

HEALTH

Hitting the tracks to employment

A newly expanded Family Service Association of Bucks County program is helping young adults with Asperger's find jobs.

By **JO CIAVAGLIA**
STAFF WRITER

On a recent job interview, Kyle Dixon brought two copies of his résumé

printed on good paper, he asked about cross-training, but not his hourly pay, and wore a necktie that he tied himself for the first time.

Before the Falls man left, the hotel chain manager requested a second interview.

"They even offered me a better position than I went for," Dixon announced to a half-dozen other young job seekers seated before laptops in a Family Service Association of Bucks County office in Middletown.

His news brought high praise and some practical advice.

"That is awesome," job coach Jennifer Davis-Fenton said. "But that doesn't mean you stop looking."

Finding a job isn't easy in this economy for young adults.

But it can be even more challenging for the ones like Dixon, 24, who have Asperger's syndrome, a developmental disorder whose main symptom is severe difficulty with social situations.

People with the disorder, a mild form of autism, often have above average intelligence but trouble communicating and interpreting common social cues. They can display intense interests in limited subjects, engage in repetitive behaviors and dislike any change in routines.

Not the qualities that most bosses want in prospective employees.

Enter Tracks to Employment, the latest component of the Asperger's Awareness Community-Education and Support, a comprehensive support program designed to bridge a gap between high school and adulthood.

FYI

Businesses interested in partnering with AACES to offer employment and volunteer opportunities for Tracks to Employment participants can call Allegra Hedges at 215-757-3300.

To learn more about AACES and participating in Tracks to Employment as a participant, call Amy Conte at 215-757-6916, ext. 351



DAVID GARRETT / STAFF PHOTOGRAPHER

Job developer Allegra Hedges reviews a list of job openings with Kyle Dixon of Levittown.

Most autism support services target early childhood interventions, but young adults face significant challenges adapting to new daily routines once they are no longer in a structured school environment. Without regular reinforcement, the skills acquired in school can regress.

Family Service Association started AACES last year with a drop-in social networking center called "The Coffeehouse" at its Middletown headquarters. Since then the program has enrolled 50 people between 18 and 26 years old, agency spokeswoman Stephanie Sides said.

Tracks to Employment started last year as a 12-week workshop series focused on job preparation, including filling out applications, professional behavior, interviewing skills, resume writing and dealing with coworker conflict.

Family Service has contracted with Special People In Northeast Inc., which provides services such as job coaches. About 10 local businesses have partnered with the program so far, job developer Allegra Hedges said.

The program's next component, Tracks to Education, for those interested in post-high school education opportunities, will start before the

end of the year, Sides said.

"For some it's a big deal to just come to the class," AACES program coordinator Amy Conti said. "It takes a long time (for some of them) to feel comfortable to come to a place."

Many don't have driver's licenses. Only one of the first 11 participants had a part-time job, though several had completed interviews. Only one had a resume. Another had never made a phone call before.

So far, two participants in the first group have found part-time work and a third is volunteering, Conti said. The others continue their job hunts. A second training class is under way, and a third is scheduled for next month.

While looking for work can be stressful for anyone, for people with Asperger's it can quickly become overwhelming. Sometimes they are so honest on job applications that they put down information they don't have to, Conti said. They misread social cues and body language, which can lead to misunderstandings.

"There is always a set of unwritten rules for the workplace. Things like if the boss's door is closed, that is not a time to bother the boss, what do you do to look busy at work, or if a

coworker is talking about another coworker, how do you handle that," Conti said. "That is the stuff that can be very difficult for people to get."

For some, even figuring out what to wear for a job interview is tough.

Conti recalled one young man who came in before a job interview. He was dressed in a casual Friday-like outfit. Another participant suggested that he change into something dressier.

"I don't know how to tie a tie, so I didn't know what else to wear," Conti recalled as his response.

Another participant took the man home and showed him how to tie a necktie.

He got the job, Conti said.

Bensalem resident Joel Mallin, 26, has been working in the kitchen of a chain restaurant since February after unsuccessful job searches for a year.

Recently, Mallin said, his bosses started giving him extra hours, and they scheduled him for additional training.

The lessons he learned in the AACES program helped him.

"Like, how at my age you need a résumé," he said, "otherwise no one will take you seriously."

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