

Missouri iVR SUCCESS STORIES

WORKING TOWARD THE FUTURE

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“I was a little bit nervous when I started the program,” said Domyinique Mejias, a student receiving pre-employment transition services who recently participated in a new opportunity for youth with disabilities to gain valuable work experience. “But, just kind of be yourself. Be yourself – that’s the whole thing.”

In 2014, the Workforce Innovation and Opportunity Act (WIOA) was signed into law. Among the services provided through WIOA are programs designed to help individuals with disabilities prepare to enter the workforce. VR is required by the law to provide pre-employment transition services to students who are eligible (or may be eligible) for VR services.

VR’s response to this requirement was the development of the VR Summer Work Experience pilot program in 2015. This six-week initiative provided a paid, competitive and integrated employment opportunity for students entering their senior year of high school. Participating students worked 20 hours per week; four of those hours were spent in a classroom learning soft skills such as effective communication, teamwork, problem solving and critical thinking.

“I know I can do many things that are different,” said Mejias, who worked at University Hospital in Columbia this summer. “It has helped my confidence and helped me a lot to be independent.”

Fifteen CRPs participated in the program. Their staff worked with 143 students at 34 job sites across the state. The CRPs were responsible for contacting employers and developing agreements to allow the students to work there. VR counselors then referred students to specific jobs. Sites included University Hospital, Shelter Insurance in Columbia, Mexico Veterans Home, and other public and private businesses.

Greg Wingert, president and CEO of MORE Group, said the summer program was fast-paced and rewarding for the company and students alike.

“Our host business partners (University Hospital and Mexico Veterans Home) provided meaningful work experiences that allowed (students) to work side-



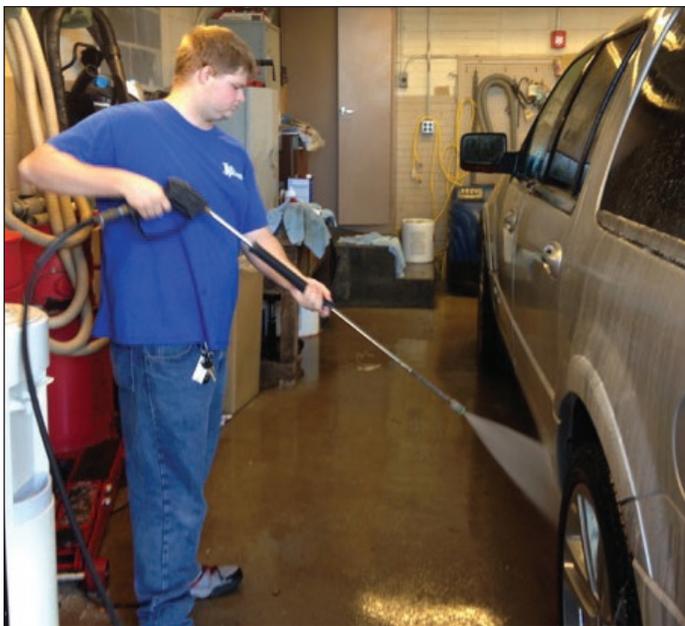
Alex Kessel examines a tire during his time working for Shelter Insurance as part of the VR Summer Work Experience pilot program.

by-side with other employees,” Wingert said. He also said the business partners reported that the students “demonstrated high-quality work performance and commendable work ethics.”

“Our VR-referred students leapt at the opportunity, and their mentors at Shelter Insurance fully embraced the dual roles of supervisors and teachers,” said Ben Falby, an employment consultant at Job Point. “The project presented an ideal duration: long enough for students to adapt to the workplace and short enough that Shelter mentors could fully dedicate themselves to the education portion of the relationship.”

Brenda Overkamp, director of marketing, research and

(Continued on the next page)



Jonathan Bias washes one of Shelter's corporate cars. He and other participants gained valuable work experience.

rehabilitation at Job Point, said Falby's experience and ability to relate to the students were key to making him the right job coach for the program.

"He did an outstanding job for us serving as the conduit between the organization, the students and Shelter," Overkamp said.

Paul LaRose, vice president of human resources at Shelter, said he was also pleased with the results of the program. The students experienced what it was like to work at a job, and Shelter employees learned something as well.

"The program helped all of us here at Shelter gain more insight into how younger workers view the working world," LaRose said.

Two students who worked at Shelter this summer, Joseph Smith and Alex Kessel, had many positive things to say about the program and their employment experiences.

"I thought it was exciting because the people were really nice when they first met me for the job, and they showed me around like I was their family," Smith said.

Smith worked in a variety of areas from the print shop to landscaping at Shelter Gardens (a 5-acre public garden located at the corporate office) to working with mechanics on Shelter's company cars. He said he enjoyed that there were different tasks to be done every day, and he learned a lot about the type of work he might like to do in future jobs.

Kessel said he also was confident that the skills he learned would be helpful in the future.

"Before I did it, I didn't think I would be able to keep a job or get up in the morning and go to work every day," he said. "So I learned that I was able to do that."

An even larger turnout in the program is anticipated for next year. Due to its success, the VR Summer Work Experience will again be offered as a pilot program.

When asked what advice they would give to future students entering the program, all of this year's participants stressed the importance of giving your all.

"If you want to be in the program, you have to put in 100 percent effort, or you're not going to really learn anything or have them appreciate what you're doing," Kessel said.



Joseph Smith helps to landscape Shelter Gardens. A daily variety of tasks gave Smith insight on what jobs he might seek in the future.

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