

Agency Helps County Residents With Disabilities Go To Work

In spite of the downturn in job availability, 2,812 Oklahoma Department of Rehabilitation Services' clients, people with disabilities, found gainful employment from Oct. 1, 2010 to Sept. 30, 2011.

In today's world, the subject of jobs is one of the most talked about because it is a major concern for the general public. The Oklahoma Department of Rehabilitation Services (DRS) also shares that concern. DRS' main focus in the Vocational Rehabilitation Services and Visual Services divisions is to help Oklahomans with disabilities find employment.

Each year, the federal oversight agency, Rehabilitation Services Administration, gives DRS their mandate for the next year. This year, the goal was 2,292 closures. That means helping 2,292 people with disabilities find and keep a job. DRS surpassed the RSA goal by 520 — more than 20 percent increase in closed cases over fiscal year 2010.

"We honored our promise to the state legislature by helping more than 2,800 Oklahomans with disabilities go to work, when they opted not to cut our budget severely last year," Michael O'Brien, DRS director,

said. "Due to the legislature giving us the opportunity to maintain our budget, we were able to serve Oklahomans and achieve outstanding employment outcomes."

In Sequoyah County, DRS counselors helped 49 Sequoyah County residents find employment. The total sum of their combined salaries is \$988,851. That is money that can be spent in Sequoyah County.

Counselors David Calvert, Tammy Hall and Jeannie M. Partaka, help residents on the road to independence in Sequoyah County.

When a DRS client earns his own paycheck, he becomes a self-sufficient, taxpaying citizen, reducing the need for disability benefits, Medicaid and other social services. He also spends more money in the community where he lives and generally enjoys a better quality of life.

"It is kind of scary to hear about how jobs are disappearing, especially since we are an employment agency for a special niche of people," Mark Kinnison, Vocational Rehabilitation division administrator, said. "There is the perception that people with disabilities cannot work and if able bodied people are competing in the job market,

an employer might hire the non-disabled person based on the wrong perception.

"Our counselors go above and beyond by meeting with employers and helping to change perceptions and attitudes. Counselors educate prospective employers about the benefits of hiring a person with a disability and the opportunity to gain dependability, commitment and lower turnover."

The agency can help employers with hiring and training costs for qualified workers with disabilities. DRS may also pay a percentage of the new employees' monthly salaries for a short time with the understanding that they will be hired on a permanent basis if they meet the job standards.

"When the employment climate is tough like it is, it is more important than ever that our counselors prepare our clients well for the workplace — whether its job interview practices, resume writing or paving the way with the area's employers." Dr. Michael Jones, Visual Services division administrator, said. "Our counselors got the job done and many of our clients went to work. They did an amazing job."

Also, breaking ground is the DRS Vocational Rehabilitation Reimbursement Program. For only the second time the last 15 years, the program has exceeded \$1 million in revenue. DRS collected more than \$1.6 million on 92 claims. Each one of these claims, represents an individual who maintained wages high enough to permanently leave the Social Security Administration disability and Supplemental Secu-

rity Income programs.

DRS is reimbursed dollar for dollar by SSA when vocational rehabilitation services result in someone reaching this level of sustained employment success.

"We also served 1,994 high school students with disabilities and prepared them for life after high school," O'Brien said. "I am very proud of the work our transition counselors do in preparing students for the next chapter of their lives."

DRS has contributed over \$3.4 million in supporting transition-aged clients in Oklahoma through its various programs, such as Tech-Now, Project SEARCH, Work Adjustment Training, School Work Study and summer programs.

The agency served approximately 34 students in Project SEARCH. Project SEARCH is a one-year, worksite-based school-to-work program. Participants complete between three and four rotations of 10 weeks each on various jobs within a host employment setting. More than 1,800 high school students participated in School Work Study and gained valuable transferable employment skills.

To qualify for services, clients must have a physical or mental disability that is a substantial barrier to employment. They must be able to benefit from vocational rehabilitation services in ways that lead to finding or maintaining employment.

For more info about employment programs and services offered by the Oklahoma Department of Rehabilitation Services, visit the agency's website at www.ok-drs.gov or phone (800) 845-8476.