

Ready to Work:

Students with Intellectual Disabilities Learn Skills for Entry-Level Jobs

President Obama's photo popped from the corner of a page Troy Booker carefully placed into each folder. Booker then aligned the folders for a meeting at the Administration for Children and Families (ACF), part of the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services.

Organizing materials is a typical assignment for Booker, one of six intellectually disabled high-school students set to graduate from ACF's Project Search June 15. Partners in ACF's Project Search, which is based on a program developed in Cincinnati, include the District of Columbia Public Schools and the District of Columbia Department on Disability Services. The ACF program, which prepares students for entry-level jobs at ACF or elsewhere, grew from President Obama's vision to bring more disabled people into the workforce.

Booker and his fellow interns have spent the past academic year at ACF's headquarters in Southwest D.C. Each 18 to 21-year-old student participates in three rotating internships in ACF offices, including the Administration for Native Americans, the Office of Child Support Enforcement, and the Office of Refugee Resettlement. The students immerse themselves in their individual places of employment for most of the day, but a portion of each day is spent in a classroom with Lisa Haynes, a special education teacher from the D.C. Public Schools. When Haynes is not in the on-site classroom, she visits the students in their work environments, where job coaches Carolyn Price and John Eldridge provide them with marketable, competitive skills.

In addition to the teacher and job coaches, the students each have a mentor and higher-level supervisor who are ACF employees. The mentor assigns the student tasks which have been coordinated with one or both of the job coaches. ACF employees participating in the program receive training on disability awareness and how to best support the interns. The mentors and supervisors are taught to set high expectations and use team approaches for their Project Search interns.

Hands-on solutions to any problems are addressed by the job coaches during their daily rounds to interact with students and their mentors. For instance, one student had been asked to "file a pile of documents in date order," Price said. The documents came with dates designated by the first two digits representing the month and the second two digits representing the year. Because the student was having a difficult time reading the dates on the documents, Price composed a chart illustrating that 01 represented January, 02 represented February, etc. "It's my job to come up with a compensatory strategy for the student," Price said.

In addition to collating and filing duties, the interns are sometimes asked to act as a receptionist -- answering phone calls, taking messages, and greeting and escorting visitors. They might also conduct research on the Internet or enter data into a computer program.

Not all the students aspire to office jobs, according to Haynes. “Some want to do retail or cosmetology and some want to work outdoors,” Haynes said. “But the skills are transferable – dress, protocol. We’re helping them become competitive so they can get what they want.”

Haynes and the job coaches at ACF are sharing job leads for their students with colleagues at sister Project Search programs at the U.S. Department of Labor and the U.S. Department of Education.

Michael Francis thinks he may be happy in an office job. “At first, in a cubicle, I was bored. Then I started getting more work and thought maybe this is something I really want to do,” the soft-spoken Francis said. In his current internship rotation, he files, types, scans and prints. But Francis said his favorite part about ACF is getting to “meet people from all over town.” The social factor improves his ability to communicate, Francis explained. “[The internship] is helping me open up a little more, helps me learn more words and interact with more people.”

President Obama envisioned the kind of job training Francis and his fellow interns have received from ACF and their partners when he pledged: “If we are to build a world free from unnecessary barriers, stereotypes, and discrimination, we must ensure that every American receives an education that prepares him or her for future success.”

Troy Booker has completed his assignment for the day. The pages featuring President Obama’s photo are tucked safely into their folders, awaiting the designated meeting for which they were prepared.