

# *Center House Employment Supports: Work and Education Program*

*A program that provides educational and vocational supports to adults with moderate mental retardation, many of whom also have major communication difficulties*

## **Summary**

The *Work and Education Program* (WEP) is a component of Center House Employment Supports (CHES) that is funded by the Department of Mental Retardation (DMR). WEP provides educational and vocational supports to approximately twenty-five adults with moderate mental retardation, many of whom also have major communication difficulties. The setting provides a safe, supportive place where people can learn and be productive. Here, conditions can be tailored to each individual's needs without the usual



*WEP provides vocational supports in a safe, supportive setting so that the individual can learn a skill and be productive where conditions can be tailored to that person's needs.*



*The Center House Work and Education Program is located on the third floor of a large industrial complex on Drydock Avenue in South Boston*

demands of the workplace. The environment is designed for people who are not comfortable in settings that more closely parallel community job conditions.

While primarily engaged in individual activities, participants also work in small groups. Support staff members are skilled in communicating with people who have limited verbal abilities, and form close working relationships with each person based on mutual caring and respect. Staff makes extensive use of training and technology to develop effective ways to communicate with each participant, capitalizing on that person's strengths and preferences. The overall goal of the *Work and Education Program* is to help people achieve their full potential through participation in:

- **Community activities** focusing on community exploration,
- **Educational activities** leading to exploration of interests.,
- **Pre-vocational instruction** leading to skill acquisition, and
- **Jobs in integrated community work settings** (individually or in small groups) including the supports and accommodations necessary for success.

The *Work and Education Program* uses a structured, supportive and individualized environment to help participants develop behavior patterns that will lead to greater personal success in the community. Each

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person is encouraged to follow his or her own interests – either towards employment or educational fulfillment.

Center House Employment Supports contracts with a licensed psychologist to provide clinical consultation on a weekly basis to maintain an effective therapeutic milieu and to give clinical guidance to individual participants.

Expressive therapy interns run **expressive therapy groups** every week at the Education and Training site. The interns conduct classes in art, movement and music under close staff supervision.

### **Program Operation**

Each member of the *Work and Education Program* is supported by an Individual Support Plan Team. This Team consists of the person supported, that person's WEP and Residential Support Staff, DMR Service Coordinator and chosen family members. People are embraced and celebrated for being exactly who they are, unconditionally. Individual preferences and expressions of interest are used as a starting point to help WEP understand and support the development of the person's vision for the



*Community Skills development takes place using the teachable moments in casual and formal social interactions while playing organized games such as this one that was constructed by WEP staff.*

future. From this understanding, the Team helps the individual to develop concrete goals in order to guide support services. Each participant experiences staff support differently, and it is up to support staff to learn the unique way to work with him or her to make the experience truly effective. This involves acute attention in the context of a relationship of trust, particularly with those individuals who have limited conventional communication skills. The resulting plan for supports is constantly evaluated and adjusted based on each person's experience and input.

### **Daily Choices**

On a daily basis, participants have the opportunity to meet together to discuss events in the news, to make individual and group plans for the day and to project plans for the future. Individuals communicate in the manner in which they are most comfortable, and the *Work and Education Program* staff presents a variety of communication tools for participants to use, including Objects, Photos and Sign Language as well as written and spoken language. Support staff frequently uses the **Mayer Johnson Boardmaker** system to communicate with people who have limited verbal abilities. This system is a computerized program designed to make communication boards and displays. The system has over 7,000 symbols paired with words in 10 languages that can be individualized to describe any activity. Participants with limited verbal communication skills make use of **Boardmaker** to communicate their desires with staff members and their co-workers.

The daily activities of WEP are divided into three sessions, and individuals choose activities that support their stated interests. Supports are provided under the DMR funding category designation of "Community Based Day Supports."

Supports are provided in **four basic areas** to help individuals achieve their future goals:

**1. Community Skills** development takes place using the teachable moments in



*Learning a new job can be a fun process at the Work and Education Program.*

casual and formal social interactions – organized games such as Checkers, Dominos, Trivia, Pictionary, as well as WEP-constructed games of unique interest to various individuals. The goal is to provide each individual with community readiness skills they can use as they go out into their communities.

Community Outings are arranged according to the choice of the individuals. Past outings have included going to places such as: George's Island, The Museum of Fine Arts, The Boston Tea Party Museum, The New England Aquarium, Castle Island, South Boston Public Library, Fire Station, Black Falcon Pier – Tall Ships, USS WASP, Charlestown Navy Yard, and the Museum of Our National Heritage.

Each week participants in the program also have the opportunity to choose to help grocery shop for the elderly. This group goes food shopping and brings the supplies to a central location from which the food is distributed to those in need.

**2. Educational Groups** have been developed in the areas of current events,

cooking and nutrition, art experience, communication, human rights, math, using money, language arts, sign language, safety, social skills, time management, health and the human body, and other interests that are requested. The goal is to provide individuals with opportunities to explore and expand their interests.

People have access to a **computer classroom** with standardized software and high speed Internet connections. Participants use the computers during computer classes as well as during their breaks. Activities include learning to type, creating a greeting card for a friend, and practicing skills such as reading or arithmetic.

**3. A Pre-Vocational Instructional Curriculum** has been developed which focuses on the exploration of expressed interests, business etiquette, time management and skill development, and is open-ended so as to pursue individual job interests. The goal is to encourage exploration in the various skill areas related to work so that individuals may match their interests and skills.

**4. Employment in the community** is supported by Job Coaching while the person is working on a crew or at an individual job. People are supported as needed with direct job-related instruction, which is gradually



*This Community Outing via boat to George's Island is a very popular trip.*

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reduced to monthly check-ins as independence increases. Behind-the-scenes instruction and support in hygiene, timeliness, social interaction in the workplace, money management, travel training and work skill routines is provided as needed by Job Coaches. The goal is to support people who have selected jobs, to work efficiently and productively for as long as they choose. Each attempt at community employment is built on either:

- **Crew sites** which have included maintenance, landscaping, paper recycling, bottle recycling and retail work, or
- **Individual Placements** which have included work at McDonalds and Bay Cove Human Services.

### **Location**

The *Work and Education Program* is part of Center House Employment Supports and is located in the Marine Industrial Park in Boston. WEP occupies a large sun-lit room as “home base.” It shares a common cafeteria and several other studio rooms for Art Experience, Cooking, and Computers with other Center House Employment Supports programs.



*Every person experiences staff support differently, and it is up to support staff to learn what unique way makes the experience truly effective for each person.*



*Each individual is embraced and celebrated for being exactly who he/she is, unconditionally.*



*This woman seems pleased with her individual placement at McDonalds.*

The *Work and Education Program* is accessible by public transportation from South Station in Boston. Buses #3, #6 and #7 stop nearby. There is also a shuttle bus, which offers transportation from South Station for a nominal monthly fee. The majority of the people who participate in WEP ride on DMR funded vans.

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*For more information about the Work and Education and other programs of Center House Employment Supports, please contact Yohanna LaRoche Program Director at (617) 878-2540*



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