

Case Study

Hospital's school-to-work program aids young adults with disabilities

Abstract

Through the international Project SEARCH program, York General Health Care Services (York General) – in conjunction with several local partners – prepares and transitions young adults with disabilities into employment by providing immersive guidance and training within a real-life workplace setting. The students receive classroom instruction and serve as interns across a variety of roles within York General's hospital and medical facilities. In addition to helping the health system become more diverse and live its values, the program helps develop candidates for positions facing a shortage of applicants.

Most importantly, the program has been beneficial to the young adults and their families, as well as the school system, York General and other local employers. Since York General became a Project SEARCH participant in 2012, 90 percent of its interns have secured and maintained employment. The organization has hosted interns across 23 departments in four facilities, and continues to see interest and engagement from its employees, many of whom serve as mentors to the interns.

Opportunity

In 2012, York General, a multi-facility health care organization in York, Neb., saw an opportunity to demonstrate its core values and fulfill a business need at the same time. The local school system and Nebraska Vocational Rehabilitation (Nebraska VR) – an employment program for people with disabilities – contacted York General with a request to consider hosting the Project SEARCH High School Transition Program. The program combines hands-on job experience and classroom instruction to help young adults with intellectual and developmental disabilities prepare for employment.

York General leadership thought the program would (1) help the organization become more diverse and compassionate (two highly valued cultural attributes), and (2) develop additional employment candidates for positions with a shortage of applicants. With approval from the organization's administration and board of directors, York General chose to host the program at its Willow Brook assisted living facility.

Intern Success Story

Unsure what she wanted to do after high school, Elizabeth* participated in the Project SEARCH program at York General in 2013-14. Career assessments she had previously completed with Nebraska Vocational Rehabilitation indicated an aptitude for administrative assistance in a business office setting.

Elizabeth knew she also wanted to work with people. York General placed her in two internships within the organization that aligned with her interests: the Health Information Management office and Hearthstone Long Term Care. She soon learned she didn't enjoy "desk work," but found her passion and strengths working with the residents at the long-term care facility.

These experiences helped Elizabeth decide what she wanted to study at Hastings Central Community College, and she recently graduated with an Associate's Degree in Human Services and an Activities Therapy Assistant Certificate. Elizabeth currently works in the activities department at a local nursing home, and she often visits Project SEARCH and York General staff on her days off.

** Name changed to protect identity.*

Partnership Approach

The Project SEARCH instructor coordinates and leads monthly meetings with all program partners, which include York General as well as Educational Service Unit 6 (ESU 6), Nebraska VR, Nebraska DHHS Division of Developmental Disabilities, Assistive Technology Partnership, and the Nebraska Commission for the Blind and Visually Impaired. The instructor reports on all aspects of the program, from goals, plans and accomplishments to challenges and needs. Partners make decisions as a group, adhering to all applicable health care regulations, York General policies and procedures, and Project SEARCH guidelines.

Key Steps

- Local school system and Nebraska VR contact York General about hosting the Project SEARCH program.
- York General Board of Directors and administration approve participation in the program.
- ESU 6, which serves several school districts in the area, agrees to fund the program, including the instructor's full salary and a portion of the skills trainer's salary. ESU 6 divides the costs among all schools with interns in the program.
- York General selects Willow Brook assisted living facility to host the classroom instruction portion of the program, as well as internships.
- Partners outline steps for participant selection, communication with families and young adults, and educating department leaders and employees.
- York General human resources department works with the program instructor and department leaders to identify internships that are best suited to the interns' interests and abilities.

Young adults who wish to participate in the program must be at least 18 years old. The typical participant has met all other requirements of his or her Individual Education Plan, and is in the last year of high school eligibility. Applicants go through an interview process and, if selected, serve as interns for nine months during the academic year. They receive classroom instruction at Willow Brook and generally complete three 10-week internships at various departments within the hospital. York General employees serve as mentors and provide on-the-job training. Interns receive their high school diplomas in May after successful completion of the program.

“Many of our interns begin the program believing there are constraints or obstacles they will never be able to overcome, but are then amazed that they have in fact exceeded those perceived barriers.”

– Cathy Norquest, Human Resources Director, York General

Results

In the first five years of the program, 90 percent of interns (18 of 20) found and maintained employment either on their own or with the support of Nebraska VR or other partners. This success helps meet the needs of the school system, local employers, and families with adult children who have disabilities. It also alleviates some of the training responsibilities of the state agencies.

York General has hosted interns across 23 departments (e.g., dialysis and maintenance) in four facilities, including the hospital lab and Willow Brook assisted living. Employees have noted positive relationships between interns and residents at the assisted living facility.

Hosting the program at Willow Brook also addressed a need identified by resident and family satisfaction surveys: expanding resident opportunities to interact with the community. "By having Project SEARCH in our facility, our residents became part of something that was improving our community and surrounding communities," said Rhonda Koehn, Willow Brook Administrator, adding that residents, interns and staff develop mutually beneficial relationships that provide greater guidance and meaning in the interns' work. In addition, interns make daily progress on mastering soft skills relevant to most working environments, as well as York General's standards of behavior and conduct.

Lessons Learned

Proper Planning: It is important to place interns in areas of the organization that are not under stress from staffing shortages, relocations, technology implementations or other challenges. York General chose to host the program at its assisted living facility at the request of the facility's Administrator, who recognized the benefits Project SEARCH would bring to interns, residents and staff alike.

Building Momentum: The success of the program has prompted several York General department directors to request opportunities to mentor interns. As more departments participate in the program, interns gain a wider variety of skills to further discover and develop their interests.

Strong Culture: Program leaders have noticed interns showing enthusiasm for the York General culture, even outside of the workplace.

Community Partners

York General Health Care Services is a community, not-for-profit, multi-facility organization dedicated to providing high-quality, accessible health care services to the York, Neb. area. York General includes an acute care hospital for inpatient and outpatient services, a skilled nursing facility, assisted living, hemodialysis, medical offices, and home health care.

The Project SEARCH High School Transition Program is a unique, business-led, one-year, school-to-work program that takes place entirely at the workplace. With a primary objective of securing competitive employment for people with disabilities, Project SEARCH is hosted at more than 300 sites worldwide.

Educational Service Unit 6 in Milford, Neb. serves the educational needs of students, teachers, parents, administrators and all learners regardless of age, ability or location. ESU 6 offers services in administration, instructional materials/printing and production, professional development, special education and technology.

Nebraska Vocational Rehabilitation helps people with disabilities prepare for, obtain and maintain employment while helping businesses recruit, train and retain employees with disabilities.

About Bryan Health

Bryan Health is a Nebraska-governed, nonprofit health system that cares for patients, educates tomorrow's health care providers, motivates our community with fitness and health programs, and collaborates to continually improve how we serve others.

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