

Investing in Workforce Diversity – The Village at Sprenkle Drive Shares its Success

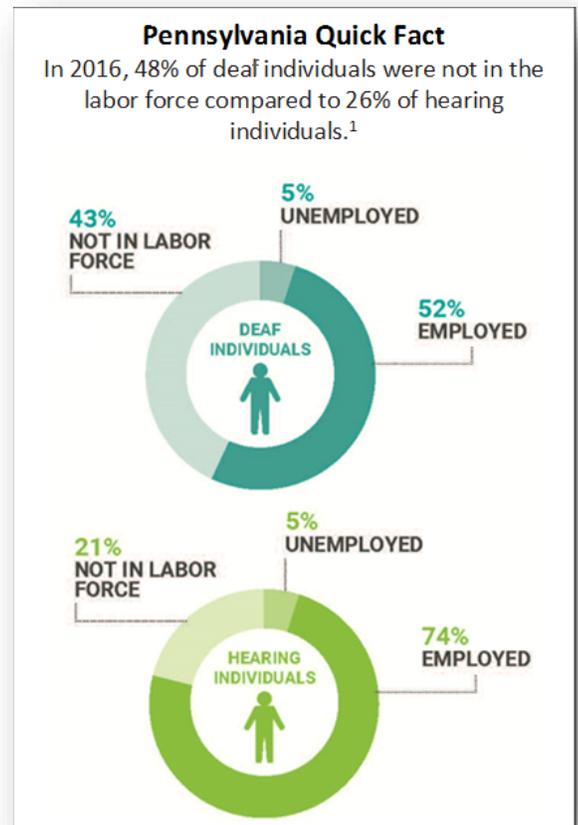


The Village at Sprenkle Drive has learned the value of recruiting workers from a traditionally underutilized group within the state workforce – the disabled. When Amy Eakins, Director of Facilities, was first employed at The Village at Sprenkle Drive there was a hearing-impaired employee that she wanted to be able to communicate and connect with more effectively. Through [Spiritrust Lutheran Deaf Connections](#) Amy learned American Sign Language and started using them as a hiring resource for the hearing impaired. Amy later connected with the [Office of Vocational Rehabilitation](#) and [Lincoln Intermediate Unit 12](#) (LIU12) when she attended a local high school cultural event. Through this partnership, developmentally disabled and hearing-impaired high school students are hired through the work-experience program to work in housekeeping and laundry.

Summer Poteet, Senior Environmental Services Worker, helps to train the disabled employees in her department. She has found the retention rate to be high with her employees and has seen the benefits to the community. Residents with dementia react favorably to the disabled staff since they tend to make eye contact and are generally more relaxed in their demeanor. Skilled nursing residents have the option of taking sign language as an activity. Residents want to learn how to sign basic courtesies such as “good morning”, “hello” and “thank you”. Their curiosity is peaked when they discover that a “sign name” is given to them by the deaf team member.

Communications with hearing staff can sometimes be a challenge. To address these challenges, body language training, sensitivity training, and innovated communication styles are used. For example, flicking a light switch off and on in a room will get both hearing and hearing- impaired employees’ attention. Staff and management also participate in brown-bag lunches to learn better ways to communicate with each other.

The Village at Sprenkle Drive has truly embraced its disabled workforce and volunteers. This fall, three additional autistic employees will join their team to learn housekeeping and laundry duties. Listening to Amy and Summer talk about their employees, a deep sense of pride and joy is conveyed. Summer receives great satisfaction by giving an opportunity to someone so they can serve others and contribute to the care of the residents. Amy put it best when talking about her staff and the senior living field - “you observe a team member’s heart when they give of themselves to the greater good”.



Resources

The Department of Labor & Industry's [Office of Vocational Rehabilitation](#) (OVR) assists individuals with disabilities in accessing educational, independent living and real-life, work-based learning experiences that will lead to real jobs with family-sustaining wages. In [2015](#), OVR staff assisted more than 8,700 residents of Pennsylvania with disabilities in obtaining competitive, integrated employment. Approved OVR providers, such as LIU12, develop programs under the [Work-Based Learning Experiences](#) program funded through the [Disabilities Education Act](#) to place students, nearing graduation, with opportunities to try out their skills in the real world. Their goal is to set students up for long-term success by helping them to become quality employees within the local community. Transitional Consultants work closely with the businesses they collaborate with by providing a job coach so the training does not take away from the businesses' staff and their work.

Leading by Example

The following comments from Ernst & Young and Starbucks are powerful models of disability inclusion in the workforce. They not only reject the outdated ideas that disabled workers are liabilities to business, but actively promote the perspective that workers of all abilities bring different strengths to the companies' missions.

“Ernst & Young seeks the best talent- period. To find the specialized skills we need, we have to tap the broadest available talent pools, including people with a wide range of physical, cognitive and mental health abilities. We know that diverse teams produce better solutions, so there’s a clear performance advantage to bringing together people with all kinds of differences - in gender, ethnicity, orientation, age, background, and abilities. Employees with disabilities have higher retention rates, so for many businesses, there can be a real cost savings through reduced turnover. Studies show that consumers prefer doing business with companies that employ people with disabilities, so there’s brand value. Research has also found organizations employing people with disabilities have higher morale and employee engagement, which we know drives profitability. Finally, people with disabilities often have well-honed problem solving skills and a degree of adaptability that are especially valuable in today’s fast changing business environment. At Ernst & Young, we learned this early in our history, as our co-founder, Arthur Young, was deaf and had low vision. Unable to successfully practice as a courtroom lawyer because of his disabilities, he turned to the emerging field of accounting, where he became an innovator and entrepreneur.”

-Lori B. Golden, Abilities Strategy Leader, Ernst & Young, LLP

“When we think about hiring for Starbucks, we think beyond labels. We challenge ourselves to look beyond traditional sources and typical profiles, to bring in people that share our values and our passion for service and community. There is no better example than our commitment to hiring people with disabilities. These talented professionals bring unique experiences that foster innovation and new ideas while contributing to a culture of warmth and true inclusion. We work across multiple business teams to collaborate and inspire partners (employees) to embrace accessibility as a global value of Starbucks, and we are continually inspired by the diversity and inclusion of our people.”

-Scott Pitasky, Executive Vice President and Chief Partner Resources Officer, Starbucks

The Goal

When recruiting and retaining people with disabilities into your community, the main idea is to look beyond obligatory compliance. Through openness, communications and a willingness to be flexible, the goal is to create a workplace that is genuinely welcoming and inclusive to everyone, resulting in an improved morale, higher productivity, reduced turnover and other bottom-line benefits.

LeadingAge PA has developed a [Diversity Toolkit](#) to help guide our members in their workforce initiatives. The toolkit is located on our website under [The Change Institute](#).

Thank you to The Village at Sprenkle Drive, Amy Eakins, Summer Poteet and Melinda Krebs, Transition Consultant at LIU12, for sharing their story. For more information on the community, please visit <http://sprenkledrive.spiritrustlutheran.org/community/sprenkle-drive>.

If you have questions on this article or would like to submit a suggestion for a Strategy Spotlight case study, please contact Marianne Lake at marianne@leadingagepa.org.

¹ Garberoglio, C. L., Cawthon, S., & Sales, A. (2017). *Postsecondary Achievement of Deaf People in Pennsylvania: 2017*. Washington, DC: U.S. Department of Education, Office of Special Education Programs, National Deaf Center on Postsecondary Outcomes.