OPPORTUNITY WORKS! - PROVIDING A NORMALIZED APPROACH TO RE-ENTERING THE WORKFORCE

One of the first things people notice upon entering the VOW office is the walls. They are covered with posters, quotes, printouts, and papers of all sorts. One wall has a quote from Derek Sivers, founder of CD Baby; another John Wayne. There is a "No Whining" poster on one side and a "Bang Head Here" next to the door. There are also inspirational quotes challenging people to step out of their comfort zones, "climb mountains", and think positive. The coffee is always on, and today Tom Petty is singing on the radio.

"We don't take ourselves too seriously," says Employment Coordinator Dan Gifford, "but we take what we do very seriously."

The VOW office looks and functions like any business office not like a clinical setting. Staff and clients may be seen working side-by-side on computers, and jokes are commonly made about who's really working there.

The concept of people with mental illness working or returning to work in the community is fairly new compared to those with other disabilities. Interestingly enough, work was the treatment of the day back in the late 1800s. Sadly, soon after most people with mental illness were institutionalized until the late 1960s. It has been even more recently that effective and safe medications, without debilitating side-effects, have allowed people with mental illness to function effectively in the community. And clearly the fear and stigma associated with mental illness was and is one of the biggest barriers then and now.

When asked why we need services like Vocational Opportunity Works, David Sagi, Rutland's VocRehab Regional Manager states, "While I believe some of the misinformation about individuals with mental illness still exists, having programs like VOW in the community advocating for the people they serve is helping to counteract stereotyping. They highlight abilities rather than point out disabilities...the support that Vocational Opportunity Works provides is different in that they provide long-term supports, much longer than traditional VR services last. Long-term supports and follow-up increases both opportunities and successful employment outcomes, especially for people with mental illness."

A few years ago, the VOW office applied for a grant to produce a community video. This video, titled Work Works! has since been shown all over the country and is currently being used in several trainings and even a graduate level curriculum. The work on the video was done almost entirely by people with mental illness, and reflects the belief that work is a core ingredient in feeling part of a community. It also challenges some of the false beliefs and stigma around mental illness. Employers speak openly about their initial fears and concerns and how those were turned around by meeting with VOW, but more importantly by meeting and working with VOW clients. A clip from the video with some direct quotes from area employers entitled "Employer's Perceptions" is available for viewing on the GCEPD [website](#).

Always on the forefront of the field, the staff at VOW have been working closely with others in their agency to tie work related goals more closely and more often into the client's treatment goals. Additionally, staff have been working on the development of skill-building groups for the people they work with. These groups are designed to not only help with on the job skills, but also common challenges like housing, money management, and healthy living. "Generally, it's problems in people's lives outside of work that tend to lead to problems on the job. By helping people attain and strengthen their independent living skills we increase job retention", states George Nostrand, employment counselor. "We are always looking to help people take a more proactive approach towards their issues and help them take responsibility for their own wellness."

Poor self-esteem and a lack of support are two more subtle barriers to successful employment. When asked why he hadn't worked in 25 years, one person replied, "No one asked me if I wanted to work." This was a person who when he came to the VOW office, introduced himself as being a schizophrenic who was mildly retarded, explains Dan Gifford. "That was his self-image - two

diagnoses." Since then he has gone on to work successfully at two jobs, recently helping to interview and train one of our other clients.

"At VOW we don't have to use 'People-first' language as a means of political correctness, because we practice 'person-first' as a natural and core belief", states George Nostrand. "The people who step through our door are not looked at as different, ill, or disabled; they are people looking to do something perfectly normal - find a job."

WORK WORKS!

Personal reflections by George V. Nostrand, V.O.W. employment counselor and member of the GCEPD.

Work saved my life. Really. At times when I was most depressed, work got me out of the house, forced me to keep moving, interact with people, and distracted me from my overwhelming symptoms. When I reached the point where I felt I had no reason to go on, work showed me I could be successful. When I felt I had nowhere to go, working helped me gain the focus to turn my life around. That's why I do what I do. Not only do I believe in it in theory, I have reaped the rewards in my own life.

I have been doing employment counseling for several years now for V.O.W. (Vocational Opportunity Works), working with adults who suffer from serious and persistent mental illness. People with mental illness face many barriers. One that often holds them back, even once they have been stabilized, is their self-esteem. Poor self-esteem prevents people from taking the risks necessary to become successful. And success is one of the key components to positive self-esteem.

Work is a therapeutic tool that, along with other supports like medications and therapy, can help people regain and rebuild their lives. Everyone shares some common needs including the need to feel useful, wanted, sociable, respected and important. People want to be able to learn new things, use their skills, be proud of their work, and have meaning in their lives. In our society work is a significant part of our identity. When we meet someone new one of the first things often asked is "What do you do for work?" I don't know too many people who would chose to say, "I am a full-time mentally ill person" and they shouldn't have to. In the last decade the medications used to treat mental illness have made it possible for people to manage their symptoms, and changes in the laws around benefits have made it more economically possible.

Still a majority of the adults with mental illness in this area aren't working. There are a number of reasons but one seems to jump out at me. Fear. Fear on the part of employers, coworkers, and others in society who have not been educated about mental illness. Fear on the part of people with mental illness that they will not be accepted and cannot succeed. The only real way that I know to combat fear is through education. People fear what they do not know or understand. As a

depressed, work



community we must work together and be willing to open our minds and talk about how we can work together for everyone's benefit. There are hundreds of mentally ill adults who are capable of doing some type of work and there are always employers looking to hire. It's time to bridge the gap. When it comes to helping people regain their status and place in society; work works.

This article has been printed in the Rutland Mental Health Services 2002 Annual Report, Spring Lake Ranch's newsletter, a newsletter from University of Hartford, CounterPoint, and in several other publications. For permission to reprint, please email: george.breakingthecycle@gmail.com.

INTERNET RESOURCES ON MENTAL ILLNESS/ DISABILITY & WORK

There are hundreds of sites on the Internet about mental illness and work. Work has been proven to be one of the most affective treatments for mental illness and most people with mental illness can work. Stigma and the previous rules around disability benefits kept people from working for years. As people have become better informed and the system has adjusted to allow people to work with less risk, work has become more commonplace for people with mental illness.

1) SAMHSA (Substance Abuse & Mental Health Services Administration) -

"Businesses Materials for a Mental Health-Friendly Workplace: Workplaces That Thrive: A Resource for Creating Mental Health-Friendly Work Environments"

http://www.allmentalhealth.samhsa.gov/business_resource.html

This has a lot of information, but it is well indexed. SAMHSA is a great resource in general.

This publication is designed to help human resources personnel look at the benefits of a Mental Health-Friendly Workplace.

2) www.worksupport.com

From Virginia Commonwealth University, a long-time leader in the field. Has a great "Resources" page.

3) Disability Info.gov - Department of Labor [website](#):

Great links under "Employer Resources"

4) Association for Persons in Supported Employment (APSE): www.apse.org

National Organization dedicated to promoting the ideas of Supported Employment.

5) National Alliance on Mentally Illness (NAMI): www.nami.org

A great site for general information on mental illness. Also has a section on Supported Employment.

Questions on what you've found? Give us a call at VOW at 802-786-4935. We'd love to talk with you.

HONORING DEBORAH LISI-BAKER



Deborah Lisi-Baker, a member of the GCEPD, will retire on April 1, 2009 as Executive Director of the Vermont Center for Independent Living (VCIL), a position she has held for 10 years. Affiliated with VCIL for 28 of its 30 years, prior to serving as Executive Director, Deborah worked as Acting Executive Director, consultant, Deputy Director and a Project Director for VCIL's policy work in assistive technology.

We are pleased to be able to recognize and honor Deborah for her multiple accomplishments over so many years. We asked Deborah to share some personal reflections with us.

Tell me a little bit more about VCIL:

(DLB): VCIL was founded 30 years ago as Vermont's first organization founded, directed and staffed by individuals with disabilities and continues to support individuals with disabilities, "working together for dignity, independence and civil rights." VCIL also works with community organizations and state agencies to promote equal opportunities in employment, independent living and community participation. Partnerships with organizations like Vocational Rehabilitation, the Vermont Department of Labor and the GCEPD have created greater accessibility in employment services, the Youth Leadership Forum, and Vermont programs that help people on Social Security have greater access to health insurance and work.

What brought you to VCIL so many years ago? What issues was the organization working on back then?

(DLB): I was part of the 1978 survey of Vermonters with disabilities that led to the creation of VCIL. I later got involved in VCIL because I was involved in disability rights advocacy as a volunteer. The first Executive Director, Barry Bernstein, kept stopping by my apartment and telling me I needed to get involved. Eventually I did. I was frustrated by the stories of Vermonters with disabilities who were having trouble accessing equipment like wheelchairs, adaptive devices for the blind and deaf and other adaptive equipment Vermonters with disabilities needed to be able to work, participate in community life, and take care of themselves and their families. I was hired to work with individuals with disabilities and state agencies on policy changes that would improve access to needed equipment.

How has the organization changed over the years?

(DLB): VCIL started with a staff of three, housed in an inaccessible location, with staff sometimes having to crawl up stairs to reach individuals with disabilities who were unable to leave their inaccessible homes. We are now housed in a building that has won awards for accessibility and we have helped Vermonters make hundreds of homes and community buildings accessible. We have a staff of 32 - many part-time workers - and four offices and outreach workers in different parts of Vermont. We are cross-disability; people who work at VCIL and people we work with have

a broad range of disabilities but share common concerns about the need for social respect and recognition of the rights and abilities of individuals with disabilities.

You've been actively involved with the disability rights movement so long now - what has motivated you to give so much of yourself to this cause?

(DLB): The lives, voices and stories of individuals with disabilities and their families, the partnership work that happens when individuals with disabilities come together to make change, and the equally important work and renewal that happens when individuals with disabilities, policy makers, businesses and other citizens share our mission and work with us and with others in their community to make Vermont a welcoming and accessible place for all Vermonters, including Vermonters with disabilities. When we can help each other make needed social change, what is more exciting? I also love the tie to other civil rights and human rights movements.

How have things changed over the years? Are there positive changes that have occurred which you never would have anticipated?

(DLB): So much has changed. One of the most powerful changes is that parents of children with disabilities have higher expectations. They want and expect that their children will be seen and treated as persons first and have the opportunity to share the same benefits and opportunities that all Vermonters want. Another thing that has happened is the evolution of participant direction and leadership in disability policy and services and a reframing of disability issues, from "special" services to inclusive design of programs and services so that all persons can benefit. This is important to all of us because more people are living with disabilities or dealing with disabilities as they age. Homes, job sites and community spaces can accommodate this diversity, if we plan for it. Universal and lifespan design in workplaces, homes and community planning hold great promise for all of us: policy makers, planners, Vermont citizens, and employers.

What have been some of the biggest struggles and challenges you have faced?

(DLB): It is frustrating to be working on some of the same issues: decent pay and benefits for direct care workers, equal access to jobs, accessible design, and an end to stereotypes that prevent people with disabilities from seeing themselves and being seen as individuals who have a lot to offer their communities. I remember as a young woman I felt like I spent a lot of my time having to kick stereotypes out of the way. People with disabilities and their families and friends are still doing this today. But it is much better. We can pay for dependence or we can build the resources that make work and independence possible. This is hard to remember when times are hard, but it matters more than ever. We need to continue to invest in success. It makes good social policy, creates opportunity, and saves money in the long run.

What memories do you hold most dear? What are you most proud of?

(DLB): I love it when people come together to create solutions and I love it when individuals with disabilities and deaf Vermonters speak up and participate in change from a place of pride and dignity. I remember the voices of so many Vermonters: one young man saying, "I may have a spinal cord injury, but I haven't lost my backbone." One woman saying, "How can I hate my body when it has given me my politics?" A group of people creating recovery and self help supports for individuals with psychiatric disabilities who proved it was possible to grow and work and thrive despite the challenges of living with their disabilities. The movement of individuals with developmental disabilities that led to the creation and incredible success of the statewide group Green Mountain Self-Advocates.

When I was a young child there were no community services for children with disabilities and their families. I was institutionalized in a rehabilitation facility for several years. Years later, as a teenager, I wrote the institution to ask if there was any summer employment available. I thought it would be helpful for young people there to have the support of a peer mentor. I got a letter back saying, "We don't hire the handicapped." There was no law against that then. Today, qualified individuals with disabilities are protected from discrimination on the basis of disability and a broad range of medical, vocational and independent living resources are available for individuals with disabilities and their families. We still have a lot to do but more and more people recognize disability as part of our shared human experiences and we are creating laws, policies and ways of living and working together that do not leave individuals behind. That's exciting.

So what's next for you?

(DLB): I will be working part time at the University of Vermont and doing some consulting work in Vermont and nationally. I also am saving time to write. And I am still serving as the President of the Vermont Coalition for Disability Rights.

Deborah, we thank you for all you have done to advance the cause of disability rights and wish you well as you embark on your next journey.

Thanks for reading this issue of "Abilities". We welcome your comments, feedback, and suggestions for future issues. Copies of past issues may be found on our website - www.hireus.org, or in the [Constant Contact archives](#).

Melita DeBellis,

Governor's Committee on Employment of People with Disabilities
melita@gcepd.org; 802-434-6600; www.hireus.org

and

Christine McCarthy

Vermont Business Leadership Network
vabired@aol.com; 802-878-1107; www.vtbln.org

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