

Monday, October 24, 2011

Disabled residents finding work opportunities

The national jobless rate for Americans with disabilities is 16.9 percent. That's where Prescott Valley's New Horizons comes in.

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PRESCOTT - Ahren Stelmach of Prescott started a part-time job in May doing general maintenance and cleanup work at The Palace on Whiskey Row.

Stelmach, who was born with traumatic brain injury during childbirth 36 years ago, has advanced in his skill set and responsibilities. He now works from 9 a.m. to 1 p.m. Monday and Thursday sorting truck deliveries of food into the walk-in refrigerator and dry storage area.

"I think everybody works good, like a team," Stelmach said. "I'll stay here until they kick me out," he added, with a laugh.

Stelmach's boss, restaurant General Manager Neil Grimes, said he assigned Stelmach to do simpler tasks at first because he was not sure about his skill level.

"You have to be able to read dates, use problem-solving (skills)," Grimes said, referring to Stelmach's current responsibilities.

For instance, the job requires Stelmach to place perishable products in front in the refrigerator if their expiration date is sooner.

Grimes said he is pleased with Stelmach's performance, describing him as a "positive, hard-working employee."

Grimes, who has been on the job six years and has known Stelmach for a while, agreed to hire Stelmach through a placement from New Horizons, a nonprofit independent living center in Prescott Valley.

He said he "would definitely look into" hiring other New Horizons referrals if openings were to arise at The Palace.

"Neil (Grimes) is an incredible manager," said Kristi Wolford, a job development specialist with New Horizons. "He's got employees who have been here a long time."

Wolford, a contract employee for New Horizons who lives in Prescott



Les Stukenberg/The Daily Courier

Ahren Stelmach cleans shelves at The Palace Restaurant in Prescott Monday morning. Stelmach is a client of New Horizons independent living center, which is expanding its job development services for its disabled clientele.



Les Stukenberg/The Daily Courier

Chris Mountain works at the Good Samaritan Society in Prescott as a dietary assistant. Mountain is a client of New Horizons independent living center, which is expanding its job development services for its disabled clientele.

Valley, said she has placed 10 clients in jobs since she started on the job 10 months ago. Only one of the placements has not worked out.

Wolford, who has a bachelor's degree in psychology from California State University, Fullerton, said she helps her clients to prepare résumés, write cover letters and fill out applications. She also coaches them on job interviews and occasionally accompanies them for interviews.

"I don't just sit down and do paperwork," Wolford said. "I try to match them up with employers. We go out and job-search together."

Wolford's employer has provided job placement services for mentally and physically disabled adults for four years through contracts with the Arizona Department of Economic Security, Executive Director Liz Toone said.

Toone said New Horizons has expanded its job-placement services by hiring Wolford and two other job development specialists: Wolford's husband, Dale, who started in August; and Deborah Darby, who began serving the Verde Valley in July.

The job developers have their work cut out for them, made all the more worse in a weak job market. Toone provided an article from Forbes.com in August that indicated the national jobless rate for Americans with disabilities was 16.9 percent.

Having a disability might have made it harder for Christopher Mountain, 44, of Prescott, to land a job, he acknowledged. He was born with Down syndrome.

Wolford said she looked at four potential employers who she believed would match his skill set.

"I was trying to get him in retail because he is so outgoing," Wolford said.

Wolford placed Mountain as a dietary aide about a month ago at Good Samaritan Society Prescott Village, a skilled nursing and independent living center in Prescott. He works three hours a day, four days a week. "It's a combination of almost everything - doing dishes, serving food and a lit bit of prep cooking and cleanup," Mountain said in his husky voice. "I love it - the environment, the people. I get along with everybody."

Mountain is doing a great job, said Larry Webb, director of dining services.

"He is very consistent in his work," Webb said. "He is dependable. He's a great guy all the around. He is very pleasant to be with."

Webb, on the job for four years, said Mountain is his first placement from New Horizons. He admitted being partial to hiring Mountain because his son, Tyson, 25, has Down syndrome.

New Horizons, other nonprofits provide job-placement services

PRESCOTT - New Horizons independent living center does a "wonderful" job helping to place disabled people in jobs, said Mark Kendall, unit supervisor of Vocational Rehabilitation Services in Prescott.

"They work with people who have needs in terms of independent living," said Kendall, who works for a state agency that is a division of the Department of Economic Security. "For us, they have very qualified and skilled job developers. And they really help their clients to become employed. We work in tandem with them. We work together."

However, Kendall and Kristi Wolford, a job development specialist with New Horizons, stressed other private entities in the tri-city area provide similar services through contracts with the state. They include Goodwill of Central Arizona, which maintains a thrift store in Prescott; and AIRES, with a presence in Prescott Valley.

Goodwill provides four job-related services, one of which, Group-Supported Employment, targets disabled people.

The program provides for work to be done in a setting where individuals with disabilities interact daily with others who are not disabled, according to a fact sheet.

"Participants develop skills, abilities and behaviors that will enable them to fully realize their vocational aspirations and support their transition into a more independent employment if they desire," it states.

Goodwill served 25 people through the job placement programs in Prescott in 2010, according to Lindsay Hansen, who handles public relations for Goodwill.

AIRES, founded in 1978, provides a variety of services to its clients, including residential group homes, independent living arrangements and vocational rehabilitation, according to its website.

The vocational rehab program is appropriate for people with disabilities who want to learn job skills and obtain jobs, the website states.

The six counselors at the Vocational Rehabilitation Services office in Prescott work with two groups, Kendall said. They are people with disabilities looking for jobs and those living independently and not working.

"If someone came in and was a construction worker and hurts their back and they can't do construction work anymore, we would do assessments on what their strengths are and find out what kinds of other career opportunities they may be able to participate in," he said.

He said fewer than half of the referrals from his agency receive disability benefits. The remainder has not applied for disability benefits through the U.S. Social Security Administration or will not apply if they land full-time jobs.

Disability recipients may earn as much as \$1,000 a month in a three-year period without jeopardizing their cash benefits, said Melissa Larson, community work incentives coordinator for New Horizons.