

Our Story



Twenty years ago, in 1996, while working as the Director of the Emergency Department at Cincinnati Children’s Hospital Medical Center, Erin Riehle was frustrated with the high turnover rate in entry-level jobs that involved restocking supplies. While working to identify a solution to eliminating the high turnover rate, Cincinnati Children’s had adopted a major diversity initiative, taking a policy statement from the American College of Healthcare executives, which reads, “Healthcare organizations must lead their communities in increasing employment opportunities for qualified persons with disabilities and advocate on behalf of their employment to other organizations.” Erin wondered if people with disabilities could fill the entry level jobs she had. Not knowing anyone with a disability she turned to Great Oaks Career Campuses and the Hamilton County Board of Developmental Disability Services and asked if her idea was possible. Together with these organizations the idea of filling a handful of jobs in Cincinnati Children’s Emergency Department evolved into a comprehensive program model—Project SEARCH.



Project SEARCH has grown from one original program site at Cincinnati Children’s to over 200 across 40 states and four countries. Some of our business partners include but are not limited to: Bronson Methodist Hospital in Kalamazoo, Fifth Third Bank & Spectrum Health in Grand Rapids, Mercy Memorial Hospital in Monroe, Blue Cross/Blue Shield in Detroit, Troy Beaumont Hospital & Henry Ford Hospital in Oakland County. Project SEARCH’s primary objective is to secure competitive employment for people with disabilities.

Project SEARCH is driven by collaboration with the following Berrien community partners:

- ❖ Hospital or Business
- ❖ Berrien RESA
- ❖ Michigan Rehabilitation Services (MRS)
- ❖ Disability Network
- ❖ Riverwood
- ❖ Bureau of Services for Blind Persons (BSBP)



Michigan Lieutenant Governor Brian Calley supports Project Search and has allocated funds for this project through Michigan Rehabilitation Services (MRS).

“It became clear as the task force met that the state’s responsibility for educating children needs to be refocused. “Everyone in Michigan deserves a chance to live a self-determined independent life and an effective education is essential to achieving that outcome. We look forward to working together with all partners to implement these recommendations.”

Brian Calley, Michigan Lieutenant Governor





The High School Transition Program is a one-year internship program for students with disabilities, in their last year of high school. It is targeted for students whose goal is competitive employment. The program takes place in a healthcare, government or business setting where total immersion in the workplace facilitates the teaching and learning process as well as the acquisition of employability and marketable work skills. Students participate in three internships to explore a variety of career paths. The students work with a team that includes their family, a special education teacher and Rehabilitation Services Administration to create an employment goal and support the student during this important transition from school to work.

BENEFITS of the Project SEARCH Model:

Benefits to the Students:

- ❖ Participate in a variety of internships within the host hospital / business
- ❖ Acquire competitive, transferable and marketable job skills
- ❖ Gain increased independence, confidence, and self esteem
- ❖ Obtain work based individualized coaching, instruction and feedback
- ❖ Develop linkages to Vocational Rehabilitation and other adult service agencies

Benefits to the Business:

- ❖ Access to a new, diverse, talent stream with skills that match labor needs
- ❖ Gain intern/ employees with disabilities who serve as a role model for customers
- ❖ Access to a demographic of the economy with intense buying power: people with disabilities represent one of the fastest growing market segments in the US
- ❖ Experience increased regional and national recognition through marketing of this unique program
- ❖ Performance and retention in some high-turnover, entry-level positions increase dramatically

