

Aug. 24, 2018

**To: Employment First stakeholders**

**From: Acacia McGuire Anderson, Statewide Employment First Coordinator**

**Re: Employment First: Provider transformation Success Story**

(Please forward to your local partners & stakeholders)

[Like Us](#) on Facebook!

## **MV Advancements transforms its business model**



(Left to right) Kathy Schlotfeldt, Mike Schmidt and Marie Gwilliam of MV Advancements leadership team.

Photo: Angela Yeager

At the core of [MV Advancements](#)' philosophy is one word: belief.

Belief that people with intellectual and developmental disabilities can succeed in their goals and ambitions, with the right supports.

Belief that people with I/DD can not only work in community employment, but advance in their careers and achieve their goals.

And finally, belief that a company can maintain its central mission and philosophy while also completely transforming the way it does business.

The organization's founder, Margaret Reavis Larsen, started then-Mid-Valley Workshop in 1966.

“Employment was part of our mission, from the beginning,” said Kathy Schlotfeldt, executive director of MV Advancements. “We were always looking to the future.”

Community inclusion programs and residential group homes were added in the 1970s, and in the 1980s the organization began supported employment, or what it calls “individual placements.”

“The funding model didn’t really support individual community employment at that time,” Marie Gwilliam, manager of the employment division for MV Advancements’ Yamhill County office.

In 2014, what was then called Mid-Valley Rehabilitation began to plan for its future again. Changes happening at the state and federal level prompted the organization to begin conversations about what its future might look like. Mike Schmidt was hired as an employment specialist in December 2014 and remembers a company still finding its path. Mike was promoted to director of employment services in March 2016.

“I came from the private sector and had always hired people with disabilities,” he said. “I did it because I saw the value as a private employer. I saw a great deal of resistance to changes happening at the state level, and MVA didn’t have a path forward yet.”

In 2015, the organization applied for a transformation grant from the Department of Human Services. At this same time, they hired Kathy as executive director and started a process of rebranding, including changing the name to MV Advancements.

“Kathy’s huge strength is putting the right people on the bus and giving them the tools to be successful,” Mike said. “It really took that leadership change, and the fact the board believed in her and had faith in her ability, to make the needed changes.”

Kathy’s vision was that all roads lead to competitive, integrated employment, and that MV Advancements needed a fluid business model where a variety of services support people to live and work as independently as possible. Discovery, Employment Path Community, Small Group Supported Employment – all these services should help people realize their dreams and achieve their goals.

“You have to have a fluid model,” Marie said. “It’s the only way to be successful with the changes in the system. We offer the full range of employment, community inclusion and residential services. People move in and out of services depending on their needs.”

Transformation is not easy. The first forums held with families in 2015 were rough, according to the team.

“People were angry and upset, of course,” Kathy said. “People wanted to know why their adult child couldn’t stay where they had been for many years.”

Mike said it helped that the organization was staying true to its mission and vision.

“Kathy was clear – the mission, vision and values are the same, but how we get there looks different,” he said.

Kathy added, “It’s about doing the right thing for each person in every situation, even when it’s hard, and to help each person realize their potential and advance in their goals.”

Through transformation grants, MV Advancements worked first with Chris Brandt with At Work! and then Living Opportunities to build a business plan. They also used the training and technical assistance from DHS grants to write solid job descriptions to “get the right people on the bus.” In two years, the organization went from having two employment specialists to a team of 14.

“We used that grant money with a focus on outcomes,” Mike said. “We specifically targeted it to grow our employment team to provide those services to then have the capacity to grow the business.”

The organization didn’t stop at transformation grants. They reached out to expertise throughout the state. They brought in Debra McLean to train their staff on Discovery. They consulted Allen Cress (formerly of Southern Oregon Aspire and now with Edwards Center) and Seth Johnson of Opportunity Foundation on what worked and what didn’t for their organizations. They received consulting and training on how to get their employment staff productive faster through targeted training.

“It once took a year for our employment specialists to be productive to the point of billing; now it’s about 60 days,” Marie said.

Kathy said she had doubts along the way. She said she was not happy about some changes in policy. She was initially upset when the front door to sheltered workshops was closed by Oregon in July 2015.

“At the time, I was worried about my brother, who lives in Mt. Angel,” she said. “Now I see it had to happen. The people who have never been in a workshop have a much easier time adapting to community employment, and it’s important to start as early as possible on that path.”

All the leadership team members had their “a-ha” moments when they saw what community employment could mean for people. For Marie, it happened a decade ago, when a young woman who barely made eye contact and didn’t appear to be verbal got her first community job.

“She was a new woman,” Marie said. “She had new friendships. She started talking. Her whole world opened up.”

That woman still works in the community, and has faded from supports.

“We celebrate when people fire us,” Marie said, laughing. “When they are so successful that they don’t need us anymore and have coworkers and friends to support them, that is truly the goal.”

Kathy said those early successes, and promoting those successes to their board and the community, helped MV Advancements grow and thrive.

“Seeing is believing, and we saw the difference community employment made in a person’s life,” she said.

MV Advancement closed its industrial services operation, and will close its wood products division by the end of 2018. All but three people working in wood products have transitioned into community employment.

Building small group employment and employment path options was critical to the business plan, Mike said.

“You can’t take a large group of people and place them all in individual jobs at once and give them all the support they need and deserve,” Mike said. “Small group and Employment Path Community have been instrumental. Individual

placements are always the goal and some people were able to go right into that, but for many, they need time to work on soft skills or get that community work experience.”



Employment Specialist Doug Andreas (left) is a job coach for Zachary at his job in Dayton. Zachary works 15 hours per week maintaining the Dayton post office’s janitorial and landscape needs.

Photo contributed by MV Advancements

MV Advancements now has more than 65 community business assessment sites throughout Yamhill and Polk counties. Many of these businesses also end up employing people with I/DD. The businesses are diverse, ranging from retail and restaurants to office jobs and retirement communities. This model allows people in MV

Advancement services to do

Discovery or Employment Path Community work experiences in a variety of industries to see what is a good fit.

MV Advancements has hired Consuelo (Connie) Christianson as its Business Relations Manager to go out into the community and make those business contacts to develop new community business sites. Ed Wanner is the manager of enclave operations and continues to find new businesses in the community for small group employment. Georgia Conrad is the Development Associate. Steven Scherer is the Polk and Marion County Employment Manager.

Next up for the organization is building a new corporate headquarters in McMinnville, where they can house their growing team, and continuing to grow services. Today, MV Advancements has 123 people in Supported Employment Services in Yamhill, Polk and Marion counties, 76 people in Small Group Supported Employment, 10 people in Employment Path Community, and 80 in

Day Support (community inclusion) services. In the fall, MV Advancements is planning to expand employment services in Marion County.

For the MV team, successful transformation comes back to that one word – belief.

“When we hired Marie to lead the Yamhill employment team years ago, she inspired me because she truly believes in her heart that employment is possible for everyone,” Kathy said. “I can’t overstate the importance of belief. Believing it is possible for each person to live up to their highest potential and building from that.”

Mike added: “We work from the end goal of what the person wants to achieve and then work backwards from there to determine the steps needed, so the person is always at the center of what we do.”