



March is Developmental Disabilities Awareness Month

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MONTGOMERY, AL - For 26 years, The Arc of the United States has sponsored Developmental Disabilities Awareness Month to enhance understanding of the issues affecting people with developmental disabilities and educate the public that people with developmental disabilities can be vital and vibrant members of communities.

According to a recent study by the CDC:

- Developmental disabilities affect more than 7 million Americans (and more than 121,000 Alabamians)
- About one in six children in the U.S. had one or more developmental disabilities or delays in 2006-2008
- The prevalence of parent-reported developmental disabilities increased 17 percent from 1997-2008

These statistics underscore the increasing need for specialized health services, education and social services for people with developmental disabilities. Housing, employment and public education efforts are key issues for those who want to live as independently as possible and feel they are a vital part of their communities.

According to The Arc, a majority of adults with developmental disabilities are unemployed or underemployed, despite their ability and desire to engage in meaningful work. Systemic factors contributing to this disparity include lack of adequate transition services for youth moving from school to employment and community living, wage disparities, training and supports, and segregated employment. Many people with developmental disabilities want to work in integrated "real world" employment situations. However, more than 75 percent are instead in sheltered employment, day habilitation services or non-work community integration programs.

In an effort to increase training and supports and competitive employment options, a unique and innovative school-to-work program called Project SEARCH began in Alabama last August at Baptist Medical Center South in Montgomery and Shelby Baptist Medical Center in Alabaster. Developed in 1996 at Cincinnati Children's Hospital, Project SEARCH's High School Transition Program is a one-year, business-led program that takes place entirely at the workplace. Students learn relevant, marketable and transferable skills while immersed in an actual business. The program provides real-life work experience combined with training in employability and independent living skills to help ensure successful transitions from school to productive adult life.

The Project SEARCH model involves an extensive period of training and career exploration, innovative adaptations, long-term job coaching, and continuous feedback from teachers, job coaches and employers. As a

result, at the completion of the training program, students are employed in nontraditional, complex and rewarding jobs. Project SEARCH in Alabama is a collaboration of many state agencies, with the statewide coordinator position housed at ADMH. The department hopes to expand Project SEARCH to two or three more sites within the next year and keep building the program throughout the state.

In addition to quality employment, a home of one's own, either rented or owned, is a cornerstone of independence for people with disabilities. However, across the nation, people with developmental and other disabilities face a severe housing crisis because of such issues as affordability, accessibility, discrimination and availability. Although HUD has several programs that seek to increase availability, the supply of affordable, accessible housing linked to supportive housing is far less than the need. A new initiative in Alabama will now at least make it easier to locate this housing.

Just last month, several housing and social service agencies partnered to announce the launch of ALHousingSearch.org, a free housing locator website that gives renters, landlords, housing professionals and social service providers access to real-time rental housing information. The website offers landlords, including those with critically-needed affordable and special-needs housing, a place to advertise properties at no cost, while helping renters find units that fit their specific needs. Features for renters include quick links to housing resources as well as rent-affordability and moving-cost calculators. The project was developed by Disability Rights and Resources of Alabama and Socialserve.com, and funded by ADMH's Alabama Council on Developmental Disabilities.

To raise awareness of these employment and housing needs, as well as other issues such as stigma facing people with developmental disabilities, groups from across the state will hold events in hopes to educate both officials and the general public. On Tuesday, March 5, the 6th annual Autism Legislative Day will be held from 10:30 a.m.-3 p.m. at the State House in Montgomery. In addition, on Tuesday, March 19, the Alabama Disabilities Advocacy Network will host Alabama Disability Advocacy Day at the State House in Montgomery. Local chapters of The Arc of Alabama will also host awareness events throughout March.

INFORMATION SOURCE: Alabama Department of Mental Health

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