

Halton Healthcare Builds on its Strong Tradition of Serving Communities Through the Project SEARCH Program

Halton Healthcare is dedicated to the communities it serves and this includes championing inclusion and accessibility. Through the Project SEARCH initiative, they have not only fostered inclusion for youth with intellectual disabilities, but have also found talented individuals to help fill positions.

Halton Healthcare is an award-winning healthcare organization comprised of three community hospitals and numerous community-based services in the growing urban and rural communities of Halton Hills, Milton and Oakville. The Georgetown Hospital, Milton District Hospital and Oakville Trafalgar Memorial Hospitals are very much a part of Halton's rich history and have a long-standing tradition of providing quality care to many generations of area families. With more than 5,000 employees and 931 Medical and Professional staff, Halton Healthcare is one of the largest employers in Halton Region.

In 2016, Halton Healthcare partnered with the Halton District School Board and Community Living Oakville to launch Project SEARCH, a unique school-to-work training program for students with disabilities. During the program, students with intellectual and/or developmental disabilities are given real work experience and training for future employment after graduation. Project SEARCH students receive support from department mentors, skills trainers, and worksite accommodations and adaptations. The program provides individualized job development based on the individual's experiences, strengths, and skills.

The students who are mentored through the Project SEARCH initiative benefit by gaining valuable and marketable job skills that assist in their education and employment and come away with an overall improved sense of confidence, independence and responsibility.

Justin's story provides a strong example of the power of the Project SEARCH program. In December 2020, Justin began working as a Project SEARCH student in the Medical Device Reprocessing (MDR) department at Oakville Trafalgar Memorial Hospital (OTMH). The department is responsible for cleaning and sterilizing medical devices and tools used in many areas of the hospital, including operating rooms. This work requires organizational skills and close attention to policies and processes to ensure the safety of both patients and employees.

Justin has a developmental disability, but that did not stop him from learning the requirements of the job. With staff support from Project SEARCH, Community Living Oakville and Halton Healthcare, Justin received the job experience, mentorship and job-coaching he needed to succeed.

After graduating from the Project SEARCH program in 2021, Justin enrolled at a local college where he completed and obtained his official MDR certification. Once he was certified, Justin was hired for a temporary, part-time MDR position at OTMH. He has since made the transition to a permanent position.

“Our team is pleased to have Justin with us. He works very hard and he’s never missed a shift,” says Iryna Savchuk, Manager of the MDR department at OTMH. “Justin’s co-workers really enjoy working with him and he has become an important part of our work family.”

For his part, Justin confirms that he has truly enjoyed his time with the MDR team and has gained confidence in his skills. He plays an important role in ensuring patient and staff safety, and has even begun to take the lead in mentoring and coaching other students entering the program.

Young individuals with disabilities often face challenges when finding employment due to limited opportunities for real work experience through placements and internships. Led by the purpose, “*To Care*”, Halton Healthcare is putting its commitment to a culture of inclusion, diversity, equity and accessibility into action. Through the Project SEARCH initiative, candidates like Justin are able to use the skills they learned in their work experiences for rewarding and competitive employment.

Since Project SEARCH launched at Halton Healthcare’s OTMH in 2016, the successful program has expanded and has just started its second year at Milton District Hospital.