



## **Supported employment program benefit individuals with disabilities, in recovery – and local employers**

*By Melanie Dallas, LPC*

In previous columns, I have written about how, with the right treatment services and supports, individuals with mental illness and substance use disorders can recover and live independent, productive lives in their communities. The same is true for individuals with intellectual and developmental disabilities – the majority of whom are capable of living independent, self-directed lives, and with the right supports and services, are able to do so.

A common desire among individuals that receive services at Highland Rivers Health – whether for mental illness, substance use disorders or developmental disabilities – is the desire to work. To have a job and earn an income. While it's true that some of the individuals we serve receive disability benefits, having a job is often seen as a mark of true independence and living in recovery. Indeed, many of those we serve would like to earn money rather than simply receive it.

Highland Rivers' Supported Employment program helps individuals in recovery or with disabilities find and maintain jobs in their community. Our employment specialists provide each individual that wants to work pre-vocational training and skills assessment, and coaching in resume building, job search and interviewing. They also work with local employers to identify unmet needs and to match individuals with employers and jobs based on skills, preferences, experience.

It's important to note that many individuals in recovery from mental illness or substance use disorders have previous work experience and some a college degree – many lived and worked like anyone else until their illnesses made that impossible. But after receiving treatment and support, they are able to manage their symptoms and illness and want to work again.

For example, our agency works with a man who was a star athlete in high school and college, before mental illness emerged and began affecting almost every aspect of his life. He left school, had run-ins with the law and was eventually sent to a state mental hospital. After the hospital closed, he continued receiving treatment services at one of our outpatient clinics.

Today he is living in recovery, and through the Supported Employment program, he got a job at a local retail business where he is a favorite among co-workers and customers alike. More important, he is earning money and contributing to his household and community.

Individuals we serve that have intellectual and developmental disabilities have enjoyed similar successes. In one community, our employment specialists worked with a local business that needed to have its windows cleaned regularly. Our specialists matched a few individuals with

disabilities to that work and soon nearby businesses were asking to have them clean their windows as well – and each business was paying the individuals for their work.

For employers, there are many benefits to hiring an individual in recovery or with a disability through the Supported Employment program. Employers are able to hire a work-ready employee that takes their work seriously and gives them their best. Individuals also receive onsite job coaching and employers can consult with our employment specialists as needed. In some cases, employers can also receive tax benefits.

But perhaps most important, when hiring an individual in recovery or with a disability, an employer is giving someone a chance to live independently and build self-esteem, earn money for work the employer needs done, and helping to improve the quality of life in their community.

If you are an employer in any of the counties served by Highland Rivers Health and would like to learn more about hiring an individual with an intellectual or developmental disability, call (706) 270-5050, ext. 1217. If you would like to learn more about hiring an individual in recovery, call (678) 587-0920, ext. 3406. You have the power to change lives, and your community, for the better.