**Unique Program Teaches People With Disabilities To Be Care Providers**

**by Blythe Bernhard | September 9, 2019**

A first-of-its-kind training program aims to provide career opportunities to people with disabilities while also addressing the shortage of direct support professionals. (Charles Cherney/Chicago Tribune/TNS)

Carmela Mack wants to help people with disabilities because she knows what it feels like to be excluded.

The 18-year-old with a hearing impairment is a student of the Direct Service Professional (DSP) Academy in Washington, D.C., where she plans to earn a certification to work in the field as an aide to people with disabilities.

“There are not enough people trying to advocate for people with disabilities,” Mack said. “I’m going to love this job because I’ve been through this and I know what it feels like to not be supported. I can connect with them because that was me.”

The academy is run by RCM of Washington, a company that provides support to people with disabilities. Its goal is twofold — provide career opportunities to people with disabilities while also addressing the shortage of home health aides and DSPs.

“Quite frankly from a business perspective, having an employee coming to you fully trained and qualified is good business practice,” said Susan Brooks, operations manager for RCM. She added that for the aide, “There’s a level of understanding and compassion and passion for what they’re doing as well as that strive to help someone achieve equity.”

The other 11 students in Mack’s training class have autism or other developmental or intellectual disabilities. The group is the second to enroll in the program, and the first adults. A group of nine high school seniors with disabilities graduated last spring from the course with at least one now working as an aide, Brooks said.

DSPs help people with intellectual and developmental disabilities live more independently by assisting with daily tasks like bathing, cooking, cleaning and transportation.

The DSP Academy is free to participants, with funding coming from Washington’s Department on Disability Services. Those who become employed as DSPs are typically paid through Medicaid, with an average hourly wage of $11 to $12, according to the U.S. Department of Labor.

The academy’s curriculum meets Washington’s standards for DSP certification including CPR and first aid while adding professional skills like job searching, resume building and mock interviews.

Participants study the history of disability rights while also learning how to plan activities and navigate public transportation. There are sessions on relationship building and other health and wellness topics.

The class meets from 9 a.m. to 2 p.m., Monday through Thursday to complete the 120-hour course over six weeks.

Applicants must have a high school diploma and valid driver’s license and pass a background check. They must be able to read and write and engage in critical thinking skills, Brooks said.

A similar program in Ohio trains at-risk youth to become DSPs, but the program tailored for people with disabilities in the nation’s capital is thought to be the first of its kind.

Potential employers are supportive of the program and the opportunity for new hires, Brooks said.

Only about 20 percent of people with disabilities are employed, according to the Labor Department. At the same time, the annual turnover rate for DSPs nationwide is 45 percent, said Gabrielle Sedor, chief operations officer at the American Network of Community Options and Resources, or ANCOR, a trade group for service providers to people with disabilities.

Training programs like the DSP Academy help people with disabilities feel “included, supported and empowered,” Sedor said. “We recognize that people with disabilities can contribute mightily to any workforce.”

Sedor said her group is working to draft federal legislation to offer grants for states to fund similar programs outside of Washington.