



VALLEY COLLABORATIVE

Volume 9, Issue 2 News for the extended Valley Collaborative community Spring 2021



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Administrative
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(6 years at
Valley)

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Valley Collaborative DDS, MRC, MCB, SSA Adult Services Program

Dear Valley Community:

This is a special edition of our newsletter dedicated to all of the Individuals we serve in the Massachusetts Department of Developmental Services (DDS), Massachusetts Rehabilitation Commission (MRC), Massachusetts Commission for the Blind (MCB), and Social Security Administration (SSA) Programs.

Valley Collaborative's Adult Services Department provides training, employment and community integration services for Individuals with disabilities through funding by DDS, MRC, MCB and SSA. These programs provide a robust pathway for students to continue their careers beyond high school so that they can reach their educational and/or occupational goals.

Valley's staff have overcome many obstacles this past year while remaining focused on the needs of these Individuals and committed to their care. The resilience and adaptability they have shown kept those programs thriving throughout the Covid-19 pandemic and allowed for these much needed services to continue without interruption. Whether it was the job development team continuing to support essential workers at their worksites during lockdown, direct support professionals learning how to

provide services remotely, or the supervisors creating new curriculum and activities for individuals to engage in, the entire department was focus on providing exceptional services to the community we support. Highlighted in this newsletter are just a sampling of the many success stories that have come out of a year of struggle and opportunity.

Below is just some of the feedback we have received from the community:

. "Thank you to Valley for the diligence and dedication during these times and thank you to the counselors for making sure they identify and coordinate all resources for their consumers. It does truly take a village..." -

Maureen Kriff, MRC Area Director

. "Wonderful things are happening with our collaboration together and I am grateful." -

Rachel Chapman, MRC Vocational Rehabilitation Counselor

. "I wanted to let you know that I had a long phone call with a parent today, and she could not speak highly enough about Valley and the support that her son is receiving.

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We Make It Work!

Spring is here and the Today & Tomorrow program is ready to bloom! After a long year of dealing with an unprecedented pandemic and adapting to the "new normal" the individuals in the Today & Tomorrow Program have continued to move forward to reach their individual employment and personal goals. One such Individual, Ryan Woods, has been with the Today & Tomorrow program for several years. During this time Ryan has worked extremely hard at a variety of job sites as well. He has worked with the Job Development Team to develop employment skills to find an independent job in the community.

Job Developer, Chris Woodward, 2 years at Valley, has spent several months training with Ryan to explore and develop his employment goals and skills. Together they created his resume, practiced interviewing, completed assessments, and practiced how to deal with various situations in the workplace. All of their time and effort paid off! Ryan interviewed at Lowe's and Primark and received an offer at both locations. After discussing the pros and cons with Chris and his family, Ryan decided to accept the offer at Primark and will be starting shortly. Eight additional Individuals in the Today & Tomorrow Program have secured job opportunities with the support of the Job Development Team this spring. These positions are scattered throughout the Merrimack Valley and include Dan Sicard at Home Depot, David Silva at 3 Trolls, Natalie Surette and Samantha Wojtowicz at Market Basket,



Ryan Woods, Wilmington (left) and Joe Venskus, DDS Job Developer (15 years at Valley)

Ryan Woods at Primark, Kenny Bonnell at Camp Paul, Lindsey Biron at Wamesit Lanes and Edgardo Cabera at Walmart. The Today & Tomorrow Program has embraces its motto all year - WE MAKE IT WORK!



Ray Busby, Tyngsborough (left) and Dr. Chris A. Scott, Executive Director Ray is proudly sporting his new Valley Collaborative baseball cap. We are proud that Ray chooses Valley for his vocational programming. Ray works at the Tyngsborough High School.

Evan McAvoy

Evan McAvoy (MRC Client) has been employed by the Middlesex County Retirement System as a custodian since August of 2014. Evan was initially referred to Valley Collaborative by the Lowell Massachusetts Rehabilitation Commission. Valley staff worked closely with Evan updating his resume, working on interview skills and setting career goals. Evan has worked throughout the COVID-19 pandemic and he takes great pride in his work. Thanks to Evan for helping to create a safe environment for the Individuals and Staff at Valley! We appreciate you Evan and your employer the Middlesex County Retirement System.



Evan McAvoy, Custodian, Middlesex County Retirement System

We Make It Work!

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Although he is completely virtual at this time, she made a point of telling me that she overhears the ZOOM classes, and said that the staff and job coaches running his groups are always respectful and do a great job of getting participation and responses from the folks participating. She said that everyone has such a great approach, and give great positive feedback to the individuals, that she knows her son and his peers are being heard and valued." - **Jarrod Douglass, Human Services Coordinator, Department of Developmental Disabilities**

. "Thanks, Holly. And Happy Teacher Appreciation Day to you and all the Valley Staff. You guys are doing AMAZING things! Thank you!" - **Gail, DDS Adult parent**

As you may know, Valley just celebrated Staff Appreciation Week. Below I share with you the email I sent out to staff and the "bio" of Donna Suarez - Valley's very special staff person of the month.

Dear Valley Staff,

In recognition of Staff Appreciation Week, I wanted to reach out and thank each of you for the role you play in serving the most vulnerable among us. Your impressive work ethic, dedication and professionalism are greatly appreciated.

Throughout the pandemic you have remained positive and unwavering in your dedication to Valley. Whether you have been working remotely or on-site the focus has always been on the students of the Elementary, Middle and High Schools and the Individuals in our Adult Program.

We are proud of the work you do and appreciate you.

Your biggest fan,

Chris

Chris A. Scott, Ph.D.
Executive Director

Staff of the Month

Donna Suarez is Valley Collaborative's staff of the month. Mrs. Suarez's contributions can be seen throughout 25 Linnell Circle, at the heart of Valley's Adult Service Program. Donna's work ethic shows her incredible devotion to Valley Collaborative's mission and vision. Not only does Mrs. Suarez excel at her work, but she always offers to help others, even when she is extremely busy. Donna's kind smile, warm presence, energetic nature, and caring demeanor greet all who enter the doors of our program. As the building 'greeter,' she makes all who enter feel welcome and at home. She prioritizes her work every morning in order to be available to provide this level of comfort and care to our Individuals during their arrival and dismissal times. Donna values the inclusive feeling of a family and brings this core value to her work at Valley on a daily basis. Additionally, Donna is astutely aware of special dates and upcoming events in the personal lives of our Individuals. Her ability to plan little surprises for our adults and staff, remembering birthdates and/or special occasions with a kind card and perhaps a small cake, is most thoughtful. Aside from Mrs. Suarez's can-do work ethic and attitude, her penchant for party planning has led to her informal title as the social convener for Valley! Donna, thank you for choosing to work on the Valley team and thank you for all that you do.



Heather Valcanas, Director of Adult and Transitional Services, (14 years at Valley)



Matthew Gentile, Assistant Director of Adult and Transitional Services (7 years at Valley)

Heather Valcanas is the Director of Adult & Transitional Services for Valley Collaborative. She has a BA in Human Services Management and more than 13 years' experience with Valley overseeing programming for more than 220 Individuals through various state and federal contracts. During Ms. Valcanas' tenure, she has worked with Dr. Scott and the team to increase the number of Individuals receiving DDS services from Valley Collaborative by 60%, as new and exciting programs and partnerships have been developed and implemented.

Matt Gentile is the Assistant Director of Adult Services for Valley Collaborative's Today and Tomorrow Program. Matt has been with the Collaborative for the last seven years, but just recently took on his new role of Assistant Director. Matt is dedicated to providing meaningful programming to the individuals of the Today and Tomorrow Program. Originally a High School Guidance Counselor, Matt has built up a cache of tools and techniques to reach individuals and help them meet their goals and achieve successes throughout their daily lives. Matt is devoted to creating an environment that fosters learning through instruction and experience, while also providing a safe place for individuals to discover their true capabilities."

Curriculum and Activities



Hybrid Classroom with Bob Perkins, Vocational Coach (4 years at Valley)
Throughout the pandemic Individuals have participated in remote and on-site learning. This picture depicts individuals on-site at 25 Linnell circle while their colleagues are zooming in.

Creating activities for the Adult Program has been a challenging, fun, and rewarding job over the past year. This job is also very much a team effort. Matt Gentile does a great job choosing topics that are relevant and important to the Individuals we serve based on their feedback. The topics tie directly into job development skills, independent living skills, social skills, coping skills, and most importantly - safety skills. I recently developed a whole week's worth of lessons/activities inspired by one of the Individuals in the program. Renato Silva also has a large part in the development of the activities. He develops the direct and explicit instruction lesson that precedes the activities I create. We often discuss the topic given to us by Matt and collaborate about the direction we would like to go with it in order to be the most beneficial and applicable to the Individuals in the program.

In order to incorporate each Individuals' communication and social skills

goals, I build in open response discussion activities to help Individuals review, summarize, reflect upon, analyze, and synthesize the topic. It is important that these open discussion questions be personalized and reflective so that Individuals can understand how the topic applies to their own lives. These activities have been a great way for Individuals to practice their

two-way conversation and turn taking skills with their staff and peers. They also allow Individuals to dive deeper into the topics and clear up any questions or parts of the lesson that they didn't quite understand. Although guiding questions are built in to these discussion activities, it is important to note that organic discussion is always encouraged.

In addition to the discussion activities, the Valley team has also developed curriculum around job interviews, community resources, safety and personal care. To keep the activities/lessons fun and lively, I try to incorporate a variety of games such as "Deal or No Deal" and "Jeopardy", when possible and I am currently working on developing a Family Feud game to incorporate into the lessons.

Overall, creating these activities for the Individuals has been a very rewarding experience. I am continuously learning something new and evolving these activities to better suit Individuals' needs, but more importantly, Individuals seem to be enjoying the activities and improving their skills during this unprecedented time.



Nikki Gounaris, Field Teacher (17 years at Valley) and Renato Silva, Teacher (not pictured - 3 years at Valley) have developed engaging activities for all those participating in remote and on-site vocations.

Valley Collaborative Leadership Team



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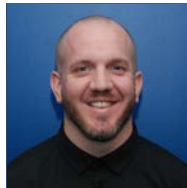
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Individual Spotlight

Jack Saba

Jack started in the Adult Program last year at the height of the COVID-19 Pandemic. By participating in Valley's remote programming, he has been building friendships with various people in his group. Jack attends the remote sessions daily and has

clearly made it a priority to stay engaged with his peers and staff at Valley. While Jack was reserved and quiet when he first started in the remote sessions, he now actively participates and often leads the conversation with no fear at all! Jack has truly stepped out of his shell and has made the best of the

Valley Collaborative Board

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Mr. Christopher Malone

Superintendent, Tewksbury Public Schools

Dr. Michael Flanagan

Superintendent, Tyngsborough Public Schools

Mr. Everett (Bill) Olsen

Superintendent, Westford Public Schools

new service delivery method with Valley. Initially, Jack was nervous to read out loud to the group. Now, he's volunteering to read every day! Jack comes to every meeting with a bubbly attitude and a huge smile on his face. He volunteers to participate in any meeting he can and always surprises us with his many talents and abilities when he has opportunities to share.



Jack Saba
Chelmsford
DDS Client