

The Voice

Oregon
Commission
for the Blind

Vision-Opportunities-Innovation-Choices-Expertise

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Message from Dacia Johnson, Executive Director



Next month will mark my 20th year working in public vocational rehabilitation for the State of Oregon. Now more than ever, I am excited about what is possible when an individual who is blind receives the opportunity to acquire new skills and utilize their unique talents and interests in a job of their choosing. The Commission for the Blind's 2015 Summer Work Experience Program is featured in this edition of The Voice. The program provides youth who are blind the experience of living independently among peers and working in a competitive job environment. The recent passage of the Workforce Innovation and Opportunity Act, the federal legislation that supports the vocational rehabilitation services provided under SWEP places further emphasis on the importance of pre-employment services that are targeted at youth with disabilities. This policy change is in direct alignment with our commitment to invest in youth who are blind as they are establishing their goals and expectations for their future educational and employment goals. Successful work opportunities increase the likelihood that youth who are blind will be employed and stay employed into adulthood.

Summer work experiences are a critical component to the agency's youth rehabilitation strategy and is often a pivotal time for young Oregonians who are blind as they begin to understand what is possible through hard work and commitment to reaching life long goals. Employers who participate in the program report gaining greater understanding about their workplace and how the work gets done. If you are interested in hearing more about the program or having a work experience student at your worksite, please contact our SWEP team.

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Dacia". The signature is written in a cursive, flowing style.

Introduction to the Summer Work Experience Program

SWEP 2015...

The Oregon Commission for the Blind (OCB) has been providing students throughout Oregon the opportunity to attend the Summer Work Experience Program (SWEP) for over 30 years.

This is a program in which students develop employment related skills on the job through paid work experiences at businesses throughout Portland, Salem and surrounding areas. These students also take part in social, educational and recreational experiences that expand their thinking around what is possible for those who experience vision loss.

Students in this program make invaluable lifelong friendships with peers who have first-hand knowledge of what it is like to live with vision loss. They learn alongside one another and from one another.

Upon exiting SWEP, each student has an associated comprehensive report that is provided to their vocational counselor and their regional program. This allows for continuity of training for these students as they move back into the school year and ensures skills learned during SWEP are practiced, maintained and built upon throughout the school year.

Through this sharing of information, SWEP staff, counselors and regional programs work hand-in-hand with students and their families to ensure students are able to progress toward independence, employment and full productive lives.

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Portland SWEP:

The Portland SWEP is a six-week intensive program in which participating students are housed at Portland State University and get the opportunity to work in the local community. The students maintain employment at various business locations within the Portland Metro area and work approximately 25-30 hours each week.

This year our SWEP employers included SAIF Corporation, OMSI, Tessa's Coffee Corner, New Seasons Market, American Chimney, Portland State University Rec Center, SE YMCA Child Development Center, Burgerville, Independent Living Resources, SCRAP PDX, and Portland Nursery. These employers provided students with invaluable work experience and professional skills that they will carry with them into their futures.

During the first week of Portland SWEP, the students attended orientation in which they were provided training by vocational rehabilitation staff on what it takes to research and prepare for a job. Each student developed their resume, worked on job interview skills, and met with their employers to ask questions and learn about employment expectations. During this first week, students were also provided orientation and mobility (white cane travel) training by OCB mobility specialists in order to learn routes to and from their worksites and to key locations throughout Portland.

SWEP students also engaged in classes focused on college preparation. In these sessions students learned about advocacy, services available through OCB, financial aid and scholarships, organizational/note-taking skills, how to work with disability services, information about specific colleges, etc. Students also had the unique opportunity to meet professional mentors with vision loss who had completed their degrees and were now working successfully in the community.



Atziri worked for
Independent Living Resources

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Portland SWEP is designed to give students experience living independently in a dorm setting. Students learned to create and maintain a budget based on the money they earned as a result of their work. They were responsible for planning, shopping for and preparing their own meals. They were expected to keep their laundry, bathrooms, kitchens and common area clean. Students were provided with training and coaching as needed in order to maintain or develop their skills around tasks of daily living/independent living skills.

In addition, the students participated in many exciting and challenging activities. Among the students' favorites this year were the Iron Chef Challenges, self-defense class, tandem bicycle urban challenge, bowling with Guide Dogs, and the challenge course.

Portland SWEP 2015 concluded with an awards ceremony to acknowledge the students' hard work and to recognize their employers' generosity in granting the opportunity to gain real life work experience. As a result of this year's program, some of our students were even offered permanent positions at their places of employment—which is a strong testament to our students, our staff and our participating employers!



Jarod worked for American Chimney

One of our Portland SWEP Dorm Counselors, Teresa Phillips, wrote this sensory poem to sum up the Portland SWEP 2015 experience:

SWEP looks like ... opportunities for students to grow individually and as a whole with work experiences and dorm life.

SWEP smells like ... the great outdoors while on the dragon boats, tandem bikes, hiking trails, golf course, challenge course in the woods, and the beach trip to the coast.

SWEP tastes like ... Iron Chef teams working together to create amazing meals for everyone to share and enjoy.

SWEP sounds like ... laughter in the dorms, listening to music, sharing stories, playing games, and spending time together.

SWEP feels like ... building friendships, new experiences and a home away from home.

Salem SWEP:

Salem SWEP is an intensive five-week program in which students work in/ around the Salem area while they reside at the Oregon School for the Deaf. Students work 25-30 hours a week and get the opportunity to gain new independent living skills and also get to tackle new exciting challenges alongside peers who experience vision loss. Students worked in a variety of jobs and employers gave very positive feedback about their work and the inspiration and motivation they brought to all those at their worksites.

This year worksites included FIVE NEW Salem Employers and FOUR returning "Seasoned" Employers. New employers included: Elsinore Framing and Fine Arts – Mr. & Mrs. Narkus, Habitat for Humanity ReStore, Special "T" Music – Melissa Potts, Value Village, and Willamette Humane Society. Seasoned Employers included: City of Salem – Bush Park, Family YMCA of Marion & Polk Counties, Salem's Friends of Felines, and The Salvation Army.

During the first week of Salem SWEP, students attended orientation where they were provided assessments and training by vocational rehabilitation staff. These assessments and training were geared to help determine their work and daily living skills and abilities.

They worked with staff to identify their individual skills and areas in which they need improvement. Students were provided orientation and mobility assessments/training, in and around the Oregon School for the Deaf's campus. Those students who were able to travel independently (or with minimal assistance) were given additional training on how to get to and from their worksites, to the dorm, and other key locations in Salem. Each student received a technology assessment to determine their current skills level as well as establish new training/technology goals for school, employment and leisure.



Paige and Mark painting the benches at Bush Park

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Salem SWEP is designed to assess and train students in all areas of life, including independent living. Students are assessed and received consistent training throughout SWEP. Areas in which they are assessed and trained include but is not limited to: budgeting (using the money earned in their work experience), meal planning and preparation, shopping, doing laundry, and house cleaning (including bedrooms, bathrooms, kitchen, etc.).

SWEP staff support student growth as they learn and enhance these skill sets. As students exit the program they have documentable growth and aptitudes in these areas.

Students participated in many recreational/social activities throughout the program. Most of these activities are planned and coordinated by the students themselves. Among the students' favorites this year was: Salem's Get Air, Salem's Art Fair, golfing, and their time spent with Portland SWEP students at Portland State University.



Sam with the large producers video camera

Salem SWEP 2015 concluded with an awards ceremony to acknowledge the students' hard work and to recognize their employers' generosity in granting the opportunity to gain real life work experiences. Employers were impressed by the student's work ethics and accomplishments during SWEP 2015. Many commended the students who worked for them and they are excited to provide work experiences for SWEP 2016.

Conclusion for Portland and Salem SWEP:

This year's SWEP students once again made a lasting and positive impression on our valued employers and partners. We want to thank everyone who was involved in SWEP 2015 for your involvement in making this another successful, life-changing program for our students. With SWEP 2015 successfully concluded, students and staff are gearing up and getting excited for SWEP 2016!

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What are Students Saying about SWEP?

One of our Portland SWEP students, Sierra Burgess, who worked for SAIF this summer, summarized her experience with SWEP in an email she wrote to the Director of Rehabilitation Services and she gave us permission to share...



Sierra Burgess at SAIF

"In the beginning I was scared. I am not much of a techy person, so the idea of working here made me uneasy. But I have done more than I thought I would, or could.

One thing I know I will take away from this is knowing that I can do it. It does not matter that I have a brain injury or that I am legally blind, I can do what I really want to do. I know I have boundary's set up around me for what I can do and what I can't, but they are now much smaller than they were. My whole life I thought I would fail in whatever I did, but this year with my wonderful job, and all the activities we did during SWEP I feel more inspired.

I know I will walk away from this with more faith in myself, and I won't put myself down as much. It's just so hard sometimes, sometimes it gets to me, all the things that have happen in my life, my eyes, my memory and brain injury, it all gets to me so much that I want to give up in thinking I can do great things. Now I know that the skills I have learned and the ones I had, like being so outgoing will get me far. I have thought so much about my life lately and realized that I have a lot to work on, but considering where I came from, I have a lot to offer.

So to me, the thing I will always remember about this summer is that I am worth more than I once thought. I know now that I will improve in the things I am lacking on if I wish to, and I can only get better on the things I do well in. Thank you Angel for letting me come back, it did me good, I feel that all around I am better than I was, and that I will only get better then I am today. I could tell you that the best thing was learning more on JAWS, or how to fill out survey letters, or how to work in the mail room, but really, the best part of working here was that the people were so amazing and they made me feel at home, like I was part of the team. I will hate leaving, but I made a good impression for the blind and visually impaired community. The world is changing from how it once was, and we have more and more opportunities' each day in the work field. I am so proud of what SWEP is doing and any way I could help in the future, I would be more than happy to. Thank you."

Business Highlight For SWEP 2015

This year we were delighted to develop a business partnership with SAIF Corporation. SAIF's Diversity and Inclusion (D&I) Group reached out to learn more about OCB, which resulted in a seminar titled, "Careers and Technology for People with Vision Loss" that was presented by OCB staff to each SAIF office across the state. In doing these presentations, SAIF learned about the SWEP program and was immediately inspired to participate as a host employer. OCB has been honored by the opportunity to work with SAIF's D&I Department. Here is a message from Christine Lincinome, the Director of Diversity and Inclusion,

"SAIF's D&I Mission: The commitment to diversity and inclusion allows us to attract and retain the best talent to SAIF and helps us understand the similarities and differences within our communities for the benefit of our employees, business partners, customers, and the community.

Partnering with the Commission for the Blind provides us the opportunity to understand the potential barriers to employment for individuals who happen to be blind or have low vision and find solutions to overcome those barriers. By supporting the SWEP program we are able to support the skill and educational growth of students who have the potential to be future employees for SAIF. SAIF is interested in creating an OPEN, inclusive environment that leverages the strengths of all its employees."

We want to recognize SAIF and all of our 2015 SWEP employer partners for your invaluable role in making SWEP 2015 a true success. You are truly business leaders and we could not provide this program without you! We have heard from you how powerful and life-changing this experience has been for you and your employees and we want you to know that you each have had a positive and lasting impact on our students. For those businesses that have never experienced the incredible opportunity of participating in SWEP, please contact us for more information about how you can get involved. Thank you to all of our past, current and future SWEP business partners! We look ever so forward to working with you as we begin to plan for SWEP 2016!

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**OREGON
COMMISSION
FOR THE
BLIND**

“Expanding Opportunities for
Oregonians with Vision Loss”

Do you know that Blind Oregonians...

Have jobs, careers and participate in their communities

Engage in leisure, recreational, and volunteer activities

Travel independently, read, and experience life to the fullest

For over 50 years, the Oregon Commission for the Blind has been a resource for visually impaired Oregonians, as well as their families, friends, and employers. We have nationally recognized programs and staff that make a difference in peoples lives every day.

Our vision is to achieve full inclusion of visually impaired people in society. Towards this aim, we help people make informed choices about their individual goals and plans.

These aspirations ultimately lead to successful employment, independent living, and social self-sufficiency. For



Cecelia (pictured), success meant learning skills that allowed her to keep her job as a forensic scientist and be come an expert witness on DNA fingerprinting.