

5-2-14

**To: Employment First stakeholders**

**From: Statewide Employment First Coordinator Mike Maley**

**Re: Employment First: Alternative Work Concepts**

(Please forward to your local partners & stakeholders)

A few days ago, some of the Employment First team members had the opportunity to go to Eugene to meet with Liz Fox and her crew at Alternative Work Concepts. This week's message is to share with you some of the important work Alternative Work Concepts is doing to help people with intellectual and developmental disabilities (I/DD) get integrated jobs in the community.



Alternative Work Concepts (from left): Jacque Gerdes, Liz Fox, Scott Whetham  
(Photo: Lightflies Photography)

Alternative Work Concepts (AWC) started in 1986 when it received a Department of Education grant to work with individuals with multiple disabilities who were transitioning out of school or institutions.

Jacque Gerdes, assistant executive director of AWC, is one of the organization's founders.

She said integrated employment has always been their focus.

“The field has undergone a lot of change since we started, but we have stayed small and flexible,” she said. “We have always been about Employment First and integrated employment and the belief that everyone who wants to work can work.”

Today, AWC is a nonprofit employment agency serving clients in the Eugene/Springfield area. The organization currently has 35 clients; of those, 31 are working in integrated jobs and four are undergoing job development. All of AWC's clients make minimum wage or better, at industry standards.

AWC only serves clients with significant multiple disabilities – physical as well as cognitive.

Scott Whetham, program coordinator for AWC, said the organization prides itself on successfully finding jobs for people once considered “too disabled to work.” He said AWC’s underlying belief is: if someone has the will to work, there is a job out there for them.

“Years ago we served a client named Robbie who had cerebral palsy, and was blind, deaf and mute,” he said. “People weren’t sure what he wanted to do. We visited his house and discovered he had good finger dexterity because he had this bead device he worked on for hours.”

AWC then took Robbie on tours to several job sites, and eventually ended up in an office with a microfiche machine. Robbie’s body language changed when he felt the microfiche machine. He eventually ended up working 20 hours a week for many years as a microfilm operator.

“We are always looking at the person, and what their needs are,” said Liz Fox, executive director of AWC. “We also do a lot of networking with the business community to open up new avenues for our clients.”

Fox said AWC is eager to share its practices with individuals, schools, organizations and field staff. AWC offers technical assistance, and is always available to take people on tours to see that individuals with significant multiple disabilities can work and be successful.

In the coming weeks, we will be sharing some of the employment success stories that we witnessed firsthand. We will introduce you to Darci, Vickie, and Sam, who all have community jobs and receive support from AWC. In the meantime, if you want to learn more about the work that AWC does, you can call the agency at 541-345-3043 or visit <http://www.alternativeworkconcepts.org>.

Thank you all for your continued involvement, support, and advocacy for services to individuals with intellectual and developmental disabilities in Oregon. If you have comments or other questions, please email them to [employment.first@state.or.us](mailto:employment.first@state.or.us).

~ Mike