

Testimony before the Appropriations Committee
02-15-2013
Dustin Aston

Good evening Senator Harp, Representative Walker and Distinguished Members.

I stand before you with the very unique experience of serving the very same age demographic that I belong to. As an Employment Specialist and facilitator of InterCommunity's young adult group, I witness every day just how important this group is and how it can literally be life changing.

Being a Young Adult in this day and age is a challenge in and of itself. When coupled with personal mental health issues though, this crucial time in our lives can often seem like a mountain whose peak gets ever higher even as we persevere and unfortunately, many of us lack the familial direction or social bonds that it takes to navigate these paths more smoothly.

My job has given me the opportunity to help light these paths for other Young Adults in East Hartford and the surrounding towns. Our program not only focuses on building interpersonal skills and relationships with peers, but it aims to empower individuals through entrepreneurship. When we aren't inundated by three to four feet of snow, my group runs an ice cream cart that serves our organization and members of our surrounding community. All profits go into the running of the cart, and the funding of future projects. For members that want to gain some retail experience, we have our Common Goods store which provides our Young Adults with the chance to learn business and management skills. We have our ever growing dog treat business, where consumers have been involved in everything from the purchasing of equipment, to the designing of the labels and bags. Lastly, we have been working on designing a mentor program which will pair our Young Adults with adult counterparts in the agency. These adults are able to provide firsthand experience, and the reward of playing a key role in the lives of these young people.

So, with all of these opportunities, what about our results? In 2012, InterCommunity's Young Adult Program has had 21 participants that have been meeting every other Friday from 12:00 to 4:30. Of these 21, 11 clients have obtained part time placements in our community (6 of these clients obtained multiple jobs or full time positions). Furthermore, 8 of our participants have actively enrolled in college courses. Of the 21 participants, 15 have started new jobs and/or school this year (71%).

Working for a group that is focused on recovery and skill building has shown me how essential it is to be passionate about overcoming any obstacle that is in your path. Those of us that have chosen this profession and the consumers that we represent are a resilient bunch. Unfortunately, we cannot go this alone. My organization alone has around 200 consumers that fit into the DMHAS Young Adult Age parameters. With these results, InterCommunity's Young Adult program is ready and will continue to grow. I ask that you keep in mind the fact that we are making a difference every day. We are a group of people that are reaching out and changing the lives of those that we serve on a daily basis.