

DIVERSITY, EQUITY & INCLUSION

This program can help businesses hire more people with disabilities

Last month, on a perfect night for baseball, Kennedy Krieger Institute's community gathered at Ripken Stadium in Aberdeen to watch and cheer on a young man as he accomplished something rare and exciting.

Robby, a twenty-something with autism, landed a job with the Aberdeen IronBirds minor league baseball team this spring. He works as a fan host, rotating between serving as a ticket taker, operating the area known as the fan zone and working as an usher. If you take in a game this summer, you might see him greeting ticket holders and showing them to their seats.

Robby is conscientious and loyal, so this milestone is not a surprise to the people who know him. But it is quite the accomplishment when you consider that more than 80% of people with disabilities are not part of the workforce. Eighty percent – that's a number that needs to change, and can change, within the Baltimore business community through innovative solutions.

With the unemployment rate in Maryland hovering around 4% and many jobs going unfilled for months, there's a disconnect between those with disabilities being without work and companies who are eager to fill their ranks. One program that seeks to bridge that gap is Project SEARCH.



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There are 600 Project SEARCH programs around the world and 14 in the state of Maryland, including our program at Kennedy Krieger. Project SEARCH is a 10-month transition-to-work program that provides hands-on job training for individuals ages 18 to 24 who have disabilities. They learn through integrated worksite rotation internships, career exploration, innovative adaptation and mentoring from experienced staff. With Kennedy Krieger's nearly 100-year history of providing health care and later education for individuals with disabilities, becoming a Project SEARCH site was a natural fit.

Project SEARCH is just one part of our larger Neurodiversity at Work strategy, an initiative that's been successful and growing as we continue to work with individuals who are neurodiverse and help them find meaningful employment. Robby, for example was one of 10 interns who comprised our fourth and largest Project SEARCH cohort, all of whom graduated on June 7.

While the pandemic limited some job opportunities, it provided our interns with other unique experiences – Robby was one of several interns who served as Covid-19 health screeners for patients, staff and visitors arriving at Kennedy Krieger campuses. This service was invaluable to us.

Beyond his onsite work at Kennedy Krieger, Robby volunteered with Meals on Wheels, a committed partner that continues to find creative ways our interns and alumni can acquire job skills. It's this kind of community involvement that has made our Neurodiversity at Work program consistently successful. Royal Farms, National Institutes of Health, PetCo and Tino's Bistro in Columbia are some of the other businesses who have employed our alumni since we started our program.

Business leaders may applaud these efforts but think that a neurodiversity hiring initiative will never work at their company. However, we, along with other Project SEARCH programs, have proven that it can work extraordinarily well.

We do this by offering employment partners support and ongoing education, as well as training on the neurodiversity movement. This includes providing an overview of disability awareness, barriers to employment for individuals with disabilities, and ways we can break down those very barriers to have a more inclusive, productive and stable workforce. When one of our Project SEARCH interns or graduates has been hired, we work with employers to navigate challenges, develop natural workplace supports and adopt job modifications to support success and retention.

In this way, Project SEARCH is not that different from other successful internship or employment programs. Our partners hire a ready worker and receive our full support.

Likewise, our Project SEARCH graduates receive our full support to guide a successful transition to the workplace and support their success once there. Did you know that individuals with disabilities are often those who change jobs the least and are likely to be some of your most loyal staff members?

Educators and workforce experts from around the U.S. are preparing to come to Baltimore on July 25 for the annual Project SEARCH conference. A top focus for this conference is the continued labor shortage in this country. How can we partner with businesses to provide them the workers they need and at the same time provide interns and Project SEARCH graduates with valuable job experience?

I encourage the business leaders in our community to think outside of the box when they address today's hiring challenges. Learn more about creating a neurodiverse workforce and its benefits, which far outweigh the risks. Learn more about how hiring individuals with disabilities not only strengthens our communities, but also increases employee morale and strengthens businesses. Learn more about the values of your workplace and seek to define them through meaningful action.

At the start of that IronBirds game a few weeks ago, we watched as Robby threw out the first pitch. It was a perfect moment to highlight all that he has achieved, but also what is possible when an employer makes neurodiversity in their workplace a priority.

<https://www.bizjournals.com/baltimore/news/2022/07/22/viewpoint-project-search-kennedy-krieger-institute.html>

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