

University Health Network Committed to Championing Inclusion, Diversity, Equity and Accessibility Through Youth Work Program

The University Health Network (UHN) is dedicated to championing inclusion and accessibility. One of the many ways they demonstrate this commitment is by co-hosting a Project SEARCH initiative within their group of hospitals. In addition to increasing inclusion for persons with intellectual disabilities, Project SEARCH provides untapped talent to help fill job vacancies.

With almost 23,000 employees, UHN is one of Canada's largest hospital corporations. In 2019, UHN's Toronto General Hospital site was named among the world's top 10 hospitals by Newsweek magazine. And, UHN was recently ranked as the top research hospital in Canada. Yet, despite its high profile, like many health care organizations in Ontario, UHN faces challenges in finding qualified talent to fill vacancies.

Project SEARCH is a transition to work program for youth with intellectual disabilities. Students in their last year of high school (age 19 to 20) attend a class at UHN that is lead by a Toronto District School Board Teacher. The students complete over 700 hours of cooperative job training within the hospital environment. Job coaches employed by Community Living Toronto help the students to learn work skills so the students will be ready to seek employment upon graduation.

UHN's participation in Project SEARCH benefits the organization by opening the doors to a pool of hard-working, trained, enthusiastic talent. Since 2019, UHN has hired three Project SEARCH graduates, and hopes to hire more similarly qualified applicants.

Unfortunately, many employers have doubts about hiring youth with disabilities. These unfounded concerns include: high accommodation costs, reliability, turnover and perceived human resource challenges. These misconceptions are having a profound effect on the employment prospects of youth with disabilities.

Research shows that young people with disabilities face more barriers in finding employment upon completion of their education journey due to fewer opportunities to gain work experience through part-time employment, summer work experience, co-op placements, and internships that are more readily available to those without disabilities.

“Work experience obtained at a young age is essential for long-term, post-education employment success,” says Amy Spear, Occupational Therapist and Business Liaison for Project SEARCH at UHN. “And, we found that the procedures and supports needed to assist the Project SEARCH graduates were not much different, nor more costly, than our existing human resource requirements. Not only did the program positively affect these eager, young employees, but it created an opportunity for UHN to find and hire hard-working, talented individuals.”

The staff at UHN point to the story of Mesfin as a strong example.

Mesfin started working three to four days a week as a casual employee in UHN's Environmental Services (housekeeping) department at the Toronto Western Hospital site in January 2022. Mesfin is a neurodiverse individual with challenges in processing information and verbal communications. With training and job coaching provided by the Project SEARCH team and a few on-site process adjustments at UHN, Mesfin has developed into a very hard-working, reliable and diligent member of the UHN team.

Some examples of the minimal accommodations that Mesfin required include:

- Providing a smart phone so he can text with his supervisors
- Assigning a Project SEARCH job coach
- Using basic pictures when providing instructions during the initial training period, and
- Assigning a fellow employee to provide mentorship and support during orientation and beyond.

In fact, Mesfin's manager is so pleased with his quality of work and pleasant demeanor that he is hoping Mesfin will apply for permanent openings within the Environmental Services department.

"Mesfin is a great fit to our department", said Colin Ashley, Manager Support Services, Toronto Western Hospital, UHN. "He's very enthusiastic, a hard worker. I think it is very important for Project SEARCH candidates to be employed. It's an untapped resource."

Numbers you need to know: Health and Social Assistance Sector

Ontario's health and social assistance sector has been particularly challenged by the COVID-19 pandemic, with many organizations experiencing significant turnover and labour shortages as a result.

Recent results from Statistics Canada on job vacancies (released the fourth quarter of 2021) show that there were 126,000 vacancies in the health care and social assistance sector. In fact, the number of job vacancies grew in all health subsectors over a two-year period – led by hospitals (91.6 per cent increase, 18,400 vacancies) and nursing and residential care facilities (115 per cent increase; 18,800 vacancies).

As demonstrated by major employers like the University Health Network, people with disabilities are an untapped resource, who have the talent, skills and enthusiasm to do the job and do it well.