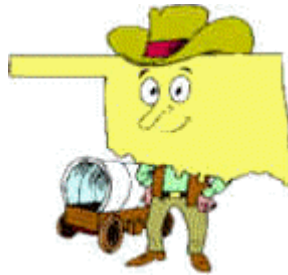


Office of Disability Concerns Will's Corner Oklahoma



(Serving the Disability Community of Oklahoma)

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Employment Opportunities: Supersize Me Please

The Oklahoma Department of Commerce has contracted with a software company to develop a new website that connects individuals looking for jobs and employers wanting to hire. Go to www.OKJobMatch.com to navigate the new website.

The website is divided into three sections: Focus Career for job seekers, Focus Talent for employers seeking to hire and Labor/Insight to give information to job seekers and employers about the current labor market. Section two and three are not up and running at the writing of this article (December, 2011), so let's spend some time on the part of the website for job seekers.

Shawna McWaters-Khalousi from the Department of Commerce directs me as I navigate the new website on my office computer. Wow. It lets me import my own resume or I can answer some simple questions and it will build a resume for me as I speak. This is great folks.

Now I can find real-time job postings which match the skills and education I have already posted in my resume. I put in that I wanted to work in either Oklahoma or Texas and got many real jobs open right now which match my experience and education. I really love this.

Oh, and I can fine tune the jobs it pulls up by more than just the place I want to work. I can tell the site I only want to work days, and I don't want to work overtime. Maybe I want a job posting to show up related to key words or even by dates the jobs have been listed. I have lots of options.

I can go directly to Job Search without messing with the resume part if I choose. I can search criteria that I choose to go directly to job postings. Search criteria can be saved to my account on the site which lets me update search results whenever I want.

Under Job Alerts you can sign up to receive regular emails on job postings which fit your criteria. I decided I didn't want to get a job alert everyday by email, but I would like to receive new information weekly.

Under Get Feedback we were able to get information on qualifications of real people (anonymous) that were hired for the kinds of jobs I am looking for. Maybe most people in my job categories had computer skills in Excel, and this lets me know how I can become better qualified.

Career Plan looks into the future at jobs I might consider five years or even ten years down the road which would fit the career I have already begun. Where was this website when I needed it thirty years ago!

Yes, this website would be wonderful for high school or college kids, but it's also good for that person already in the job market who is looking to trade up jobs. **I asked Shawna if this website is good for people with disabilities or people who do not have disabilities.**

She says, "This website assesses skills and abilities. It's for everybody." The website is for seasoned employees as well as people who have never worked or have gaps in their employment history. That's what's so great about it.

The second part of the website—the part for employers—should be up and running in the spring of 2012. It will allow employers to look at the resumes of all people who have signed into the system if they have given their consent. Employers can save on advertising jobs because www.OKJobMatch.com is free. To make this module valuable, Oklahomans need to put their resumes into Career Focus.

Employers can also contact potential employees directly to interview if the job seeker has given permission for employers to view their resumes. The website will promote a good match between what the employee is looking for and the employer needs.

Part three—Labor/Insight—can tease out trends in the job market. What are the new certifications necessary to be an occupational therapist? What big employers are hiring right now? Millions of job postings will allow this part of the website to analyze data for everyone to match jobs with potential job seekers. This part of the website is coming soon.

Check out www.OKJobMatch.com. See if there's anything there which can help your search. Shawna McWaters-Khalousi promises, "If you put your upgraded resume in OKJobMatch.com, and you don't find opportunities, I would be very surprised."

And the Paralyzed Shall Walk

Let's get rid of the negative connotation of that word "paralyzed" and substitute the phrase "wheelchair users." But is it possible for people who use a wheelchair to get around walking again—short of a miracle?

It seems like it is possible with the miracle of modern technology and if you have the \$100,000 necessary to buy it. One brand calls them "elegs," probably short for electronic legs with all its bells and whistles.

But you really can walk. I saw the video. They use a back-to-toe external framework that you attach yourself to with Velcro straps. There's a battery backpack to provide the power and, voila, you're on your feet again.

No, it's not quite as fast nor as coordinated as the movement of a typical person, but who really cares if you haven't been out of a wheelchair in years. By any account, it's still a miracle.

Roughly 1% of Americans get around in a wheelchair. Many have experienced a spinal cord injury, but some have amputations, stroke, cerebral palsy and multiple sclerosis. Most people who have not experienced these disabilities have little understanding of what it means to be in a wheelchair.

Sitting all day without periods of being upright puts you at much greater risk of developing nasty pressure sores which are difficult to heal. We need time in an upright position to fully drain our bladders. That's why people in wheelchairs are prone to bladder infections.

And don't forget the loss of muscle mass when you no longer bear weight on those legs of yours. A disability which limits your mobility has implications far beyond just not being able to walk. The outer support (exoskeleton) and the battery-pack power of elegs simulate walking and solve a lot of problems caused by being in a seated position all day.

Elegs is one brand name for the battery-powered exoskeleton. Rex, ReWalk and HAL are other brands. All of them combine mechanical engineering, electrical engineering and electrical control technology to allow a person to walk again—even climb stairs.

The most common type of control strategy for an exoskeleton uses force and motion sensors to read the user's intent. Based on sensor data, the computer controller activates the exoskeleton to deliver movement.

As with all technology, time will improve the walking device which helps people with disabilities. Batteries will get smaller and less cumbersome. Computer chips will improve. Some day the exoskeleton will not require hand crutches.

Movement will more closely simulate walking. Perhaps most important of all—the \$100,000 price tag will diminish. It may be common in the future for people who experience a spinal cord injury to be upright and walking again within weeks.

Imagine going to that ball game in an upright position after having been in a chair for years. Imagine being able to get into your car again and drive to work. With the exoskeleton device that's not just a dream anymore. It's a reality.

Physical Access in Public Places

Physical access is critical for people with disabilities. Physical access means ramps with proper slope. It means doorways which are wide enough to accommodate a wheelchair.

It means bathrooms with ADA-compliant facilities such as higher toilets, grab bars and roll-under sinks with insulated piping. If people with disabilities are ever to use the public places we all take for granted, they must have access to those places.

The Americans with Disabilities Act of 1990 (ADA) provides legal protection for people with disabilities seeking access to public places or private places to which the public is invited. The U.S. Department of Justice in Washington, D.C. enforces the ADA. The USDOJ presumes all places serving the public are accessible unless they are informed otherwise.

I spoke with some people about their experience in getting physical access in public places. They lived in different areas of Oklahoma, but all used a wheelchair to get around. There are some similarities in methods they used to get their needs met.

Knowledge is power. This is a phrase I heard consistently from everyone I interviewed. They came down firmly on the side of knowing what the ADA says. Go to www.ada.gov for lots of important information and good links on related topics.

Becoming aware of your rights is a first step in asking people to respect those rights. You can actually speak with a live ADA Specialist at the U.S. Department of Justice by calling 800-514-0301. Hit #7 in the automated message, and you will be able to talk to a live person.

Just telling someone what the law says or providing them with printed information may not be enough. You may want to give the other party the opportunity to make the changes you asked for and follow up with a second meeting if nothing has been done in a reasonable time frame.

Everyone agreed that how you make your request for a business or program to be accessible to you makes a difference. What do I mean?

Don't start out your request with a direct threat or railing against the person who has the power to make the changes you need. Likewise, do not take a passive role assuming the other person knows better than you what the law says. Many times just letting the other person know you know exactly what the law requires is enough to convince that person that compliance is in their best interest.

There are tools out there which can give you definite information if a certain physical facility is actually accessible or not. The Smart Tool will read the slope of a ramp to ensure that ramp is not too steep. Check out "Smart Tool" on the internet and carry one with you everywhere you go.

There is a pressure gauge out there which will give you a read out on how many pounds of pressure are necessary to open a particular door. The ADA says you should not have to apply over five pounds of pressure for a door to meet accessibility guidelines. If you feel a facility is out of compliance with standards outlined in the Americans with Disabilities Act, you can file a written complaint with the U.S. Department of Justice in Washington, D.C. calling 800-514-0301 and asking a complaint form be sent to your home. It does not cost you anything to file a complaint asking for an investigation.

You also have the right to pursue federal or state litigation against a place serving the public which you feel does not provide access to people with disabilities. In most cases, the attorney fees and filing fees are paid by the violator/defendant. Interview any potential attorney on their experience in handling ADA cases and their success rate in winning those cases.

Access to public places or private places to which the public is invited continues to be a concern for people with disabilities. People say they never see anyone in a wheelchair using the sidewalk or going into a particular place which serves the public. That may well be true because people with disabilities do not have access to that sidewalk or that public place. They can't spend their money there because they don't have access.

The ADA is your civil rights bill. For your civil rights to be exercised or protected, you must get involved. Don't assume others will act in your behalf.

A Note on Advocacy

About four years ago, I wrote a small state publication called *The Little Book of Advocacy*. I based the information for this short book on the needs of people with disabilities and their family and friends.

I provided some general tips on advocacy and some specific tips for programs which people with disabilities use heavily in Oklahoma. That easy-to-read publication has met the needs of many Oklahomans the past four years, and the information in it continues to be quite applicable today.

But the subject of advocacy is a broad one and allows plenty of room for further expansion. That is what I propose to do with this article in our agency newsletter.

In the course of my job, I field questions from people with disabilities and their family and friends on every conceivable subject. This gives me some insight into what you are thinking and how you approach programs which you use to get your needs met.

I had a couple calls just recently from two parents of children with disabilities who had children in special education in the public schools. Those parents were concerned about what the school was doing to meet the needs of their children.

The parents appeared to be unhappy about their children's program and were confused about what they could do to change things. They tended to react either aggressively or passively. Some said, "How dare you!" to the school and demanded a certain service. Some said, "There is nothing I can do. The school seems to have made up their minds." I suggested a third alternative. Be assertive instead of passive or aggressive.

One parent did not have a copy of their child's Individualized Education Plan (IEP). The IEP is the social service plan that the school and the family agree upon, and it guides whatever services your child will receive both in type of service and amounts of that service. Be sure you know what that IEP says. It is your first step in advocacy.

One parent had just attended the IEP meeting and when the school did not prescribe the amount of speech therapy they felt their child needed, they refused to sign the document. This allowed the school to continue to use the IEP from the previous year which may or may not have been presently appropriate.

What an assertive response is as contrasted to an aggressive or passive response? To be assertive in the above example could have played out like this.

"I see you seem to want to prescribe speech once a week for 30 minutes in a group of children. I question whether that will meet my child's needs. As you know, my child has severe autism,

and I don't feel we are going to overcome his communication barriers until we address this thing in a big way."

You might try putting the educator on the defensive by asking how the 30 minutes once per week in a group was going to meet his particular needs. (Always talk about your child's needs rather than the type and amount of services to meet those needs.)

You might produce an independent speech evaluation by a professional which outlines your child's need of individualized speech therapy one hour per week. Professional documentation always adds credible information to the IEP team process.

But, let's play devil's advocate here. The speech therapist from the school is present, and she provides her professional recommendation which falls far short of the speech therapist which the parent has hired. The teacher reminds the parent that the school is responsible for speech therapy which would help the child function in the school setting only.

Suddenly things are cast in a different light. One therapist cancels out another, and the picture gets muddled. What do you do then? You want to either get mad and walk out of the meeting or give up.

Here's a suggestion. Agree to sign the IEP with speech therapy once per week for half an hour in a group setting. However, you make a request to the IEP team to try this for nine weeks and the team automatically meets again to look at progress.

In the next meeting nine weeks from now you will again review your child's needs. You may ask the school speech therapist to document progress your child has made during the interim. If you continue to be unsatisfied that your child's needs are not being met, you will ask the IEP team to prescribe the necessary services.

This is what being assertive means. Be prepared to compromise, but never lose sight of your child's needs. Keep coming back to the team with your concerns until that IEP actually addresses those concerns in an effective way. You do not have to be a professional educator to talk about your child's needs. You only need to be a concerned parent who wants the best education possible for your child.

CALENDAR OF EVENTS

February 9-10, 2012 SOAR training on applying for Social Security benefits to train providers who help people make application. The training will be at the Tulsa Tech Center, Riverside Campus at 801 E. 91st Street in Tulsa. For more information contact Tammie Vail at 405-522-0082 or tvail@odmhsas.org.

February 12, 2012 The Choices Institute sponsors a workshop for siblings of children with disabilities to discuss issues common to those children. The Sibshop will be from 10 a.m. to 1 p.m. at 529 N. Grand in Enid, Oklahoma. A \$5 donation is requested at the door. Pizza will be provided. For more information contact Kelli Jackson at 580-234-8880.

March 2, 2012 The Oklahoma Parents Center will hold its sixth annual Statewide conference at the Sheraton Hotel at the Reed Conference Center in Midwest City, Oklahoma. A limited number of scholarships will be available for parents who have children with disabilities in special education in the public schools. For more information contact the Parents Center at 877-553-4332.

April 25-26, 2012 The Governor's Conference on Developmental Disabilities will take place at the Embassy Suites Hotel in Norman, Oklahoma at 2501 Conference Drive. There is a cost for participants, but some scholarships are available. For more information contact Gail Russell at 405-521-6254.

If you have an event coming up relating to disability, let us know at 800-522-8224, and we'll help you publicize.

ODC web site: www.ok.gov/odc
