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Subject: From the Governor's Committee on Employment of People with Disabilities

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Governor's Committee on Employment
of People with Disabilities



Welcoming Motivated Workers!

ABILITIES

Promoting the employment of Vermont citizens of all abilities

July 2007- Vol 1, Issue 3

Dear Friends ~



On behalf of the State of Vermont's Division for the Blind and Visually Impaired

("DBVI"), I would like to thank you for bringing your attention to the articles and information contained in this latest issue of "Abilities".

DBVI's mission is to support the efforts of Vermonters who are blind and visually impaired to achieve or sustain their economic independence, self-reliance, and social integration at a level consistent with their interests, abilities and informed choices. Our services include job site evaluation, adaptive equipment, career exploration, and vocational training. We believe that people who are blind and visually impaired can help meet the upcoming labor demands of businesses in Vermont. The digital age makes it possible for a level playing field. Computers and adaptive technology are used to accomplish job duties with the same skill and accuracy as sighted coworkers. Blind and visually impaired employees access the computer with special software provided by DBVI to read the screen with enlarged font or with synthesized speech. They can access email, spreadsheets, databases, word processors, the internet, and basically everything that is available electronically. The possibilities are endless.

DBVI has statewide coverage through regional offices in Burlington, Rutland, Montpelier, Springfield, and a Central Office in Waterbury. All contact information is available on our [website](#). We work closely with our consumers and the business community to support successful employment. Please feel free to contact us if you need skilled, dedicated, and hard working employees.

Best regards,

Fred Jones, Chair,

Governor's Committee on Employment of People with Disabilities, and
DBVI Director

and

Susan Chicoine, on behalf of the Vermont Business Leadership Network

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From Perseverance to Payoff - Peter Apgar's Story



On July 9th of this year, Peter Apgar started a position doing financial analysis and resource budgeting at a logistics laboratory of the Department of Defense in Columbus, Ohio. This job marks the culmination of a journey of perseverance that began a number of years ago.

In 1999, Peter was just 20 years old when he first began to lose his vision - a complication of diabetes. One morning he woke up and couldn't read the clock on the VCR just 12 feet away. He says of that time that he experienced "a whole new understanding of fear", worrying that if he lost his ability to drive, his life would be over. Very independent and spontaneous, the freedom that came with driving meant everything to him.

At first, Peter was optimistic that his vision could be restored. A series of laser treatments gave him good vision 90% of the time. He was able to continue with his job running a labeling system at H.P. Hood. Then, after a laser treatment, he woke up and everything was blurry. It hit home for him that he might lose his sight entirely. While his employers at Hood were supportive and accommodating, eventually Peter decided it was better to leave that job and focus on transitioning to other employment. Ultimately, he underwent four unsuccessful surgeries on his eyes, and shortly after his 21st birthday, he lost his sight completely.

At that point, Peter realized that he needed to move on and look at his life in a more mature way. Shifting gears, he began to take full advantage of the support and services offered by the Vermont State Division for the Blind and Visually Impaired (DBVI). Over a series of meetings, Peter set some goals: 1) to get on with his life; 2) to become independent and self supporting; and 3) to become competitive with the sighted world in employment, developing and implementing a career working either for himself, the government, or the public sector. Furthermore, recognizing that he wanted to pursue something other than manual labor, Peter recognized that the only way to be competitive was to go back to school.

First, however, he needed to learn skills and techniques for independent living. DBVI helped him learn fundamental computer skills and then sent him to a 12 week program at [The Carroll Center for the Blind](#) in Newton, Massachusetts, which offers innovative methods, evolving technologies and personalized attention to help blind persons gain independence at home, school, and work. There Peter learned additional computer and independent living skills. As a result, he was able to approach school and daily life in a very positive fashion and as close to "normal" as one could get.

One of the most important - and perhaps unexpected - outcomes for Peter from his time at Carroll was his attitude. The young man whose initial concerns were around his immediate loss of mobility and freedom to drive came away from Carroll with a new, "take no prisoners" approach to his future. He learned a great deal about himself, and about his own capabilities. He emerged with an extraordinary work ethic, believing that you do what you need to do to accomplish the task in front of you. Making excuses doesn't work, he says, because people question your value when you begin making excuses.

By 2002 Peter was enrolled full time at The University of Vermont and living on campus. He found further support from UVM's [ACCESS](#) program, which supports students with disabilities so that they may enjoy a barrier-free learning environment. The counselors explained how UVM and the professors could support him, as well as his legal rights regarding accommodations. This allowed Peter to easily talk to his professors about what he needed to be successful.

A crucial tool for Peter's academic success was the JAWS screen reading software. Running on his regular laptop, this software program reads aloud the text on the computer screen. With the benefit of this software, the accommodations needed for classroom success were minimal: professors would e-mail him class notes, power point presentations, and any classroom handouts; Peter would submit papers on line instead of in print or hand-written format; and he could use excel spreadsheets for his homework.

Ultimately Peter settled into the School of Business, majoring in Business Administration with a concentration in finance, where he found great satisfaction in things such as assessing a business' value and return on its investment. Finally, in December of 2006, Peter completed his coursework for his Bachelor's Degree, and his job hunt began in earnest. Working with career counselors in the business school, his professors, and networking with alumni and others, Peter gained an appreciation for how he wanted to use his degree and where he could be competitive, efficient and successful, given the fast pace of the financial industry. Just being an "average" employee would not do; Peter was ready to excel.

Peter soon learned about the Federal Government's Workforce Recruiting Program, which specializes in recruiting individuals with disabilities. He went through an interview process, was put into the Government's database, and began to receive calls about jobs from various agencies associated with the Government. After considering a variety of opportunities, Peter accepted his current position with the Department of Defense in Columbus, Ohio.

So, once again Peter is stepping out and bringing his take charge attitude to the workforce. Now 28, Peter is prepared to take full advantage of the opportunities ahead for him. His career goals are many: to manage people; to apply his education to analyze financial information; to be financially successful; to advance in his career. His aspirations include being a CEO one day, and he looks forward to learning all he needs to get there.

In a certain sense, Peter brings a unique competitive edge to his work. If someone tells him he can't do something, he will find a way to do it just to prove he can. His unwillingness to accept defeat allows Peter to know that he will find the solution to any business problem posed to him. It may take a few extra minutes, but it will be a solid solution.

Peter exemplifies an important principle he would like all businesses to understand: business solutions can come from listening to and learning from the unique experience of individuals with disabilities. They understand how to make adjustments to increase efficiencies, which can be invaluable to a business. They can help businesses to break down barriers they don't even realize exist and to recognize corresponding opportunities when considering business or development projects.

With this kind of insight, coupled with his work ethic, tenacity, and intense desire to succeed, it is clear that Peter has come a long way from that morning in 1999 and is well on his way to excelling in his life and career.

Quick Links

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

[Vermont Business Leadership Network](#)

[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](#)

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LEAP - an employment focused program for youth

July of 2007 is a particularly special month for a group of six young men and women ranging in age from 16 to 19. Participants in the LEAP ("Learn, Earn, and Prosper") program - designed especially for youth who have visual impairments or are blind - they are living in a group apartment setting in Rock Point School in Burlington and working daily at ReCycle North. As a result, they are gaining the work, life and independent living skills - not to mention the confidence and experience - to help them to successfully transition into the world of work.



The LEAP program is a joint venture of the Division for the Blind and Visually Impaired (DBVI), the Vermont Youth Conservation Corp (VYCC), ReCycle North, Linking Learning to Life, and the Gibney Family Foundation, which funds the program and was a real catalyst in bringing the parties together. The goal of the program is to

provide young people - recruited, interviewed, and selected by VYCC - with the kind of significant training and support that will turn around the historically lower unemployment rate for those who are blind or visually impaired. For many of the participants, this is their first work experience. The program objectives for its participants are as follows: to complete high school; to enroll in some sort of higher education; or to find a training program that is fulfilling and leads to life long employment.

The LEAP program has various components. First is the residential component. Run by the VYCC, it allows the youth to learn and practice independent living skills, community building, teamwork, and how to arise each day and go to work. The mission of the VYCC is to teach individuals to take personal responsibility for all of their actions. Historically, using trail work as their vehicle for learning, they have taught leadership, responsibility, teamwork, and employment skills to young people. To the folks at VYCC, LEAP was the logical next step, to be inclusive with youth with disabilities, doing the same kind of work but in a different setting.

Matt Brantner, Leap Program Coordinator and an AmeriCorps VISTA member with VYCC, has been working for a year to develop this program. The experience for him has been immensely gratifying as he has watched the kids' progress, seen them come out of their shells, improve in their relationships, support each other, and grow.



Linda Chung, a certified vision rehabilitation therapist contracted by DBVI, lives with the youth at Rock Point and teaches them daily living skills, menu and meal planning, and helps out with social and recreational activities. She helps them learn to use assistive technology and techniques and to step out of their

comfort zone. She also supports their work at ReCycle North, ensuring they have the assistive technology necessary for their employment success.



The job skills and employment component is provided by ReCycle North. For them, the LEAP program was a wonderful extension of its "apprentice style" and Career Start training programs and its three part mission of environmental stewardship, educational training, and economic opportunities. According to Debbie Sheldon, the HR & Training Director for ReCycle North, they were very successful in the past in supporting a youth with a vision impairment, and they have also supplied computers to the DBVI summer camp, but they wanted to do more. So, they took the model of their career start program and applied it to the LEAP program.

At ReCycle North, the youth trainees are treated like staff and put right into the mix. In this real work environment, they learn how to advocate for what they need to be successful. They also bring with them a notable enthusiasm, eagerness to work, and increasing confidence.



A final component of the program is mentoring, provided by Linking Learning to Life. As the month-long program ends, they will connect the participants with mentors in the community to continue to support and mentor them with regard to employment and the transition to work.



As for the actual work, the youth are gaining experience in office administration, large appliance repair, computer repair, retail sales, small appliance testing, and building supply. They do administrative work on computers; take apart, clean, and reassemble large appliances; diagnose electronics; serve customers; assess the condition of small appliances; and much

more.

The biggest pay off is their personal experience. For some, it is learning what the real work world will be like and realizing they have the talent and ability to be successful in the work setting. Others are enjoying meeting new people and learning about their path to their work. Still others appreciate their discovery that they could quickly learn and prosper at technically challenging work such as computer repair. There has been the recognition by some of how motivated they are and how much they love to work. In addition, the social aspects of the work are especially rewarding, as is the experience of being treated as equals by co-workers and customers.



The impact of this experience isn't just on its young participants. Here, too, is an opportunity for the customers and co-workers to gain a new understanding of the capabilities and realities of living and working with a vision impairment, and to appreciate the wide spectrum of vision conditions and their corresponding accommodations. As one youth said, "a lot of people think if you can't see well you are going to run into a wall, which isn't the case. People often try to help too much. I don't need or want too much sympathy or support." There is an eagerness to have people know that they are self sufficient and have a great deal to contribute - as much as any other citizen.

Another young man put it this way: "any visually impaired person can do anything a sighted person can do". Let there be no doubt about this!



From Employer To Employer

A Message from Bruce Erwin, President, Good News Garage:

As President of Good News Garage, I have the good fortune of employing Barbara Buchanan as our Receptionist and Donor Coordinator. Barbara has been with us for seven and a half years. Her work includes answering the telephone, assisting people who donate their cars, recording vehicle data into the database, explaining the donation process and tax deduction opportunities, taking donations from the website, and following up with donors. We receive several thousand donor calls per year, so this is quite an important position within our organization.

Barbara also happens to be blind. To support her in her work, we have made minimal accommodations. JAWS (Job Access with Speech) software allows her to use her computer and enter information into the database. She has an individual label printer that allows her to print one label at a time, a Perkins braille, and a dual headset which allows her to hear the phone in one ear and JAWS in the other. She also uses a PAC Mate, which is something like a PDA for blind and visually impaired people. These accommodations do not impact our organization in any way, and she does essentially the same job a sighted person would do.

According to Barbara, the most satisfying part of the job is working with her colleagues to provide affordable transportation and enhance the quality of life for low income Vermonters.

Here's my message to you. Blind or visually impaired individuals can contribute greatly to the success of an organization through their desire to succeed. I have experienced first hand how much visually impaired workers want to prove that they are as effective as people with sight. We do not view Barbara any differently than any other staff person; she is there to contribute and we value her work. People who are blind or visually impaired are no less driven to achieve than a sighted person; they may well be more dedicated than one would expect.

So, Barbara and I agree on this recommendation: the next time you have a position to fill, contact the Division for the Blind and Visually Impaired. DBVI provides accommodations and on-the-job training for its consumers when necessary, and these services usually come at no cost to the employer. It is quite possible that you might find someone with the qualifications you need and a work ethic you have only dreamed about.

Resources You Should Know About!

There are a variety of assistive technologies available to support individuals in employment. Here are just a few:

Screen Magnification Software - This specialized software allows adjustable screen magnification. Simple key combinations or mouse clicks make it possible to enlarge text in small increments that start at double the size and can extend to one word per screen. This software runs behind standard computer programs

and preserves all functionality of the programs.

Screen Reading Software - This is the technology that Peter Apgar and Barbara Buchanan use, as mentioned in the stories above. This specialized computer software uses synthesized speech to read text displayed on the screen. It reads text that is inserted or opened by the user in documents and emails. The voices in the most recent versions of this software are very understandable and can be adjusted to extremely fast reading rates.

Screen reading software can be used to access the internet, word processing programs, database programs, spread sheets, email, and essentially all electronic files.

Optical Character Recognition -- Specialized software that converts print material that is scanned and saved as an electronic file. This option is helpful when documents are only available in print format.

Closed Circuit Televisions -- This technology involves a "TV-like" device that enlarges printed material using a camera to display the enlarged image on a screen. The size and color contrast can then be adjusted to user preference.

There are several different types of CCTVs - head-worn magnifiers, desktop systems, portable magnifiers, and versatile magnifiers - all designed to meet varying needs.

For more information about technology manufacturers and resellers, please click [here](#) to go to the DBVI website:



Simple Ways You Can Make a Difference

How You Can Help - Informational Interviews

As an employer, you may be asking "what can I do to help?" Perhaps your business does not have any current job openings, but you would like to get involved. A great way is to provide informational interviews. For anyone looking for a job, an informational interview provides an opportunity to get an inside look at a job field. By talking with people working in the field, the job seeker can gather information about an occupation. It is not to get a job, it is to gain information.

For a person with a disability, this is a valuable tool for career exploration. The informational interview helps a person to gain information on choosing a career, an opportunity to find out if they can do the job. In addition to gaining career information, the informational interview is an opportunity to build self confidence and to improve on interviewing skills. The jobseeker conducts the interview, they ask you the questions. It is a more relaxed setting for everyone.

As an employer, providing informational interviews to people with disabilities can

mean so much. You can help guide someone into a career they might be perfect for. You might talk them out of a job they may not be able to perform well at. You can provide feedback on their interviewing technique to better prepare them for a real interview. And most importantly, you might find a new employee! One out of every twelve informational interviews results in a job offer. Finding the right employee for you is just an added benefit to informational interviewing.

If you are interested in conducting an informational interview, a good place to start is to notify a vocational counselor at Vocational Rehabilitation or an employment representative at a VABIR office near you. You can find their contact information in the "Links" section of this newsletter.

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