

# employment in New Jersey:

## A Mixed Review

by Jonathan Jaffe

**T**alk to anyone in New Jersey who provides supported employment for people with disabilities and you can expect this position: Those who want to work in the community should have the opportunity to do so—no matter the obstacle.

But while there is plenty of passion among those who make it possible for people with disabilities to have supported employment, also known as competitive employment, the number of people doing so in New Jersey has been decreasing, a new study shows.

And the state—which refutes this study’s findings—is not providing additional financial resources to put more people with developmental disabilities in the competitive workplace, the report states.

David Braddock, a University of Colorado associate vice president and co-author of “The State of the States in Developmental Disabilities 2008,” said New Jersey lags behind most states in providing supported employment for people with disabilities.

In fact, he said, there were more people in supported employment in New Jersey in 1996 than there are now. His report, with information provided by the state Division of Developmental Disabilities (DDD), shows there were 1,783 people with disabilities in supported employment in 1996, the year the program hit its height.

A year after the Braddock report’s 10-year comparison, that number had dropped to 1,359 in 2007, according to DDD.

Meanwhile, state figures show the number of people with disabilities in sheltered workshops has been

generally consistent, with 846 people in the program in 1994 and 829 last year. Meanwhile, the number of people in adult job training programs has steadily grown, from 4,277 in 1994 to 6,411 last year.

In total, state officials said, the number of individuals enrolled through DDD in supported employment, adult training or workshops was 8,599 last year, up from 6,251 in 1994.

Kenneth W. Ritchey, an assistant commissioner with the state Department of Human Services who heads DDD, said the numbers quoted in the study are only part of the story, as they do not include people with disabilities who receive services through the state Division of Vocational Rehabilitation Services (DVRS). DDD finds work for some young adults as they are transitioning from high school to adult life, while others with the ability to be fairly independent are referred to DVRS in the state Department of Labor and Workforce Development.

“When I saw the numbers in Braddock’s study, they struck me as being odd,” Ritchey said. “How can we have less people in supported employment, as I am hearing the opposite story? The answer is that we are not capturing, for reporting purposes, the people that bypass us and go directly to DVRS for services.”

Ritchey said the DDD only reports to Braddock the number of people the agency specifically funds for employment services. The DDD and DVRS do not report the cumulative number of people with developmental disabilities who are receiving employment services from the two agencies and other organiza-

tions. Ritchey did not have an estimate of that number, only that it is higher than what the Braddock study reported.

Through information provided by DDD, Braddock said, there does not seem to be a financial commitment in New Jersey that encourages supported employment.

“It is difficult to make the case that there has been a substantial enhancement in supported employment in New Jersey,” Braddock said, noting the state spent \$10.6 million for supported employment services in 1996. In 2006, the line item remained constant at \$10.6 million, which Braddock considers a budget cut when a decade of inflation is factored in.

The New Jersey WorkAbility program is a great resource for people with disabilities who are working. Through this program, if these employees are saving more than \$2,000 in financial assets at the end of the month, they will still not lose Medicaid. Through the program, people with disabilities can have \$20,000 in resources and can earn up to \$52,788 without jeopardizing their Medicaid benefits.

Braddock’s figures show that only 14 percent of people with developmental or intellectual disabilities who are working are in supported or competitive employment. The remaining 86 percent, he said, are in sheltered workshops, day programs or training programs.

“Our data shows that New Jersey is not a national leader in supported employment,” Braddock said. “Instead, we look to Washington, Connecticut and Oklahoma.”

In Oklahoma, for example, 77 percent of the people with developmental or intellectual disabilities are in supported employment, as compared to the 14 percent cited in New Jersey, he noted.

Ritchey noted that Braddock is not incorporating all of the dollars used to help people with disabilities work in the community. While DDD funding has been “relatively flat,” Ritchey said, the division leverages federal Medicaid money, while private community provider agencies may obtain funds from other sources, including foundations or grants. “I don’t know the numbers, but they would be larger than at first blush,” he said.

State officials said they can not extrapolate the additional budget figures for supported employment. For example, there are 644 people in Real Life Choices directing budgets themselves and the state does not have a way to identify the portion of the budgets that are used for supported employment. In addition to the \$10.6 million for supported employment, there are expenditures for supported employment embedded within the Community Care Waiver and the Real Life Choices budgets.

Ritchey points to the Arc of Camden, noting the agency uses various funding sources, along with DDD money, to support follow-along services and workshops. “While our money is on the table, it is not the only money on the table,” Ritchie said. “DVRS is a player. If you want employment, you go through them first, so you don’t get tied into the DDD system.”

Richard Lecher, PhD, chief executive officer of SCARC, formerly known as the Sussex County Association for Retarded Citizens, based in Augusta, has a different perspective. He believes supported employment has been “under-funded” and “not necessarily a priority for serving the disability population in New Jersey.”

“There are a lot of causes related to workplace inclusion and community inclusion,” Lecher said. “DVRS and DDD do not cover these costs unless you have a very able and skilled worker who can more easily handle a job with minimal ongoing support.”

He said many people with moderate or severe disabilities are not provided with the right types of job coaches or support services to make it work.

“I have read a few anecdotes about workers starting their own business with the support of family or paid staff, but that is almost a rarity in our field,” Lecher said. “The more common experience has been center-based working.”

Jennifer Joyce, president of NJAPSE: The Network on Employment,—the state chapter of a national organization that emphasizes supported employment—has seen the trend in New Jersey match the national numbers. She describes the number of people with intellectual or developmental disabilities using supported employment services remaining stagnant or decreasing.

“I do think there have always been good intentions to increase these numbers, but other issues often become the priority,” she said, noting state Department of Human Services Commissioner Jennifer Velez has made employment one of her top three priorities.

In regards to funding supported employment programs, the Braddock study says, New Jersey ranks in the bottom third of the states. The \$10.6 million in funding translates into \$1.21 per capita for each resident in the state, where nearly 9 million people live. The state is paying about 50 percent less for supported employment than other states are providing, Braddock said.

There are three employment options in New Jersey for people with disabilities:

People can work in five-day-a-week sheltered workshops, where they handle basic assembly of products under close supervision and participate in basic skills classes.

People can work in adult training centers through the DDD, in which people often work in large facilities and do basic tasks. State officials say some are assigned to community storefronts, such as flower shops, bakeries and print shops, throughout the state. Hours are more flexible than in the workshops.

And there is supported employment, in which people work in competitive jobs, such as cleaning a movie theater or doing data entry at a law office. DVRS supports the effort for a short period of time, while DDD provides ongoing resources for job retention.

State officials say the DDD now works with 52 supported employment programs and pays for people to attend 31 workshop programs around the state. There are 238 adult training programs, which offer both facility-based training and at least a few hours of daily employment.

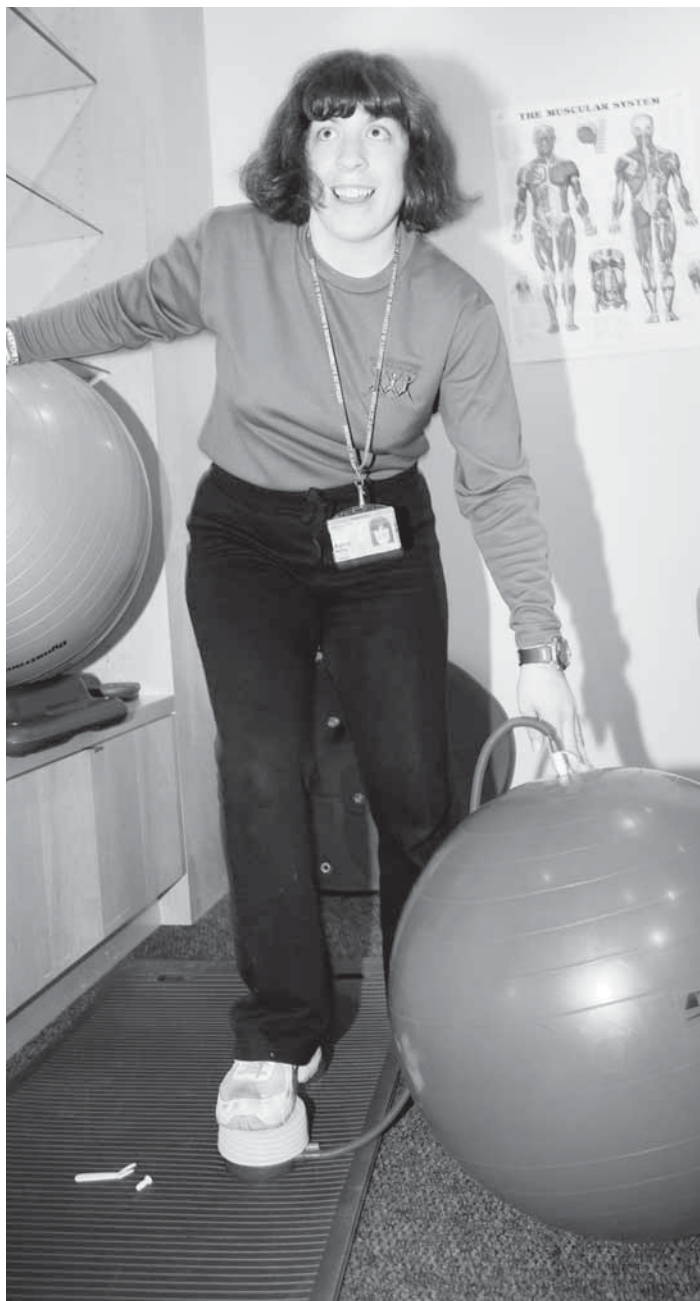
There are a number of “creative business models” in these adult training programs, such as “Vaseful,” a



**Barbara Coppens works at NJ Protection and Advocacy, Inc.**

flower shop, and “Allies Café,” a coffee cart that operates in the Chuck Costello building, a 61-unit apartment complex for people with disabilities in Old Bridge.

Leslie Long, a public policy expert at COSAC (the Center for Outreach and Advocacy for the Autism Community) in Ewing, said the sheltered workshops remain a viable option for many families as the individual has a steady place to go for 30 hours a week while his or her parents are at work. “There are many dual



**Patrice Keiling works at the Pfizer fitness center.**

income homes in New Jersey and parents can't take off," she said. "So, the workshops are a secure option."

Yet, she said, supported employment must be the future. Options need to be expanded, as it seems people with disabilities are traditionally directed to the simplest jobs, from cleaning tables to stacking shelves. For those people who do not want to work in fast food eateries or supermarkets, there is limited exposure to other opportunities in the business world.

"We need to know where the jobs are and train people with disabilities for those jobs," Long said. "We

haven't done that for people with disabilities in New Jersey and that is one of the reasons for the lack of competitive employment."

The current downturn in the economy has also affected supported employment, said Lecher, noting many of the low-wage jobs that had traditionally been passed to people with disabilities are getting hard to find. Many people who had been laid off from their job, need a second job or had to re-enter the workforce are now applying for these entry-level positions. Or, the companies are no longer deeming these jobs as "vital," and no longer participating in the supported employment program, he added.

"There are some traditional jobs, typically in the supermarket industry, that are committed to employing people with disabilities," Lecher said. "But these jobs are becoming limited."

## BENEFITS OF SUPPORTED EMPLOYMENT

Supported employment evolved in the early 1980s when the community at-large recognized there was an untapped labor pool who can handle such jobs as janitorial services and office filing. Many of these jobs were handled by older workers without advanced degrees who were retiring. Many of those in the next generation possessed college degrees and aspired for higher-paying professions, creating the void.

Dan Baker, an assistant professor of pediatrics at the Elizabeth M. Boggs Center on Developmental Disabilities, said supported employment has been a great opportunity for people with disabilities, as they can earn more money and have a better quality of life. In addition, he contends, studies show supported employment creates a benefit for all of society, as people in the program pay taxes and rely less on government supports.

"The state is broke, so we need more taxpayers," Long said. "We pay a high cost for children in special education. We want that investment to pay off, so they should be working in the community and being part of the tax system. There is no downside to having people with disabilities be part of the tax system."

Long said many people with disabilities do not need intensive support to work in the community, noting many just need a job coach to check in on them via cell phone. Meanwhile, as taxpayers, they are helping to pay for the job coach. The benefits outweigh the costs, she said, adding there is overhead to

run sheltered workshops and wages are much lower.

“We have not yet made supported employment the first choice in New Jersey for people with disabilities,” Baker said. “The first choice, if you look at the numbers, is that people are going into other forms of training, such as adult training centers. When people turn 21, they are put on the waiting list for supported employment or adult training centers. The focus should be about getting them employment in the community.”

Baker said there is a movement toward this, noting the DDD recently issued a supported employment manual and DVRS does provide supports for those who are working. But, he said, there needs to be more employee supports, which is why he believes the numbers have gone down in recent years.

Baker points to four specific reasons as to why supported employment numbers are on a downswing in New Jersey:

Integrated community employment is not always the first choice offered to people with disabilities.

Supported employment tends to be provided to people who do not need full-time support. “So, the idea is that people with supported employment do not present any level of significant challenge and are easier to support,” he said.

The business community has not been convinced that it is beneficial to hire people with disabilities. There are benefits to the employer, such as a reliable and faithful employee. Baker points to Marriott, which, he said, has had a 6 percent turnover among employees with disabilities who go through their training program, as compared with a 50 percent turnover for other employees.

Sheltered workshops provide job security, unlike competitive employment in the business world.

It is important to note that those working in competitive employment have plenty of support.

Frank DeLucca, assistant director for Project Hire in North Brunswick, a statewide supported employment program founded in 1985, said the group spends about 30 hours finding the right job for a person with disabilities. Then, there is a concerted effort to train the individual through the help of a job coach. This usually takes another 30 hours to complete. Total cost for these two phases averages \$4,080, equivalent to \$51 an hour, he said.

Project Hire then provides long-term support as a “continuous safety net,” DeLucca said, noting job coaches drop in on the worksite and meet with the employer to ensure all responsibilities and expecta-

tions are being met. He said the typical job coach does four to five visits a month, and a cost of \$3,060 a year through the DDD.

“It is flexible on a case-by-case basis as some individuals need more supports than others,” DeLucca said, noting Project Hire has assisted 3,200 people since 1985 and has an average annual placement of 200.

## THE FUNDING QUANDARY

It may come as a surprise, but many people with disabilities are hesitant to earn money. To that end, they are shying away from supported employment.

That is because if they make too much money, it is a common misperception that they will lose their Medicaid benefits, which provides health, dental and prescription coverage. People with disabilities tend to require more medical care than other people, making Medicaid an important option over private health insurance, said Lecher, who oversees residential services, day programs, job placement, supported employment and family support services for 750 people with disabilities.

Of the 60 people with disabilities employed through SCARC, two have become taxpayers and are financially independent. The remaining workers are paid minimum wage, dependent on Medicaid coverage and living in group homes that DDD subsidizes.

“We have to watch what people earn because as their SSI (Supplemental Security Income) drops, it affects whether they live in a licensed facility or not or if they live in a group home,” Lecher said. “Seventy-five percent of a person’s SSI gets returned to DDD to support the group home. So, there is a lot of watching.”

“The resources are eaten up in a large part before a person begins a job,” he added. “So, the system works against supported employment. Job coaching is also expensive and it is hard to keep people working in unskilled labor, particularly in today’s economy in which the general population wants access to the lower level jobs.”

Medicaid is the last of the SSI benefits that an individual will lose when their income steadily increases, Lecher noted.

Greg Makely, project director for New Jersey Work Incentives Network Support (NJWINS), said there is an ongoing rumor in New Jersey that people with disabilities will lose Medicaid if they work. When someone earns too much money, they lose the check portion of SSI, but they do not lose Medicaid, unless they earn more than \$33,022 in annual earnings or

have more than \$2,000 in resources at the end of each month.

He noted the New Jersey WorkAbility program is a great resource for people with disabilities who are working. Through this program, if these employees are saving more than \$2,000 in financial assets at the end of the month, they will still not lose Medicaid. Through the program, people with disabilities can have \$20,000 in resources and can earn up to \$52,788 without jeopardizing their Medicaid benefits, Makely said.

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Log on to [www.state.nj.us/humanservices/dds/njworkability.html](http://www.state.nj.us/humanservices/dds/njworkability.html) for more information about New Jersey WorkAbility. To learn more about NJWINS, log on to [www.njwins.org](http://www.njwins.org).

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“The problem is that people don’t have this information,” Makely said. “It is better for people with disabilities to work because they can make more money. If they make so much money that they lose their SSI benefits, their household income would be higher than if they didn’t go to work.”

He noted that people being served through DDD will likely not earn more than \$33,000 a year and would not risk their residential placements through DDD, he added.

“They just need to be careful that they are not saving more than \$2,000,” Baker said. He noted these funding programs are difficult to understand, adding “it is almost like you need to be an air traffic controller to keep track of them.”

He said NJWINS is one of the non-profit groups now offering individualized benefit counseling for people with disabilities to understand how the federal and state programs related to them.

## TODAY AND TOMORROW

To push supported employment forward, the state needs to earmark more money for job coaching and transportation, Lecher said, although such an investment would bear more fruit in a healthier economy when there is a need for a larger labor pool.

Kathie Szul, DDD’s director of housing and resource development, said the state remains committed

to moving away from sheltered workshops and focusing on securing employment for people with disabilities in the community.

“There is a great group working at the division on employment, giving people the supports to work in the community,” she said. “The whole key is to focus on what strengths and interests that people have and what environments they can work the most favorably in.”

Szul said sheltered workshops are a dying industry, as the manufacturing sector is going overseas for cheaper labor for such tasks as assembling a first aid kit. She notes that people in these workshops earn minimum wage, which is \$7.15 an hour.

“We really focus on the individual’s choice and try to give them informed choices,” Szul said. “We don’t automatically direct someone. We want them to know the whole array of possibilities out there that others have accomplished in the community.”

For example, Szul points to a young man with autism who had serious difficulties focusing. The state connected him with a job in which he broke down boxes. “He was the type of employee who wouldn’t take a vacation because the job fulfilled his natural tendencies,” she said. “It was the perfect job for him.”

Ritchey noted DDD recently hired an administrator who will focus on supported employment. Frank Kirkland is a former state director in West Virginia who has been named an assistant director in charge of DDD’s southern and lower central regions in New Jersey.

“He gives the division a strong presence in employment,” Ritchey said. “He will look for things the state has not taken advantage of as much as they have.”

Jennifer Joyce, of NJAPSE, said she recently met with Kirkland, noting he is “very passionate about supported employment” and will do “as much as he can to increase the number of individuals taking advantage of supported employment services.

“I think that part of the issue has been the lack of someone within the central DDD office who has the ability to be solely focused on employment,” Joyce said. “With the multitude of responsibilities that each person given the task of improving supported employment has had, other issues have taken precedence.

“We need someone who can champion supported employment with school districts, families, providers of services and, of course, people with intellectual or developmental disabilities,” she added. “There needs to be a belief on all these levels that all people with disabilities nor only can work but have a responsibility to do so.” **P&F**

# Rebecca McDonald

## Remembering an Employment Pioneer

by Jonathan Jaffe



New Jersey's success in the 1990s at moving people with disabilities from sheltered workshops, enclaves and traditional day-programs to supported employment was in large measure due to Rebecca McDonald.

Colleagues and friends remember Rebecca McDonald—who died in August 1999 from breast cancer at age 50—as a woman of vision who enthusiastically embraced the notion of supported or integrated employment.

“Rebecca McDonald held the belief, before it was ever really popular here, that any person with a disability could work if matched with the right job and given appropriate supports,” said Tom Buffato, executive director of ARC of New Jersey. “She helped build New Jersey’s foundation for supported employment.”

“I always think of Rebecca as a comet who streaked across our state. Though she’s passed on, her light still shines on many people she never met but whom she still benefited,” said Deborah Spitalnik, executive director of the Elizabeth M. Boggs Center on Developmental Disabilities at the University of Medicine and Dentistry of New Jersey (UMDNJ).

“Rebecca was perhaps New Jersey’s earliest, most significant and most energetic advocate for putting people with disabilities to work,” recalled Robert Nicholas, former director of the New Jersey Division of Developmental Disabilities (DDD).

Shortly after Nicholas was named division director in 1989 he met McDonald and was struck by her “sincere passion” for improving the plight of people with disabilities in the areas of training and employment.

“In those days, there were only a few provider agencies in New Jersey with programs to put people with disabilities to work in the community,” Nicholas said, noting United Cerebral Palsy of New Jersey, Union County Arc and the Arc of New Jersey offered programs.

Meanwhile, DDD did not have the staff, resources or procedures to encourage other provider agencies to make a greater effort to implement supported employment. So, under Nicholas, a push began.

He enlisted the help of what was then the University Affiliated Program of New Jersey (UAP), part of Robert Wood Johnson Medical School in Piscataway. The UAP was later renamed the Elizabeth M. Boggs Center.

Nicholas said the task of creating a supported employment program fell squarely on McDonald, then the UAP’s director of supported employment technical assistance.

## THE “GREEN LIGHT”

“There were all these provider agencies that operated sheltered workshops or other day services,” Nicholas said. “At DDD, we recognized they should be moving toward supported employment.

“These agencies did not know how to find jobs in the community for their clients, know how to match people to the right jobs, and they certainly did not have job coaches or even know what job coaches did or how to train them,” he added. “The state had no protocols for how this was supposed to work.”

“So, Rebecca was given a green light to go knock on doors and to get these agencies on board,” Nicholas said. “Some told her, ‘You’re out of your mind. This will never work.’ Others embraced the idea once they understood how it should work and knew where the money would come from to pay for it.”

“This was a relatively new concept nationally and certainly new to New Jersey,” he said. We were kind of making it up as we went along. We had to develop policies and procedures as we went.”

The Arc of Sussex was the first agency in New Jersey to close a sheltered workshop in what was called “a change-over project” and move the people into community-based employment.

Richard Lecher, chief executive officer of the Sussex County Arc, remembers McDonald as “a very focused, energetic woman who from the start had a clear vision of what supported employment should look like.”

Lecher, now in his 36th year with that agency, said like most other provider agencies, the Sussex County Arc was “entrenched in center-based day programs and there weren’t sufficient funds available for conversion.

“With the state’s bureaucracy at the time, it was difficult to shift from center-based services to supported employment,” Lecher said. “The state required that agencies spend their money on the project they had and not on an experiment with employment.”

But McDonald persisted. And through her efforts, Lecher said, the state relaxed some of its requirements and conversion grants became available to agencies. This funding enabled the Sussex Arc to close its first sheltered workshop in 1992 and move the people it had served into supported employment or to community-inclusive programs, such as food and clothing distribution centers it operates for the needy. The Sussex Arc closed its third and last sheltered workshop in 1995.

“Rebecca developed the curriculum to train job coaches,” Nicholas said. “She drafted or inspired many of the state’s protocols and procedures. She fought for funding and continued to work with provider agencies throughout the 1990s.”

## LEARNING FROM THE BEST

McDonald received her undergraduate and master’s degree in special education and rehabilitation from the University of Oregon in 1981, when she studied under G. Thomas Bellamy, who was among the earliest professionals to dispute the notion that sheltered workshops were the single best employment option for people with disabilities.

“Rebecca’s experience with Tom Bellamy had a profound, lasting effect on her view of how much people with disabilities were capable of and could accomplish,” said Michael Knox, the deputy director of the Elizabeth M. Boggs Center.

After she earned her master’s degree, McDonald was director of developmental disability services in Concord, NC and then Raleigh before she moved to New Jersey to become assistant executive director of the Arc of Union County in 1987.

“Rebecca’s focus at the Union County Arc was to create a collaboration between provider agencies,” said Ellen Ball-Nalvan, McDonald’s friend who at that time

worked for Our House Inc., in Berkeley Heights. “She wanted a single portal for employers to post available jobs and for people with disabilities to get referrals to go to work.”

## WHEN REBECCA TALKS...

“It meant convincing agencies to let go of some of their turf to benefit everyone. And Rebecca was very good at that. She was a real whirlwind,” said Ball-Nalvan. “We used to joke that Rebecca was like E.F. Hutton—when she spoke people listened.”

McDonald created the Union County Leadership Employment Council, a group she patterned after a similar one she had worked with in North Carolina, said Spitalnik. “Rebecca came to New Jersey with cutting-edge experience from the University of Oregon and from North Carolina where, unlike New Jersey, they used their Medicaid waivers to build supports around an individual,” Spitalnik said. “Rebecca took this arsenal of strategies and translated them to our state.”

“Many people in the field of disabilities think only in terms of approaching things from the side of people with disabilities and seeing to their needs,” Spitalnik said. “One of the reasons Rebecca was so successful is she recognized early on that we need to also meet employers’ needs and understand the job market in order to find or create appropriate jobs for people with disabilities.”

## FULFILLING A MISSION

In 1990, McDonald became UAP’s director of supported employment technical assistance. McDonald worked with the federal Office of Special Education and federal Department of Special Education and Rehabilitation Services to obtain hundreds of thousands of dollars in system-change grants that helped provider agencies implement community-based employment for their clients.

Then, McDonald worked with the state departments of Education and Vocational Rehabilitation to put those federal monies to use.

In addition to her work at the UAP, she became a clinical pediatrics instructor in 1996 and later assistant professor of clinical pediatrics at the Robert Wood Johnson Medical School in Piscataway.

Meanwhile, McDonald was helping create a national Association for Persons in Supported Employment (ASPE). McDonald was ASPE’s founding vice president, served as its president for three years, and was an officer for the APSE Foundation until a few months before her death.

“Rebecca helped start the New Jersey ASPE chapter and enlisted me,” Ball-Nalvan said. “She phones me and tells me, ‘Okay Ellen, you’re going to be president of the state chapter and I ended up serving in that post for three years.”

“One of the most powerful statements about Rebecca McDonald was that after she passed away the national and state ASPEs created an award named in her honor,” said Ball-Nalvan. “The award is given annually to any professional, person with disabilities or family member who exhibits Rebecca’s brand of courageous, tenacious and visionary leadership in their advocacy for people with disabilities. The words on that award sum up Rebecca for me.”

Dale Dileo, a Florida-based advocate for people with disabilities and author of “Raymond’s Room,” which focuses on ending the segregation of people with disabilities, remembered meeting McDonald in the early 1990s while he lived in South Plainfield.

“Rebecca brought me in for UAP training sessions and as a guest lecturer at its annual conference. We quickly became friends and she invited me to participate at a conference for the national ASPE,” Dileo said.

“She really got me involved in ASPE,” said Dileo, who later served several terms as its president. “She could inspire people to participate and get involved. Rebecca was a powerful motivational force.”

Dileo and McDonald later co-authored ASPE’s ethical guidelines for supported employment, a document the association still provides to its new members.

Dileo last saw McDonald at ASPE’s national conference a year or so before her death, when she was in remission from her first bout with cancer. “We sat together for a few hours catching up,” he said. “Rebecca saw her remission as a second chance at life. She knew her cancer was life-threatening, but she passed it off as just one more obstacle for her to overcome in her ultimate mission.”

“Rebecca was determined not to curl up on a couch. No, she was eager to get back to helping people with disabilities and being an advocate for them. That’s what was foremost on her mind,” said Dileo. “That was Rebecca McDonald. That’s the kind of person she was.” **P&F**

# Myles Williams

by Maryann B. Hunsberger



**Myles Williams  
and his mother**

“My whole life changed from attending,” said Myles Williams. “Before I went, I was still caught up in being blind and didn’t think about other people’s disabilities. I learned at Partners that people have things worse than I do. I came to understand that so many people out there have disabilities and need information.”

Partners in Policymaking (PIP) is a nationally renowned advocacy training program sponsored in New Jersey by the state Council on Developmental Disabilities.

“I was most impressed by meeting parents whose children have disabilities like autism and Tourette. They

talked about struggling to find the right treatments for their children with Tourette syndrome, getting them into the right programs at school and educating their school districts. I had never really spent time with parents of children with disabilities before. I learned so much.

“I found out that teachers often don’t even know that children in their class have disabilities. Often, they see a child running around acting funny and think they are just acting up. By the time parents find out the child has a disability, a lot of time can be lost. I had no idea, since the only disability I had known about was blindness.”

At Partners, Williams learned to testify before legislators, write letters to elected officials, and to advocate for individuals with disabilities.

“Many people will be coming back home from the war with disabilities and we need to know how to help them. The housing issue will get even bigger when injured servicemen come home needing accessible places to live. I had thought about this before Partners, but learned that instead of complaining about things like this, I should be writing letters and passing the word to other people.”

Partners gave Williams the incentive to start a monthly support group for people with blindness and visual impairments. He worked on this project throughout the eight months that he attended Partners, contacting provider agencies, receiving advice on forming a support group and searching for a meeting place. He sent out flyers and recruited members with help from the Commission for the Blind and Visually Impaired (CBVI) and a center for independent living in Hackensack called HIP (Heightened Independence and Progress).

One month after graduating, Williams formed Eyes on Patterson. They meet at Second Home, an adult day center in downtown Patterson. “A lot of blind people just stay home. They are frightened and don’t know what to do. They began coming to our meetings and making new friends.”

“A speaker recently discussed voting and using the machines. A blind photographer talked to us about his work. I told the group about a blind chef in Jersey City. I’d like to have him come speak. I tell the members how they can get into schools or the work force and open businesses through different programs. I told them how CBVI could help train them to learn mobility. That way, they could walk outside and take public transportation instead of staying home all the time.”

Williams understands the fear and immobility many blind people experience. At age 12, he became visually impaired and learned he was losing his sight. He became fully blind at age 37. “At first, I stayed home a lot and felt like ‘why me?’”

CBVI worked with him on basic survival skills, such as how to get around, travel, use a cane, type, cook and keep house. “That helped lift my spirits up. I saw blind people older than me who were getting around and enjoying life. So, I stopped feeling so sorry for myself.”

The Paterson resident now walks, takes public transportation or uses Access Link for transportation. When grocery shopping alone, he calls the store in advance to let customer service know he will be coming. Sometimes, he asks in advance how much money to bring. At the counter, the store assigns someone to help him shop. “Some people don’t believe I’m blind because I do things. I try to do as much as I can do.”



**Myles Williams at home in Paterson NJ, holding a life size poster of himself from PIP, class of 2006.**



**Myles Williams working with JAWS on his computer at home. JAWS is a software program that helps people who are blind navigate e-mail, computer programs and the Internet.**

For the past year, he has attended a daytime adult center in Prospect Park called Caring. Williams does additional food shopping, goes to malls, drug stores and flea markets with Caring. At the center, he helps as much as possible.

“Two people just recently lost their sight, so I’m giving them time to adjust before trying to get them involved. I spend time listening to them and trying to cheer them up. I try to let them know there is a life out there and there’s no sense sitting around moping. I’m like the class clown, but in a good way. I like energizing and motivating people.”

Williams also co-moderates the Passaic County Monday Morning Network with Margaret Vas. He joined Monday Morning after visiting the network meeting in Wayne. “I asked how I could get a meeting started in my county, found a partner and we formed our group.”

The network gathers at a different meeting place each month. “We do this so we can bring the program to people. Margaret is a wheelchair user who handles the paperwork, since I am blind.”

The group discusses various issues, including the importance of voting. “Since it’s an election year, voting is the most important thing we talk about now. Many polls don’t have voter accessibility, so we try to change that.”

The network sent letters to the Paterson City Council about curb cuts, since many intersections only have curb cuts on one side of the street. “You can get down one side of the street, but not up the other. One curb cut has a pole in the middle of it.”

The group sent pictures of problem areas to each council member and talked to the business administrator. “They marked the areas that need to be fixed and we are waiting for them to do the work. It often seems like the needs of people with disabilities are on the back burner.”

Williams and his mother share an apartment. All but two of his ten living siblings live within walking distance in Paterson, so they visit each other regularly. He keeps in touch with the new friends he made through Partners, Monday Morning and Eyes on Paterson. He also attends a monthly group, Beyond the Eyes, for support and socialization.

At home, he stays busy with his computer. He uses JAWS® for Windows, a screen-reading program for blind computer users, to navigate the internet and type. He got this assistive technology through CBVI.

“JAWS® is a program that talks. When I touch a key, the computer says the name of the key. I took classes at Diamond Spring Lodge in Denville to learn how to use the program. I can type letters, play games like Solitaire, and do a lot of things on my computer.”

After attending his sessions, he began helping others to learn the program. “I sat in the practice room and helped people to practice using JAWS® the right way.”

While volunteering, he met Frances Grant, community outreach coordinator at DIAL, Inc., a center for independent living. Grant recommended that he attend Partners. “She told me about all the things I could learn. I was a little nervous at first, since I didn’t know what I was getting into. It was like the first day of school. I found out I was the only blind person, but didn’t feel out of place. The others helped me when I needed some assistance.”

A life-sized poster of Williams hangs in his bedroom, as does the leadership plaque he received when he graduated. “A Partners graduate made the poster for me. Attending PIP was the best thing I ever did. We need more programs like PIP. So many people with disabilities and parents of children with disabilities could learn their rights and find services.” **P&F**