

ASPIRE!

"Labels can only confine. Aspire to be undefinable."

- Colin Wright

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 UDS



Empowering Lives & Enriching Workplaces through UDS Community Employment Services

A Message from Brian Thomas, President/CEO

United Disability Services demonstrates each day the profound impact of inclusive employment through our multi-faceted Community Employment Services program. More than just a job placement service, UDS builds vital bridges between motivated individuals with disabilities and local employers, creating a stronger, more inclusive community for all.

For the individuals we serve, meaningful employment is a portal to independence, purpose and social inclusion. UDS recognizes the unique strengths and aspirations of each person. The program's staff of eight professionals offers tailored support, including community-based work assessments, personalized job skills training and ongoing coaching. This person-centered approach helps participants overcome barriers and prepares them for competitive, integrated employment. For many, a steady job is a source of dignity, a connection to the community and a desired step toward a more fulfilling life.

Employers throughout the region also stand to benefit significantly from partnering with UDS. By tapping into this diverse and often overlooked talent pool, businesses gain access to reliable, dedicated employees. Research has consistently shown that hiring people with disabilities is not just good corporate citizenship – it's good for the

bottom line. Employees with disabilities often exhibit higher retention rates, which lowers recruitment and training costs. Studies also indicate they are on par or better than their non-disabled colleagues in terms of performance, quality of work and attendance.

Beyond the financial advantages, hiring people with disabilities enriches company culture. Diverse teams foster innovation and bring fresh

perspectives to problem-solving. Inclusive hiring also boosts morale, strengthens internal camaraderie and enhances a business's public reputation. UDS works directly with employers to identify

and develop suitable job opportunities, ensuring a smooth and mutually beneficial process.

The UDS Community Employment Services program is a powerful example of how a community can thrive when everyone is given a chance to contribute. For job seekers, it's a launchpad for a brighter future. For employers, it's an opportunity to strengthen their team and build a more compassionate, successful workplace. Through our team's work, UDS is not only transforming individual lives but also enriching the fabric of the greater Akron community.

Brian

Research has consistently shown that hiring people with disabilities is not just good corporate citizenship – it's good for the bottom line.



If You're Going to Do It, Do It Right

Celebrating National Disability Employment Awareness Month

Mike is a “git 'er done” kind of guy whose shift begins at 5 a.m. and he is always ready to go, bright and early, with a smile. It seems quite fitting that he works for The Home Depot, where their slogan is “How does get more done.” Carrie Elchert is the store’s associate support department supervisor and says, “Michael is a great part of our team. With his varied background, he has so much knowledge and he loves to help our customers by sharing what he knows. He was hired to water plants in the gardening area, but it didn't take us long to realize customer service is really where he shines!”

In 2022, Mike was a licensed real estate agent and property manager in his forties when he experienced a stroke that temporarily impacted his vision. It was disorienting and unsettling but did not slow him down. Less than one year later he experienced the same type of stroke in the same area of his brain—a rare occurrence, according to his doctor. The second stroke led to vision loss in his left eye. He also learned he has persistent postural-perceptual dizziness, a chronic disorder. Following these diagnoses, he quips he considered having a shirt made to say, “Not Drunk—Vision Impaired,” to quell any suspicions people may have about why he might weave as he walks.

After the second stroke, he could no longer drive or do his job. He



Mike is always willing to help customers find what they need and he'll share some tips to help them get the job done right.

struggled to find employment. A nearby fast-food restaurant seemed like a shoo-in, but he was deemed “too much of a liability.”

Opportunities for Ohioans with Disabilities (OOD) referred Mike to two UDS programs—Low Vision Services and Community Employment Services. He received low vision aids (pocket magnifier, LED headlamp and portable CCTV), work incentive/benefit planning and assistance with his job search. UDS Employment Specialist Dan DePasquale says, “Mike is an individual who is determined to make the best of his situation. He has amazing customer service skills and, paired with his product knowledge, he is a tremendous asset to Home Depot.” Elchert agrees and says, “Initially he had some

reservations about returning to the workforce, but we have made some accommodations and he has overcome many obstacles.”

“The struggle that I have is adjusting to my new reality,” says Mike. At one time he easily worked sixteen hours a day. He’s learned a schedule like that can take a toll on one’s body so his pace is a bit slower these days. He’s working on accepting that’s OK.

“I try to remind myself of the good things that happen throughout each day. It is not always easy for me. If I help three or four people at work and make their lives a little easier, that’s a good day.”

Employees like Mike make valuable contributions to the workforce. National Disability Employment Awareness Month (NDEAM) is held in October of each year to celebrate the talents of people with disabilities and the important role they play in America's economy.

If you are interested in learning more about how UDS can assist you in finding employment, we'd love to talk to you. Contact **Kristen Campagnano** at kcampagnano@udsakron.org or 330-762-9755.

For more information about Low Vision Services and aids we have available for people with low vision contact **Heidi Seymoure** at hseymoure@udsakron.org or at 330-762-9755.



Thanks to everyone who supported our fundraiser
we scored a record-breaking
\$50,700
for UDS All-Star Training Club!

Whether it is in the alley, on the playing field or at the track, our inclusive sports program is also a training ground for life. All-Star Training Club athletes find a sense of community and belonging that boosts self-esteem and confidence. They learn valuable lessons in sportsmanship and gain skills that extend far beyond athletic competition.

The gymnasts pictured here put those skills to the test at Special Olympics Ohio, bringing home multiple medals. Mackenzie (far left) has been participating in All-Star Training Club gymnastics since 2016 and her mom, Shawna says, "It has helped her gain more confidence, allowed her to improve social interaction and she's grown as a leader that newer athletes on the team can look up to!" Mackenzie is grateful for the friendships she's made and says, "I have learned to be a good teammate by encouraging others, cheering for my teammates and for the other teams. I try to do my best and encourage others to do the same."

Thanks for helping us strike up some fun for inclusive sports. We hope you'll join us in supporting this vital program again next year!



Folks in our CHAMPS program have had a busy summer. "I love to see the friendships that develop among our seniors as they get to know each other doing activities," says Lauren Presutti, a direct support professional in the program. They've enjoyed cheering on the Akron RubberDucks, getting their groove on doing the locomotion and participating in Akron-Summit County Public Library's 100th Summer Reading program. Whether they are indoors, outdoors or in the community, they always have a good time!



Our Drivers Go the Extra Mile

Receiving curb-to-curb transportation from a friendly UDS driver can be a great comfort when you need medical treatment and can't drive yourself. Those eligible for Non-Emergency Transportation (a statewide program for Medicaid recipients) can receive rides to and from essential medical appointments, including doctor

visits, therapy sessions and ongoing treatments.

Drivers like Margaret Jackson-Melton (pictured here) get to know their passengers as they transport them. For individuals receiving regular treatment like dialysis or chemotherapy, a great deal of time can be spent in the vehicle chatting since we transport to counties throughout Ohio. While driving one patient regularly to dialysis, Jackson-Melton learned that the patient's husband was her primary caregiver but he also worked. As a result, household chores were piling up. The driver took it upon herself to offer assistance, and followed through by doing the laundry for them on her own time. She says matter-of-factly, "We are here to serve, so that's what we do. It takes a village."

The spirit of our "village" is embodied by our drivers, who go the extra mile for everyone they transport—from NET passengers

and people with disabilities to the broader community at events like PorchRokr. Pam Guinther stayed in touch with one dialysis patient after we could no longer provide services due to her increased medical needs. Driver Maggie Vincent says, "We care about the people we transport. I enjoy keeping in touch with parents of kids I once transported and hearing how they are doing as they get older." When a participant of SociAbilities was out during a long-term illness her driver, Linda Terry, continued to check on her until she, sadly, passed away. She also reached out to the individual's mother to offer support when she was recovering from surgery. Driver Dan Witmer, volunteers his time after hours with All-Star Training Club, our inclusive sports program. And the list goes on.

We are grateful to have such a dedicated team of drivers. The care they provide as they safely transport passengers goes far beyond the daily commute.



Participants of **Prevocational Services** have been busy bagging cotton swabs, boxing table legs, collating patient packets and putting together metal components (shown here). Volunteer assignments have

also been completed for the Akron Food Bank, PBS and Summit Metro Parks. Individuals in this program work hard but they also play hard and enjoyed group picnics in the park, going to the zoo, touring Fannie May Chocolate Factory and much more! While they are out having fun, they are also learning and identifying vocational and social skills for successful integration into the community.



What a fabulous day on the farm! Participants and staff members of **SociAbilities**, our social/recreational program, had a great time at Rittman Orchards. They took a scenic, covered wagon ride around the farm, picked apples, sipped on cider and then enjoyed a picnic lunch together at a park.

United Disability Services

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The mission of UDS is to provide and support inclusive, life-enriching options through person-centered programs and advocacy.

UDS is a non-for-profit organization [501(c)(3)] with programs accredited by the Commission on Accreditation of Rehabilitation Facilities (CARF).

David Hansen, chairperson

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Sandy Palmer, editor

Amy Tubergen, writer



You can make a difference in the life of someone with a disability by donating today.

To learn more visit: www.udsakron.org/donate



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Volunteer Feature: Heather Hollosy



As a social work major at The University of Akron, Heather Hollosy needed to find an internship site. After a few interviews elsewhere, she visited UDS and immediately felt at home. "Everyone was so nice and the positive energy was infectious."

In August, Hollosy began a two-semester internship at UDS and is currently working in our BraVo! adult day program. She is getting to know the participants and staff members through the daily activities, trips and programming. Her responsibilities will grow as she works toward graduation in May. Hollosy describes her experience so far as amazing. "The relationships are so strong. Everyone is very comfortable and they are always laughing together — like a second family. It's a place where I can make a meaningful contribution and grow professionally."

Volunteers at UDS have the opportunity to "be a part of an organization that makes a difference every day," according to Hollosy. And, while she's not sure of her future plans, "I know the relationships I'm building and the lessons I'm learning will stay with me."

For information on how you can volunteer at UDS, contact Amy Tubergen at atubergen@udsakron.org.