

COVERSTORY



At The Nicholas Center, Dean packs an order for one of the organization's clients, Line Of Site.

Photo courtesy of the Nicholas Center

ENABLING THE OTHER-ABLED

Workforce training expands for the disabled, benefiting employers, employees and society

By ADINA GENN

Increasingly, new paths in the workplace are opening up for people with autism as well as people with disabilities.

Along with training for employers and employees, there is boosted awareness among the region's leaders on the benefits of supporting a diverse workplace culture in which all team members can thrive.

Right now, new workforce training opportunities across Long Island coincide with high unemployment among those on the autism spectrum – experts put this figure at 85 percent. These opportunities may also solve some of the decades-long struggle employers have faced finding qualified workers. And with the right training and support, experts say, employees are highly proficient, punctual and loyal team members.

This is something David Thompson sees daily while working with those on the autism spectrum.

Thompson is the senior director of employment and inclusion at The Nicholas Center, which provides daily support to individuals with autism, and works in partnership with Spectrum Design, a custom apparel

and promotional items business with a social mission to employ people on the autism spectrum in Port Washington.

People with autism often “like routine processes,” Thompson said. Jobs deemed too mundane for some “may be a dream job for someone else.”

Meanwhile, a new effort is underway to inform employers about tax incentives and credits when they hire people with disabilities or who are on the autism spectrum.

This includes “a work opportunity tax credit,” Rep. Andrew Garbarino said recently on LIBN|Now, the weekly news webinar on LIBN and Facebook. “It’s available to employers who hire individuals from



Courtesy of Winters Center for Autism

Sean Winters is completing a Winters Bros. recycle route.



Courtesy of Winters Center for Autism

In this pilot program with Winters Center for Autism, Anthony practices inventory management in the food pantry at Long Island Select Healthcare.

certain target groups that faced significant barriers.”

Garbarino also spoke of “a disabled access credit” that “provides a nonrefundable credit of up to \$5,000 for small business that incur expenditures, for the purpose of providing access to persons with disabilities, and that

also includes employment, if you make your small business more accessible.”

In the Town of Islip, Councilman Jim O’Connor heads up the Disability Advisory Board. O’Connor has been a long-time advocate of people with disabilities as the father of Matthew, a 23-year-old who is

“severely autistic,” “non-verbal” and “a really beautiful person,” O’Connor said on LIBN|Now.

O’Connor said that he and his wife bring Matthew “into the community, so the community can see that it’s important that we incorporate the disabled members of our community into our everyday life.”

O’Connor pointed out that “no two children or no two people with autism are alike, and no two disabilities are alike, so you always have to have the ability to listen and be able to hear and learn.”

“So many people probably have gone into businesses where somebody has already hired someone with a disability and they don’t know,” he added. “There are very, very capable children and adults out there with disabilities that most people don’t even” know about.

For example, Garbarino mentioned a busboy on the autism spectrum that he knows at a nearby restaurant that is considered “one of the hardest working busboys” in town.

Still, O’Connor said, “there might be a stigma attached to it” for employers, who may think “this might be a drain” or “I might have to pay more,” perhaps unaware of the many programs available to employers that hire people who would otherwise face barriers to employment.

West Babylon-based Winters Center for Autism, opening in the fall, is already partnering with Long Island Select Healthcare in Central Islip, or LISH. At LISH, three participants from the center began job training in March through an existing employment program implemented at the corporate office of Winters Bros. Waste Systems of Long Island.

Winters Bros. is “committed to hiring people on the autism spectrum,” said Christine Ponzio, the center’s executive director.

Positions at Winters Bros. include entry level administrative clerks who work part-time, accountants who work full-time, as well as those who do coding, analytics and other jobs, she said.

Winters Center for Autism’s Transition Work Experience Program is aimed at offering hands-on skill developments to tap into the potential of each participant as they find the job that best fits their abilities.

Services at the center include job training, career planning, interview preparation, exploration of volunteer and educational opportunities, and employer assistance to develop employment programs for people with autism.

The partnership at LISH serves as a pilot program, and the participants are gaining supported experience working in a food pantry, in customer service and in performing clerical work, Ponzio said.

Some participants can work independently while others need long-term support. In addition to providing job creation, training and placement, the center helps businesses develop and implement programs to employ those on the spectrum.

Embracing diversity can bring about change that aids society as a whole, Thompson said. He pointed to “The Curb-Cut Effect,” where in the 1970s in Berkeley advocates for people in wheelchairs fought for sloping curbs so that those in wheelchairs could safely and easily cross the street. By 1990, President George H.W. Bush signed the Americans with Disabilities Act, which included mandates such as curb cuts. The change was good for society, according to published reports, from parents navigating curbs with strollers to those wheeling heavy packages.

“There are society benefits to accommodating people that are different than you,” Thompson said.

“The more diversity you have within your team, the more perspectives you have to look at problems,” Thompson said.

Meanwhile, Levittown-based Elija Foundation offers its Transition Programs and Services, supporting people in local colleges and in competitive employment. This includes vocational assessment, program placement, career coaching and employer training for organizations that want to employ those with autism. And at its organic farm in Huntington, participants learn agricultural skills, contributing to the farm’s productivity.

In Yaphank, Maryhaven’s Business Center provides an integrated community environment where those with disabilities work alongside non-disabled persons to provide packaging and assembly outsourcing and document imaging services to companies in the region. The center provides job skills and training, so those with disabilities can find community-integrated jobs, where they can earn a sustainable wage, and become full contributing members of society.

And the Viscardi Center offers transition counseling, job exploration, self-advocacy and work-readiness training, and individualized work experiences.

Overall, these hires have a “high level of loyalty to the job, the best attendance and are the most punctual,” Ponzio said. “The job training has allowed people to explore and find their employment niche.”