

# Next Shift

## Organizations Put Disabled Hoosiers to Work

**T**he role of physically and mentally disabled Americans in the workforce has evolved over time. A national trend has emerged to create paths to gainful employment and help the disabled provide for themselves.

Last September, the U.S. Department of Labor doled out \$20.7 million in grant funds to seven states as part of the Disability Employment Initiative to improve education, training and employment opportunities for adults with disabilities; Indiana's share was \$2.27 million.

The Indiana Association of Rehabilitation Facilities, Inc. (INARF) is the principal trade association for Indiana companies that provide services for people with disabilities. President and CEO Jim Hammond explains INARF was founded in 1974 and represents a \$1 billion industry, which includes direct care, early intervention, employment services, industrial services, bus drivers and paraprofessionals.

"These organizations started meagerly and modestly, most of them in the late 1960s and early 1970s," he elaborates. "Then the parent groups got together and what started out in church basements and places like that grew into a big industry."

Hammond adds that Indiana is the only state of its size or greater that no longer has a state institution for people with intellectual and developmental disabilities.

### Members making a difference

INARF members, including Fort Wayne-based AWS and Bona Vista of Kokomo, work daily to help the disabled find work.

"Employment was one of the earliest areas we were involved in – and remains one of our key areas," says AWS President Bill Swiss. "We have a division that takes individuals with disabilities who are interested in community employment and works with them to pinpoint companies they'd like to work with, polish their resumés and help them find job leads. We even do some coaching on the job."

Swiss adds that AWS began in 1960 and served just one Indiana county at the time. Over the years, it has evolved as perspectives have changed and now provides services in eight states.

"Nationally, there has been a change in attitude by society in general – and the states specifically – whereby people with intellectual disabilities today mostly reside, live and work in the community," he explains. "At one time, many of those people lived in state-run institutions. There has been a 30- or 40-year trend, with some states being much more advanced than others in helping those folks live in the community instead. Indiana was one of the earlier states to move in that direction."

Bona Vista serves 12 counties in north central Indiana and has multiple locations. The organization provides services to adults, children and veterans, and partners with local schools and businesses.

"Our adult programming has evolved," relays director of vocational services Kelley Land. "We strive for an employment-first model with our vocational services. A major (initiative in the past two years) is the Business Leadership Network (BLN). As a provider, we get businesses together to talk about the benefits of hiring someone with a disability. It's better when businesses can talk to each other about their success stories."



**A Bona Vista client is on the job at a Howard County area Walgreens, which works on a national basis with local assistance organizations.**

She adds that approximately 15 employers have signed up for BLN, and that Walgreens is a key partner as the company has a national initiative in place to participate in these types of opportunities. Land also notes that Bona Vista helps clients maximize their independence by having them work with a benefits counselor to become independent and not simply rely on Social Security benefits.

Swiss says that AWS places clients in food and retail, depending on the person's skill level.

"We also place people in professional positions," he comments. "A lot of it would be more entry level work; many people we work with have significant limitations. But a lot of the local service providers and retailers you drive by every day are people we call on."

According to a 2011 study by the Indiana Council on Independent Living, Indiana's disabled citizens had a 38.5% employment rate, compared to 39.1% nationally.

## Making it on their own

A major motivation in helping Hoosiers of all stripes find work is the impact on state coffers.

"If a person is unemployed and goes to just having a part-time job, they're paying some taxes and they're consuming less from the public dole," Swiss surmises.

He points out that preventative work is also critical and can't be overlooked.

"It's also important if we work with kids early in life and help mitigate what might have been a more severe disability," Swiss adds, noting that AWS has clients of all ages, including infants. "It's hard to quantify, but most people would agree there's an economic benefit to the state, which would be funding that child's special education. As states close down



**Indiana Association of Rehabilitation Facilities (INARF) members employ many production workers, giving them a path to independent living.**

large, expensive state-run facilities and help people stay with their families, it has an obvious financial impact."

INARF members also contribute to the State Use program, in which state agencies and other units of government purchase products and services from these organizations.

"The contract prices have to be fair market," Swiss clarifies. "For example, if the state buys postal services from us – which is one of our big product lines – we have to demonstrate that we provide the services the same as the marketplace. There's no subsidy."

A report by Crowe Chizek (now Crowe Horwath LLP) concludes that every dollar received by a State Use employee who earns at least \$10,000 annually saves about \$1.07 in state resources. According to the report summary, this results in nearly \$11,000 in savings per year per worker when factoring the average reduction in government assistance with the local, state and FICA taxes collected.

President Jill Dunn explains that Bona Vista, where workers receive vocational experiences while performing assembly and other types of jobs, is another option that gives disabled Hoosiers a means to be more autonomous.

"We have a variety of opportunities for them," she offers. "They can even work part-time. Normally it's a six- or seven-hour day, but sometimes it's extended or on the weekends. We have contract work from a variety of different businesses and different levels of work depending on (their) expertise. We also have occupational or physical therapists on staff who can adapt a work site so it will accommodate physical limitations of an individual."

## Health care, state budget hurdles

As the Affordable Care Act of 2010 is implemented and legislators attempt to tackle the much-debated fiscal cliff, INARF members remain concerned about the impact on entitlement programs and government budgets.

"I am deeply concerned about getting medical care for the people we serve, with the number of primary doctors likely being reduced," Dunn suggests. "Or dental coverage – just today we had early childhood dentists here doing

## Improving Access

**B**ona Vista President Jill Dunn explains her organization launched Adapt-Abilities, a service that helps make homes and businesses accommodating for those with physical handicaps.

"We can go in and modify a kitchen, a bathroom or build a ramp," Dunn says. "We've been doing this all over Central Indiana for several years now."

Bona Vista's program specializes in wheelchair ramps, accessibility remodeling for bathrooms and kitchens, walk-in showers and tubs, widening doorways, specialty toilets and commodes, grab bars and handrails. General contracting services are also available for private homes and businesses.

Dunn adds that Adapt-Abilities is ideal for businesses looking to comply with Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) guidelines.

"We get calls from churches, small businesses and school corporations," she relays. "We can do any level of modification."



Food service and dishwashing jobs allow some with disabilities to contribute in the workplace and to their own care.

free services for our children and their families because it's hard to find dentists in our region of the state who will accept Medicaid.

"But the overall cost for care is another concern. What will it look like?" she ponders. "With Medicaid enrollment, in our area and others, you just never know who's going to be disqualified from services or what triggers it."

Dunn adds that Medicare is another worry.

"Just the overwhelming amount of paperwork we have to do – I'd rather be providing services than filing paper all the time," she states.

Swiss also explains that as states face more financial hurdles, organizations such as AWS take a hit as their largest customers have less money to work with.

"The biggest issue is that, since the financial crisis hit home in 2008, states have been and continue to be under fiscal pressure," he remarks. "There's really no resolution to that, although Indiana has fortunately handled it as well or better than any other state."

Swiss describes the scenario as the "classic margin squeeze." He reveals that the promise of an improving economy, however, is beginning to blossom.

"As the economy slowly heals, we see improvement in job placement numbers as employers hire more, but we understand (that at the moment) they can't employ people while trying to keep costs down," he says.

#### INFORMATION LINK

**Resources:** Jill Dunn and Kelley Land, Bona Vista, at [www.bonavista.org](http://www.bonavista.org)

Jim Hammond, Indiana Association of Rehabilitation Facilities, Inc., at [www.inarf.org](http://www.inarf.org)

Bill Swiss, AWS, at [www.awsusa.com](http://www.awsusa.com)

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