

Project SEARCH brings people with intellectual, developmental disabilities into the workforce

Written by By Molly Ann Howell Sun Correspondent
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According to the U.S. Department of Labor, only 19.1% of people with disabilities were employed in 2020, compared to 63.7% of able-bodied people.

When it comes to intellectual disabilities, the Gallup-McKinley County Schools is trying to do something to bring that percentage up.

On May 20, five students graduated from the district's Project SEARCH program, a program

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that helps individuals with intellectual and/or developmental disabilities prepare for the workforce.

The program is a one-year internship for people aged 18-22 who have graduated high school. The program prepares them for integrated, competitively paid work.

Project SEARCH is an international program, it's even located in Iceland. This year's graduating class was the eighth group to complete the course.

The interns complete three 10-week internships where they gain hard and soft employability skills that prepare them for competitive jobs.

GMCS special education teacher David Palenschat is the instructor for the program. His job is to teach the students employability skills while they're also learning from their internships.

"[My favorite part] is the look on their face when they get their first paycheck and when they first get offered a position and a job when everyone else around them thought it was not possible for them to be employed, to be competitive," Palenschat said.

The program is funded by the New Mexico Department of Vocational Rehabilitation, the New Mexico Department of Health/Developmental Disabilities Support Division, the UNM Center for Development & Disability, and the Navajo Nation of Special Education and Rehabilitation Services. The interns receive minimum wage during their internships.

The program focuses a lot on hospitality and service jobs. Some of the areas the students could work include laundry, housekeeping, front desk, snack/coffee bar, kitchen prep, inspections, dishwasher, server, busser, maintenance, or grounds keeping.

Some of the local businesses that participate in the program include Springhill Suites, Comfort Suites, Del Taco, Anthony's A Taste of the Southwest, Rehoboth McKinley Christian Health

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Care Services, Rhino Health, Xtreme Cuts, and Quality Inn.

Samuel Post is the general manager at Springhill Suites, and he is a big supporter of the program.

“We make sure we put them where they get a chance to succeed, where they can develop what fits their skill sets and still matches the hospitality and brand standard needs,” Post said. “If they’re lacking on that we sure enough give them the tools to succeed.”

Post said he began working with the interns from the program when he worked as the food and beverage manager at the Hilton Garden Inn. When he became the manager at Springhill Suites three years ago, he knew he wanted to continue to be a part of Project SEARCH.

“We’ve seen the value in the program, not just for the company, but for the kids; how much they transition, how much they change, how much they develop, and we wanted to continue to be a part of that,” Post said.

Post mentioned an intern who eventually became one of his full-time employees, Craig Roberts. Post said that when Roberts started his internship he wouldn’t talk to women and he couldn’t read. But now, Post calls Roberts the “backbone of the company.”

Post has four full time employees who graduated from the program.

“They run circles around anyone I could just hire off the street,” he said.

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