



Person-centered approach leads to successful job placement

People with challenges get support they need

By creating a highly customized plan for people with disabilities or other challenges who are looking for work, Goodwill of Orange County has been successful, year after year, in placing them in jobs in the county.

It's a "person-centered approach," explained Rick Adams, vice president, Mission Services at Goodwill OC, who oversees the workforce development program. "It means when a person comes here, their plan is going to be around who they are and what they want," he said.

Orange County employers who've hired team members from Goodwill OC say it's been tremendously beneficial. "These employees

play a crucial role in our day-to-day operations," said Brian Samaniego, Service Center lead at the Orange County Fire Authority, which has four long-term employees who were hired from Goodwill OC.

Goodwill OC serves approximately 4,000 people each year with intensive case management, many with a disability or life challenge, such as addiction or lacking a permanent home, who are looking for work. Each one will meet with a case manager or employment specialist who will assess that person's interests, skills and education, Adams said.

"After that is when we start putting a plan together," Adams explained. "That's when the

person-centered approach comes in." The goal is to find a job that matches a person's interests and abilities. "We need to work with them to craft something that they want and that is appealing to them or they're not going to be very happy in the long run," Adams said. "No one stays in a job they don't like. So, we really assess and plan – and that is really how this whole thing gets off the ground."

Some people may need to improve their English skills or receive training before seeking work in a particular area – and those steps are built into their plan.

Goodwill will not turn a person away who shows up seeking help, Adams said, but the

process works best for people who are referred by a partner agency such as the California Department of Rehabilitation, Orange County Healthcare Agency, the Veterans Administration or the Regional Center of Orange County.

"That way, we've already got a little bit of a history with the person and a better understanding," he said.

People who are experiencing significant challenges such as mental illness or addiction problems may not be ready for career development. In these cases, Adams refers them to partners who can help. "We say, 'Hey, let's get this person equipped with what they need so that they can focus on really getting to work.'"

And for those who do find a job but still need a little extra help, Goodwill OC provides that. "We have people who need more intense levels of supervision, primarily those with developmental disabilities, where you can't just say, 'OK, here's your job. You do it and I'll call you,'" Adams said. "For these people, we actually do on-the-job coaching, as well. We actually have a person with them during the day."

"The way we look at it is that outside employment is important, and there are a few reasons for that," Adams explained. "One of them goes back to that person-centered plan. Some people want to be a dental assistant. Some people want to be a tire mechanic. Some people want to work outside. If we're going to help people reach their dreams and goals, we've got to modify what we're thinking to help them – and get outside employers who are willing to work with the folks we're working with. This allows us to really, truly be person-centered."

When people with different abilities are employed in Orange County, it's good for everyone, Adams said. "Employers need that diversity. They need to hire the people who live here and have the people they hire represent our true county so that everyone gets to share in this. It'll make our county a better place if all employers look like that."

Brian Samaniego of the Orange County Fire Authority said that the four full-time employees who came from Goodwill OC are a major asset. "The OCFA originally contracted with Goodwill in February of 1990, when the first two individuals started working with the OCFA," he said. "In 2001 our Fire Chief, Chip Prather, made the two original individuals full time employees with a retirement, benefits, as

well as paid sick leave and vacation time."

The men have been working for OCFA for 13, 19, 33, and 34 years, Samaniego said. They do work such as pulling and issuing inventory stock on daily supply orders to be delivered to fire stations and headquarters, making deliveries, maintaining and cleaning the restrooms, breakroom and office areas, handling interdepartmental mail and incoming/outgoing USPS mail and packages, and assisting the day janitor in cleaning duties around the headquarters campus.

All four men have a job coach provided by Goodwill OC. "He assists them staying on track, checking their accuracy and quality of work," Samaniego said. "He also assists them with their tasks from time to time when their workload is higher than normal."

Their work is important. "Their tasks are



essential to the smooth operation of the OCFA Service Center, and their presence ensures that necessary responsibilities are fulfilled," Samaniego said. "Their contributions are integral to the purpose and functioning of the workplace. They all foster a positive attitude and brighten the day of their coworkers."

Edwards Lifesciences, an Irvine-based company that makes innovations for structural heart disease and critical-care monitoring, also employs people from Goodwill OC.

"Currently, there are employees working in a product testing lab as laboratory technicians," said Vidhya Harikumar, director of quality and a core team member of the Enable Employee Resource Group and lead of the Abilities Internship Program at Edwards Lifesciences. "There is one employee who works in the equipment maintenance department supporting ongoing maintenance of critical equipment used to manufacture medical devices," she said. "Another employee works in the patient registry department, where they sort and file the patient information forms."

Edwards welcomes these employees, Harikumar said. "Edwards is very inclusive in general, and our campus is very accommodating," she said. "We have lots of spaces for employees to take a break, collaborate and get some fresh air. As part of the Abilities Internship Program, we have partnered with Goodwill to conduct training with managers and department employees to bring awareness to the team on how to engage and interact with neurodiverse employees."

She believes Goodwill OC-trained employees are a unique asset to the company.

"The benefits are tremendous," Harikumar said. "The biggest benefit from a business standpoint is filling a business need. The employees have demonstrated that there is a need for the roles that they fill, and we have been able to create permanent roles within the organization. From a diversity and inclusion standpoint, having these employees on campus has helped us to be more inclusive. It has driven us to evaluate our procedures, processes, and way that we communicate," she said. "I would highly recommend that other local businesses hire employees trained by Goodwill OC. This partnership has been positive and valuable, and it feels remarkable that we are able to bring something like this to the workforce."

Brian Samaniego agrees. "It is truly a win-win partnership for both the employees and the OCFA," he said. "This opportunity provides these employees with a profound sense of purpose and belonging, as they recognize the value they bring to the OCFA. Knowing that their contributions are essential to the organization's success instills a strong sense of fulfillment and identity. They take pride in their work, knowing they play a meaningful role in the daily duties of their respective jobs."