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DISPATCH EXCLUSIVE / HELP WANTED: JOBS FOR THE DISABLED LOST POTENTIAL

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If he had been born 50 years ago, Ian Baustian might have been institutionalized. Locked away. No one would have discovered whether he was capable of more.
Back then, Baustian wouldn't have been a laboratory clinical assistant at Fairfield Medical Center in Lancaster, where he works alongside people who don't have disabilities -- people who embrace him and his autism.
His kind of story is both triumph and tragedy, as far as advocates are concerned. As far as Ohio has come in employing developmentally **disabled** adults, the state has much further to go, they say.
About 21,000 developmentally **disabled** Ohioans who receive services through their county agencies are employed, but seven of every 10 are segregated with other **disabled** workers instead of working in community-based jobs such as Baustian's. That rate is roughly the same as it was a decade ago.
Twenty-four states do a better job than Ohio at finding community-based work for **disabled** adults.
Advocates say that means too few people with developmental disabilities -- everything from autism to Down syndrome to brain injuries -- can meet their potential. Too few have the opportunity to earn a good wage. Too few are offered the chance to live lives of dignity.
Too many people are shredding documents or sorting clothes hangers or assembling cereal boxes with only other **disabled** workers.
"We can't make the assumption that they're not capable of doing something more," said John Pekar, superintendent of the Fairfield County Board of Developmental Disabilities.
Three things are keeping Ohio from moving forward, advocates say: complacency, the economy and prejudice.
Good enough?
In the 1960s, Ohio brought developmentally **disabled** people out of institutions and homes and gave them a way to make friends and work in a safe, secluded environment.
"At that time, opportunities and employment for folks with disabilities didn't exist. The cutting-edge approach was sheltered workshops," said John L. Martin, director of the Ohio Department of Developmental Disabilities. "People from other states came to see what we were doing in Ohio."
Decades later, the once-progressive workshop system remains strong in Ohio.
Of the state's 88 counties, 70 have publicly funded workshops. Many are skilled at obtaining contracts for work for everything from gluing cardboard for packaging to assembling electrical outlets.

Employees mostly are paid at a per-item rate that takes their disability into account: The slower they work, the less they earn. But work is optional there, and people can choose to do crafts or other activities at any time. Historically, those employed in workshops are unlikely to seek other jobs. They stay.

Most advocates agree that "the shops" still serve a purpose.

"Not everybody's going to be able to have community employment. That's very unpopular to say. Because of the nature of their disability, we have to be realistic about that," said Susan McCrary, a social worker whose clients have developmental disabilities. She serves on a state advisory council, and her 30-year-oldson, Jon, has a developmental disability.

Some have medical needs or such significant disabilities that work isn't an option -- they need round-the-clock medical care or are unable to communicate. In addition, many parents of older adults with disabilities prefer workshops because they are comfortable and safe.

But more people can find jobs outside workshops, McCrary said.

Ohio government agencies believed that, too. So they created enclaves, which are less protective than sheltered workshops but offer a support system. **Disabled** people work as a group, sometimes in a community setting. The earnings potential in enclaves often is lower than in a true community-based job.

There are enclaves through county boards of developmental disabilities that clean state office buildings, collect trash at state parks, work in manufacturing and do lawn care.

One in Clermont County cleans hotel rooms at a Cincinnati Fairfield Inn & Suites.

Between eight and 10 workers together clean up to 20 rooms a day. Individually, these employees work much more slowly than a typical housekeeper, and they have an on-site supervisor from the county board to keep them on task.

Combined, they are paid roughly the same as one typical housekeeper. Paid per cleaning task, some earn less than 75 cents an hour; the top wage is $3.10 an hour. A nondisabled worker starts at $7.75 an hour.

The hotel views their presence as a blessing and a reflection that part of its mission is to include all types of people.

"This isn't a cost-saving thing for us. It's probably a little more expensive than hiring an individual housekeeper," said Joe Griffin, the general manager. "They're a family for us now."

That enclave signals a shift for Clermont County, where the workshop was the only employment option two decades ago.

"When I came here, there was one person working in the community. It is our belief now that anybody who wants to work in the community should," said Sharon Woodrow, superintendent of the Clermont County Board of Developmental Disabilities.

In Clermont County, along the Ohio River east of Cincinnati, about 120 adults are employed in the sheltered workshop. About 70 are working in one of several enclaves. A few years back, Woodrow tried to limit how long people could work in enclaves as a way to encourage them to use their training to get a community-based job. The idea was abandoned.

"There were a lot of hard feelings," she said. "For many, (enclaves) seem 'good enough' sometimes."

Last hired, first fired

County boards and state agencies are supposed to look outside workshops and enclaves for jobs for the **disabled**.

But many who have tried have found a foe in this economy.

In the past decade, more Ohioans with developmental disabilities who receive services through their county boards were not working at all. There were 6,000 in 1999 but nearly 10,000 in 2009.

"There's an old saying that the **disabled** are the last hired and first fired," Martin said. "We've gone through a retrenchment period."
The county-funded workshop in Vinton County, in southeastern Ohio, has felt the sting of its crippled local economy. Forty adults are served through the county board, and all are employed in the sheltered workshop.
For most, it has nothing to do with their abilities. Similar barriers exist throughout the state.
"I think more people could be employed," said Jed Morison, superintendent of the Franklin County Board of Developmental Disabilities. "I think our challenge is convincing employers that people have skills, even with disabilities."
Some employers don't hire **disabled** people because they think making accommodations will be expensive. There haven't been high-profile studies that explore the cost of integrated employment for people with developmental disabilities, but research has shown that there is little to no added cost to employ people with physical disabilities.
Most of job coach Melissa McCrady's efforts to get people ready for the workplace involve breaking tasks into smaller parts, printing out step-by-step instructions and working with them until they master the job.
One of the newest roles for county boards is that of salesperson.
To find jobs for people, advocates must first ask businesses if they're willing to hire, if they're willing to train and willing to become diverse places to work. Experts say that getting buy-in from the CEO makes all the difference; they hold up Walgreens as the gold standard in creating diverse workplaces.
Last year, about 50 people came to the Fairfield County board for services. Three-quarters of them were placed in community jobs. Pekar, the superintendent there, said that Fairfield has been successful because he and the staff there have made it a priority to find meaningful work -- and limit the number of people who settle into the workshop.
Not every Ohio employer's doors have swung open with the same gusto.
Many county boards have started art studios featuring the work of **disabled** adults partly as a way to combat entrenched attitudes about the abilities of developmentally **disabled** people and partly as a way to create work for them.
Workers can create art and then sell it to the public. Some designs are mass-produced for sale.
"It's a great opportunity to build social capital. They tend to expose the general public to what people with developmental disabilities can be," said Pekar, who also is superintendent of Vinton County's developmental-disabilities board. He has helped art studios to grow there and in Fairfield County.
"A lot of it is knocking down stereotypes."
Overcoming expectations
McCrady, the job coach, once trained a woman with a traumatic brain injury. No one thought she'd ever work. It took six months to teach the woman to collect trash, and she got a job doing that at the Fairfield Medical Center. Although she's unable to safely leave the building, she works in the real world.
"I coached a person who cannot read or write to do data entry," said McCrady, who is based at the hospital but works for the Fairfield County board. She also trained Ian Baustian.
McCrady believes almost all people with disabilities belong in workplaces, not sequestered in workshops.
"They have dreams and aspirations like anyone," she said.
Finding employment for **disabled** people can be tough, advocates say.
No clearly stated statewide initiative makes it a priority, which contributes to the complacent attitude about employment in some parts of Ohio. The two agencies that most often work with developmentally **disabled** adults, the Ohio Rehabilitation Services Commission and the Ohio Department of Developmental Disabilities, don't have a history of working well together.

And the department says it can't force county boards to take on the issue, nor has it urged them to do so. But it has begun nudging county boards to take steps. It just awarded 10 small grants to county boards to do what, for so many years, officials and advocates said they ought to be doing: taking people in the workshops and showing them the rest of the working world.

The goal is to move at least five people per county into a community job. Franklin County won a grant. So did Clermont County.

"Some people are afraid," Claudia Baustian said.

Don't get her wrong -- she worries about her son sometimes. He is more trusting, less aware of danger. He could be safer in a workshop. He could be working a simpler job.

"There are adults who work at Kroger and bag groceries. For him, that would not be an acceptable job," she said.

Baustian is where he belongs.

He comes to work on time, eager to be there. He stocks kits for drawing blood to exact specifications. He files biomedical records with precision. He makes $8.95 an hour and works part time four days a week.

People at the hospital say hello to Baustian, and not in the singsong way you might greet a child. They respect that he wheels his cart of biomedical records to the hospital's back elevator, which is slightly quieter than the other, closer one, and therefore kinder to his hypersensitive hearing.

They understand when he needs to adjust his headphones to quiet the din of the hospital.

Back when Baustian was still in school, someone suggested that a workshop might be an option. But his mother has always known he could do more.

"You want them to be all they can be."