



# Many Paths Lead to Employment

By Carrie Smoot

Cindy Toth of Fairfax County observes a special payday ceremony. When the mail arrives, she and her father wait in excitement for the windowed envelope. Ripping it open with a flourish and grinning from ear to ear, she runs her fingers over the paycheck, admiring the amount she earns for her mailroom work on a ServiceSource federal agency contract. Her father, Steve, gives her a hug and a pat on the back. The money will go toward expenses, something special and savings—just like anyone else.

Now 38, Cindy, who has Down syndrome, has worked since she left school at 22. She tried many different jobs, including food service and microfiche operation. But doing the mail seems to be her calling. Her first placement was SOC Enterprises, and she worked there for 10 years—first in sheltered employment at the Op Shop, a paper processing service, and later when staff recognized her gregariousness, in the mailroom. When she eventually wanted to change jobs, case managers helped Cindy find similar work at ServiceSource Network in Alexandria. Her father is now a ServiceSource board member and leader of ServiceSource's Family and Friends group, which offers opportunities for ServiceSource employees and their families to network, socialize and have fun at special events. Frequent guest speakers at the meetings give the families insight into financial planning, independent living issues and more. "Every family has its own story, says Toth. "We help each other wherever we can."

## Good Transition Planning is Critical

In Virginia, special needs students may remain in the school system until age 21 or 22, depending on individual needs. Federal law requires that transition planning be included in the IEP beginning at age 14. The Arc of Northern Virginia information shows that Virginia ranks 48th in the country in providing adult services to people with disabilities, making it more important for parents to take part in the transition process.

"It's a big shock to parents to realize that their children are not entitled to services once they graduate from high school," says Ann L. Long, transition resource teacher with Fairfax County Public Schools. "That's why I can't emphasize enough the importance of starting early—at least three years before the expected graduation date. It takes time to process the terms, the forms and services. Don't wait until the last year! Work closely with the IEP team, your school's

employment and transition representative and attend resource fairs, asking lots of questions of the vendors."

Long emphasizes that a range of options are now available to people with mental retardation, mental illness, autism and other severe disabilities. "Employment centers—which used to be called sheltered workshops—are no longer the norm," she says. "Some parents may prefer that their children work in safe, protected environments, but the push is definitely toward community-based employment. And kids can get some experience in school through various jobs (photocopying, collating, working in the front office, cleaning, cooking, etc)."

"It's critical for all young people with disabilities to get some kind of work experience, even if it starts with volunteering or helping out around the house—and it's never too early," says Howard Green, Ph.D., business liaison of the Rehabilitation Research and Training Center (RRTC) on Workplace Supports and Job Retention ([www.worksupport.com](http://www.worksupport.com)) at Virginia Commonwealth University in Richmond. "Computers are everywhere in today's business climate. Even if your child can only do something as basic as sending and receiving e-mails, searching on the Internet or writing short notes in a word-processing program, that will come in handy in the workplace," Green says.

For many parents of special-needs children, transitioning from school to work can be somewhat challenging, but they wouldn't have it any other way. "Transition is a two-way street," says Steve Toth, recalling how he and his wife, who's now deceased, worked actively with the school system to ensure that Cindy had the tools to build a life—starting with a job. Now she has a circle of friends through work and community activities.

## Exploring the Possibilities

Cindy Toth's employer, ServiceSource Network, is one of the top five service providers employing 775 people with disabilities in Northern Virginia, and the agency operates affiliates in nine states. Lisa Ward, vice president of development at ServiceSource, invites families to come in and take a tour, see their employment offerings and "wall of fame," and discuss needs and options. Some of the agency's work center opportunities include computer recycling (older computers are especially needed), package assembly and putting together molle bags that military medics carry on their backs and use on the battlefield.

"It's all about having different options that fit the workers' strengths and abilities," Ward says. "That's key. The point is to find

the people integrated, good and meaningful work that pays well.” Ward says ServiceSource is starting a pilot minimum wage program at one of its centers. ServiceSource has a nationwide mail contract with the IRS and administrative opportunities at the NASA Goddard Space Flight Center. For 25 years, ServiceSource has operated the mailroom at the Environmental Protection Agency. In January, Ward says a food service contract begins at the FBI’s Drug Enforcement Agency. Four proposals are pending with four Fairfax County companies, and more document management services are planned.

Another Virginia provider is Soc Enterprises in Arlington. If you have ever dealt with the Department of Health and Human Services (HHS) over the phone, chances are you talked to a call center employee that HHS hired through a contract with SOC. Read any HHS materials on the prevention of childhood obesity? Staff at another SOC contract likely assembled the information packet. Others handle mail delivery for federal agencies, document management services and front office or reception work. “I want families to know that SOC Enterprises has been around since 1959. We are solely involved in administrative services for businesses. Consumers have a range of job options that are advertised internally,” says Charles Richman, president. “There’s none of the traditional food service, gardening and custodial work that most people think of as employment for people in this population. Most employees work a standard 40-hour week with benefits.”

Richman says some jobs have been lost to technology, and that’s a continuing challenge. Some longtime federal supervisors have also retired, and there’s ongoing renewed effort to educate new ones about the abilities of individuals with special needs.

SOC Enterprises get referrals from schools, community services boards, vocational rehabilitation and social service agencies, according to Richman. “Families also may visit us directly and ask questions,” he says. The intake process begins with a doctor’s certification of disability, which is more detailed than the Virginia Department of Rehabilitative Services Certificate of Eligibility. The referring agency will call and send paperwork. “We have some idea of what the person is capable of and the suggested employment option through these reports,” says SOC’s consumer services coordinator, Colleen Kennedy. “We’ll then see what the person can do with the core functions of a particular job, how much supervision they need, their social skills and reasonable accommodations by way of situational assessments.” For a mailroom worker in a supported employment enclave, where people with disabilities work and are supervised together but who may also interact a great deal with the mainstream workforce, he or she needs to be able to sequence, to work well with others, look information up in directories and to find individual offices on many floors within large offices.

“These individuals may feel nervous at first because they have come from a fairly sheltered environment such as school, or they may have felt much rejection from other potential employers. But with practice and experience, these fears are overcome,” Kennedy says. “Workers gain confidence on the job.”

## ***Sorting out the Options***

“Navigating the labyrinth of options can be overwhelming to parents,” says David Manning, an employment specialist at SOC Enterprises. He is an employment specialist for individuals in competitive, community-based employment, assisting the workers in learning job tasks and teaching them efficient methods. Manning also oversees the agency’s Thresholds@SOC program, which has had a high success rate for employing individuals with autism. Thresholds participants develop written job histories, interviewing skills and resumé’s. They work on job focusing and testing. There’s also a lot of role-playing and social skills training to help them learn the visual and verbal cues that may come naturally to others.

“Families need to work with a professional job developer,” Manning says. “This is not just someone who knows that jobs are available, but someone who has a background in mental health disorders and who knows the unique challenges that these individuals face.” It’s critical, he says, for parents to work as a team with other service providers, being realistic and accepting the limits and the potential of their sons and daughters. “They should be ready to be surprised. Many parents never thought it was possible that their children with disabilities could hold down a full-time job with benefits and live independently in the community in group homes. This goes way beyond the sheltered workshop model.”

Manning says that SOC Enterprises will be reaching out to the business community to train and familiarize employers and staff with the capabilities of individuals with disabilities. “It’s a huge paradigm shift that we as service providers have moved from a charity model, begging employers to hire our people, to a business model showing the employer how workers with disabilities can improve the bottom line,” he says. Manning described job carving—where service providers modify existing positions or create totally new positions that match the individual candidate’s unique abilities. He recalls a young man with autism who is a data entry phenomenon. The manager at a political consulting organization badly needed his skills and hired him, making reasonable accommodations. That employee continues to grow and succeed.

Didlake, Inc. is a private, not-for-profit corporation in Manassas that has provided competitive employment preparation—including job readiness skills, interviews and resumes, education, training, day support services and community inclusion opportunities for people with disabilities—since 1965. “Most families hear about Didlake through school counselors, the Virginia Department of Rehabilitative Services, through friends and Web research. It’s difficult to do site visits because much of our activities happen away from our headquarters,” says CEO Rex Parr. And the agency is still growing.

“We will continue to expand employment opportunities across Northern Virginia and start community inclusion and rehabilitation programs in the Roanoke Valley and Greater Hampton Roads. The community service boards in these areas asked us to do this,” he says. Didlake also offers janitorial, grounds and maintenance employment opportunities at Greater Hampton Roads. In Virginia Beach, 230 Didlake employees work on an overseas military auto



# What You Need to Ask to Learn What You Need to Learn

*The following list of questions was adapted from the Arc of Northern Virginia's Top Ten Questions to Ask Residential and Vocational Vendors (7/99). It can be used during the annual Vendor fair and when visiting Vendors and their worksites.*

## **1. Employment Setting**

- Do you offer facility-based or community-based options? What are they?
- What types of jobs do your consumers have (particularly those with abilities and needs similar to mine/my child's)?
- What types of industries or career paths do you help people explore?
- Does the consumer have a choice of jobs?
- What percentage of your consumers becomes employed in competitive jobs?
- What is the daily schedule for full-time employment?

## **2. Cost**

- What costs are involved for this services and who pays?
- How will participation in this program affect my benefit payments?

## **3. Transportation**

- How do workers get back and forth to their jobs?
- Who pays for transportation?
- Who arranges transportation?

## **4. Training Opportunities**

- What activities does the program offer for workers to learn new skills?
- Are there any opportunities outside the program in the community that workers can pursue? If so, is there any tuition assistance available?

## **5. Pay and Benefits**

- Are jobs typically full- or part-time?
- How often do workers get paid?
- Who cuts their paychecks?
- How is pay determined?
- Are benefits like vacation time, sick time, retirement savings opportunities and insurance plans offered?
- How does staff assist workers with management of public benefits, such as SSI? (Staff should be aware of Social Security Work Incentives)

## **6. Social Interaction/Peer Support**

- With whom do the workers spend the majority of their day?
- How do you help individuals develop circles of support at the job site?

## **7. Planning and Goal Setting**

- How frequently does the program evaluate the success of a job and reevaluate the need for supports?
- Who participates in these sessions?
- What happens if you cannot find an appropriate job placement for an individual?
- How easy is it to change jobs?
- How does a worker initiate a job change and who follows up to facilitate the change?
- What is the length of time my child can obtain vendor support and employment?

## **8. Staff Support**

- What training does the support staff have?
- Is there ongoing training for staff?
- How often does my child interact with the job coach?
- Is the supervision ongoing?

## **9. Conflict Management**

- How do you handle disagreements between co-workers (both disabled and non-disabled) on the job?
- How do you support a worker who has difficult behaviors?

## **10. Grievance Procedures**

- What happens if a worker or family member has a complaint?
- With whom should the person speak? What should the person do if the complaint is not resolved at this level?