



Number of unemployed disabled workers grows

Agencies team up to promote diversity

BY KELLY LIYAKASA
 kellyl@westfairinc.com

The economy and growing awareness of individuals with disabilities – and the programs to provide them gainful employment – has created a surge in need for worker placement.

“Three years ago, this office had approximately 1,900 consumers in the Rockland and Westchester communities,” said Gwenn Canfield, district coordinator for workforce development, New York State Department of Education Office of Adult Career and Continuing Education Services and Vocational Rehabilitation. “We now have about 3,200. ...it definitely has to do with the economy. As more people became unemployed, often they (disabled workers) were the last ones to get the job or who were dispensed of first.”

At a 2011 National Disability Employment Awareness Month Breakfast, Canfield shared a statistic that for fiscal year 2010, 171,962 eligible Americans with disabilities began careers and collectively paid \$1 billion in federal, state and local taxes.

“Employers are usually scared that an accommodation (for a disabled worker) will be a costly vehicle, but the truth is, most cost an employer nothing and 70 percent are under \$500,” Canfield said. “By the time they’re 37, there’s been a study that most young people will have had seven jobs. But people with disabilities tend to stay, work out arrangements to keep a job and remain loyal.”

Last month, the Westchester Putnam Workforce Investment Board joined forces with a consortium of providers to shed light on the value disabled workers bring to the workplace.

Partner Westchester Employment Network connects member agencies such as Ability Beyond Disability, Rockland

Psychiatric Center and Cerebral Palsy of Westchester, among many others, with viable employers.

“PepsiCo, right here, is a good company,” said Donovan Beckford, director of the WPWIB. “They’ve made it their mission to get disabled people in the workplace. The United Hebrew Geriatric Center, Walgreen’s also, these are all organizations committed to hiring these workers.”

Last month, PepsiCo hosted at its Purchase world headquarters a 24th anniversary celebration for Valhalla and Carmel-based CAREERS for People with Disabilities Inc., an organization that saw a 27 percent increase in job placements last year.

PepsiCo representative Sara Aldaous called the company a “joint advocate for inclusion and empowerment” through the PepsiCo EnAble movement, a network for employees with disabilities or other differences.

CAREERS’ executive director Tina Cornish-Lauria said longtime client Richard Pirro works at Pepsi’s fitness club and ticked off companies like Kohl’s, Marshalls, Target, Barnes and Noble, Dunkin’ Donuts and D’Agostino, that employ its other 240 clients at any given time.

“We have a workforce readiness program we instituted about a year ago and we help workers put together a résumé, fill out applications online and assign them a job coach who helps them learn the job over-the-shoulder once they start working,” Cornish-Lauria said. “Many of our clients we work with for years and years. They’re keeping their jobs.”

Canfield said an aging Westchester population will increase the need of support for the cause. “People are having to work until they’re much older,” she said. “You see people who aren’t stopping at 62. And the older you are, the more likely you are to acquire a disability. There so many variables.”

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