

## TennesseeWorks Employer Partnership Profile

Project SEARCH School to Work Transition Program, Embassy Suites, Murfreesboro, TN

### Introduction

Project SEARCH was developed at Cincinnati Children's Hospital Medical Center (CCHMC) in response to a need for reliable entry level employees in the hospital's Emergency Department. CCHMC established a partnership with local schools and service agencies to develop and implement Project SEARCH to prepare transitioning students with disabilities for employment at either CCHMC or other community employers. Project SEARCH is a nine month internship program offering classroom instruction on vocational, social and independent living skills in addition to three ten-week rotations where interns learn different jobs at the hotel. Graduating Project SEARCH interns are provided with individualized supports for placement into employment at either the hospital or another local employer.

Project SEARCH has been hugely successful at CCHMC and has now been replicated at over 400 employers in the United States, Canada, Europe and Australia. The program model has expanded to other sectors such as banks, distribution centers, hotels and government offices.

### Partners

In 2013, the State of Tennessee launched an initiative to foster the development of Project SEARCH programs to create employment opportunities for transitioning high school students with disabilities. This initiative is spearheaded by the Tennessee Council on Developmental Disabilities (CDD) and the Department of Human Services Vocational Rehabilitation Program (VR). As part of this initiative, an information session was held to educate Tennessee stakeholders and publicize the new opportunity to develop Project SEARCH programs. This session drew the interest of Delrico Howard, the Human Resources Director of the Embassy Suites in Murfreesboro. Embassy Suites, a component of the Hilton family of hotels, is a national partner of Project SEARCH and has a strong commitment to diversity in its workforce. Based on the determination of the Embassy Suites in Murfreesboro to host a Project SEARCH program, assistance was provided by



VR in developing a partnership with the Rutherford County Schools and Journeys, which is a local Community Rehabilitation Provider agency. Rutherford County Schools agreed to outpost a teacher to provide classroom instruction and recruit students for the program. Journeys provided a job coach under contract with VR who provides supports to the interns in their rotations and for placement in a job upon graduation. The Embassy Suites provides space, equipment, and, most importantly, mentoring by hotel staff.

CDD funded technical assistance from the national Project SEARCH program at Cincinnati Children's Hospital to train program staff and develop the program. The program began operations for the 2014-2015 school year with six interns and has concluded two program cycles. At the end of the 2016 school year, Progress, Inc. replaced Journeys as the Embassy Suites CRP partner.

### Outcomes

The 2014/2015 Project Search Murfreesboro program served six students. All six interns graduated from the program and all six were successfully placed in jobs (a 100% employment rate). Three graduates were hired by Embassy Suites. The 2015/2016 program graduated

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## Examples of Natural Supports in the Workplace

- Getting rides with co-workers to and from work
- Allowing employee to work in a quieter area
- Following a written or visual list of job duties available to every employee
- Creating a mentoring relationship with a co-worker or supervisor
- Involving co-workers as job trainers
- Having co-workers or supervisors cue when it is break time
- Using an existing scheduling system to increase productivity
- Getting feedback on work performance by supervisor

seven students and had 2 hires. One of the graduates was hired by Embassy Suites. Other graduates are still actively engaged in job searches.

Delrico Howard is pleased that hiring Project SEARCH graduates has increased the morale of the hotel's workforce. He said: *It helps the overall work experience for both the newly hired and the current associates. Project SEARCH has not only increased the morale for our associates but breaks down the barriers of anyone being afraid of working with someone with a disability which allows them to be treated as everyone else is treated. There is a sense of joy seeing this with our associates.* This point was amplified by Richard Ruiz, the Executive Housekeeper for Embassy Suites who said: *I have had the privilege of meeting great interns over the past three years who have not only affected my life but have made it better with their enthusiasm to learn and their willingness to grow outside their comfort zones.*

Elizabeth Kirby, the teacher assigned to Project SEARCH from Rutherford County Schools, is likewise impressed with the impact of the program on the interns. She said: *My experience with Project SEARCH has been an amazing one. As the instructor, I have seen students with little confidence become employees ready to take on the world!* Levon Mastin, a 2016-2017 intern, when asked about what he thought about Project SEARCH said: *I like being part of a team. I like working, learning, and laughing along with the employees and other interns.*

Pam Hollingsworth, Co-Director of Employment for Progress, Inc. said her agency is excited to be a partner in the Project SEARCH program at the Embassy Suites. She said: *Project SEARCH is making a difference for so many; one intern at a time. It is so rewarding to see these young men and women training for employment and building independence.*

Gayle Feltner, the Director of Transition School to Work for VR who oversees the development of Project SEARCH programs in Tennessee, lauded the Embassy Suites Murfreesboro for its leadership in establishing the Project SEARCH program. She said: *The hotel established an exemplary community partnership which has resulted in competitive, integrated employment for the students served by the program.*

Delrico Howard concluded by saying: *The growth from walking with their heads down to seeing them laughing and joking with the current associates and getting that self-confidence of knowing that they can do anything they want to do is probably the greatest thing that has happened to this hotel. This is amazing for me to see and experience and I would not ever take this for granted because this hotel is better from this program.*

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