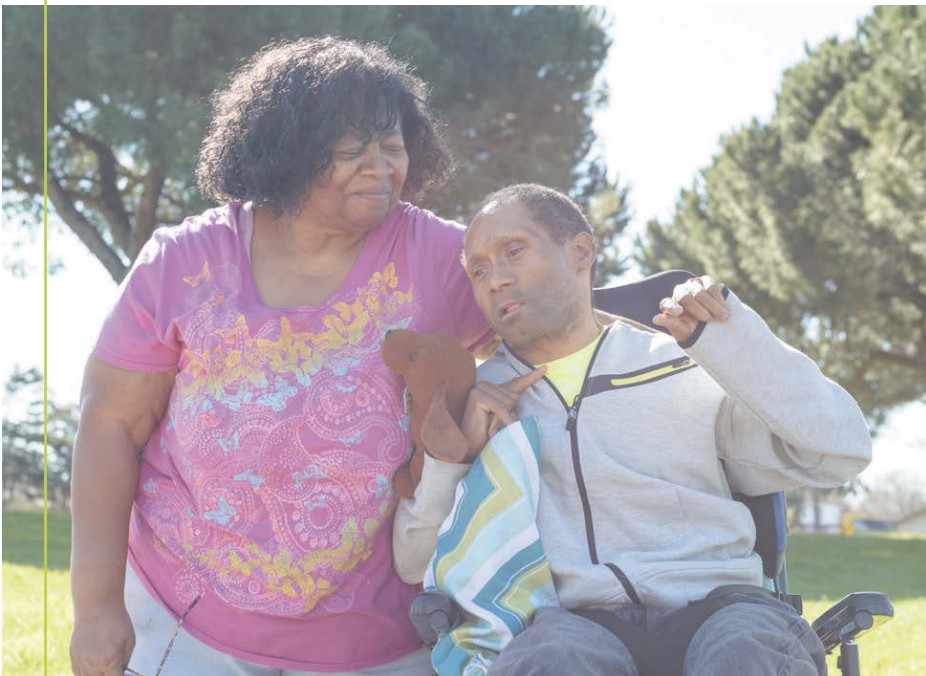


New name,



same great services



VistAbility enriches lives in The East Bay

VistAbility

Enriching Lives For More Than 50 Years

VistAbility continues to provide unique services to people with disabilities in our community

BY THEA MARIE ROOD

IMPORTANCE OF AN IPP

An IPP – or Individual Program Plan – is more global than an IEP (Individual Education Plan), according to Carol McCrary, Director of Operations at VistAbility. “It’s a contract for services with the State of California,” McCrary said, “and it originates with the 1977 Lanterman Developmental Disabilities Act.”

This legislation basically spells out the rights of people with disabilities: The right to an education, the right to work, the right to religious practice — to live a more independent life, in general.

Eligibility criteria includes intellectual disabilities, cerebral palsy, epilepsy or autism (or any condition related to autism). The disability must have occurred before the age of 18 and is expected to last the individual’s life time. Children under the age of 3 who are at high risk for developing a disability are also eligible.

An IPP is held every three years — or within 30 days of a life-changing circumstance — and allows a person with disabilities to determine where they live, who they live with, where they go to school, and what services they need (or, conversely, don’t want). They also are able to decide who attends these meetings — parents/guardians, case managers, teachers or therapists.

VistAbility, formerly known as Contra Costa ARC, has always been laser-focused on the needs of the people they serve.

In fact, its history is rooted in a parents’ group that began in the early 1960s, according to Carol McCrary, Director of Operations, who has been with VistAbility for 34 years.

“At that time, there was no special education law,” McCrary said. “Parents who had children with disabilities kept them home — there was no school for them. So a parent in Richmond ran an ad in the local newspaper asking if parents wanted to share a daycare service. It was very grassroots, and finally incorporated in 1965.”

Grassroots it might have been, but it developed into a powerful parenting lobby, which first fought for special education in public schools, then the right to employment and other services for their children. “It grew up all over the nation as an association known as ARC — Advocacy, Respect, Commitment,” she said.

While those core values remain, VistAbility made the decision in late 2018 to align with CDSA (California Disability Services Association) and to re-brand with a new name.

VistAbility’s services continue to enrich the lives of people with disabilities through three main components: Early Intervention, Community Access and Vocational Training.

Early Intervention includes intensive therapy and preschool settings for very young children. Research shows these types of programs — that also support parents — have the greatest impact. In fact, one in three infants and toddlers who received early intervention later showed no evidence of a disability or need for special education. VistAbility also offers after-school care,

“Our programs help participants to be safe and productive, and help their caregivers earn a living.”

CAROL MCCRARY
VistAbility’s Director of Operations

outreach and referral networks, and parent support groups.

Community Access and Vocational Training for adults is critical as well, and includes day programs, transportation, support

for college students, and job placement in volunteer or part-time employment.

“It’s very important for people with disabilities to contribute and be involved in their communities,” said Craig Battle, Program Coordinator at VistAbility’s George Miller Center. “They want to make their own decisions ... and be looked at like everyone else.”

McCrary agrees, and admits VistAbility creates a rewarding career path as well. “It’s very exciting to provide people with choices,” she said. “Our programs help participants to be safe and productive, and helps their caregivers earn a living. We give a lot of support and get very involved in their lives. It’s a huge relationship. [Our participants feel] like members of our own family.”



Program Coordinator Gay Paris-Arndt leads a cooking class at the George Miller Center.
PHOTO BY GEORGE E. BAKER JR.



Bright Futures Ahead

Early Intervention programs give young kids a solid educational start

BY ANNE STOKES

Mely Villicana's twin sons, Daniel and Javier Morales, were born two months early. Like many preemies, they've experienced developmental delays, mostly in their speech. But now almost 4 years old, they're thriving due to VistAbility's Early Intervention Services.

Referred to the program in 2018, Villicana says she saw improvements right away.

"They started singing, 'Head, Shoulders, Knees and Toes' on the first week," she said. "Right now they're speaking a lot! ... Now my kids are able to count from one to 100, they know their ABCs."

Christine Rottger, VistAbility's Director of Children's Services, says that the more input and stimulation young children are exposed to early on, the more they'll benefit.

"This age is so important because even with a developmental delay or

developmental disability, kids are really soaking everything up," she said.

VistAbility's Early Intervention offers two programs for children with developmental disabilities: Bright Beginnings and Great Beginnings. Both provide children up to age 3 supports not available in regular community-based daycare, such as sign language, adaptive communication strategies, speech and language therapy.

"It's important for people to know there's a lot of support out there."

MELY VILLICANA
Mother of Great Beginnings graduates Daniel and Javier Morales

"We have a wider range of strategies and techniques that we can use and aren't afraid to try with different kids," Rottger said. "Every child has individualized goals so they can be different for each child."

Bright Beginnings works with kids who have been diagnosed with or show early signs of autism as well as students who demonstrate significant delays in speech, language or social skills. Great Beginnings is slightly less intensive and is designed for kids with delays in one or more areas of development, like speech, cognitive skills or motor impairments. Parents are also included in educational plans and development.

"We're doing a lot of work with families as well," Rottger said. "Our goal is to support the family, support the child and move them along in getting closer to those age-appropriate expectations."

THE EARLIER, THE BETTER

Bright Beginnings

- ▶ Designed for children identified by the East Bay Regional Center as at high risk for or already diagnosed on the autism spectrum.
- ▶ Services include a preschool setting for one year, between the ages of 2 and 3, then a transition meeting and warm hand-off to appropriate services going forward (most often through the child's home school district).

Great Beginnings

- ▶ Designed for children identified by the East Bay Regional Center as having developmental delays (such as speech or motor skills).
- ▶ Services include a preschool setting for one year, between the ages of 2 and 3, then a transition meeting that will determine if the child is caught up or needs further services (through the child's home school district).

With the help and support from teachers, Villicana was able to work on many lessons at home, something that greatly benefited her sons.

"I would ask the teachers, 'Can I stay here for two more minutes so I can see how you do the class?'" she said. "When I came home, I would do the same thing at my house."

Villicana adds that the programs and support from Great Beginnings made a big difference in her sons' lives and wouldn't hesitate to recommend the program to other parents looking for resources.

"It's important for people to know there's a lot of support out there," she said.

For more information on Early Intervention programs, visit vistability.org or call 925-370-1818.

SERVICES START EARLY

New Beginnings

- Designed for young children who have social/emotional disorders or are at-risk of developing them because of trauma or loss. Offered at Lynn Center in East Contra Costa County, services include a preschool program for children ages 3-5 and a play therapy program for children ages 0-6.

Next Steps

- Designed for children ages 0-10, their parents, and families who are in recovery from substance abuse. Offered countywide, this service improves family relationships and teaches coping strategies.

Child Care Solutions

- Designed for children in a childcare or preschool setting who are angry or aggressive, unhappy, distant, unable to play with peers, overly shy, recovering from a traumatic event, worrying excessively, accident prone or delayed in development. Services include consultation and training for staff and referral to community resources.

Wraparound

- Designed for children ages 0-6, and their families, services can include team meetings, action plans, case management and mental health evaluation.

Katie A Services

- A partnership between Behavioral Mental Health Services and Children and Family Services for children and youth who have more intensive needs. Medically necessary mental health services are provided in the home, a family setting, or the most homelike setting appropriate to their needs.

PCSS Services

- Designed for children under the age of age 18 whose parents are on CALworks Welfare to Work or CALworks Family Stabilization. Services include screening and assessment, children's individual therapy, parent/child therapy, family counseling and child socialization groups.

Full Circle

A Bay Area woman had her life changed as a preschool student at New Beginnings — and now pays it back by teaching there

BY THEA MARIE ROOD

Jenny Norton is a teacher at the New Beginnings preschool — one arm of a therapeutic program for children ages 0 to 6 with social and emotional issues — but she was also a student there 28 years ago.

She described her full-circle as happenstance.

"I started dating my boyfriend in 2007, and his mother said to me, 'You probably don't remember me, but I was one of your teachers at the preschool,'" Norton recalled. "She started telling me stories — she used to take me to doctor's appointments and she drew little stickers and put them on my wrist, and I totally remembered all that."

This coincidence made its way back to the program director, who suggested Norton might be interested in teaching at the preschool. Norton was there the next day.

"I'm a firm believer in early intervention — I know that I totally benefited," Norton said. "I have some vivid memories, but I mostly know I always felt safe there, I always felt loved there, and I always hated going home at the end of the day. ... Kids may not remember the techniques they learned, but they definitely won't forget the feelings they had."

The New Beginnings program, which offers play therapy in addition to its therapeutic preschool, also set

"I'm a firm believer in early intervention — I know that I totally benefited."

JENNY NORTON

Preschool teacher and former preschool student

Norton up with important connections going forward. "I saw [the same] therapist from the time I was a toddler to age 18," she said. "She always reaffirmed to me that if you have a solid support system in childhood, you're less likely to be at-risk later. I know New Beginnings was that for me."

As a teacher now, she understands the impact a therapeutic preschool can have on families. "The small class size [five students per class] and small ratio [two teachers per class] allow us to give more undivided attention to our students, and ... to understand what is really bothering them," she said. "We also want parents to

Jenny Norton is giving back to a program that helped her.

PHOTO BY GEORGE E. BAKER JR.

know we're not just there for the kids, we're there for the parents too."

In fact, New Beginnings has family wraparound services — including help with housing, financial support, mental health issues or substance abuse. And the structured preschool also allows parents to go to work — something many had to give up when behavior issues caused traditional day-cares to expel their children. "I would encourage any parent who feels they need support to seek it out," Norton said.

In addition to her full-time job at the preschool, Norton will graduate with her B.A. in sociology in May. And that boyfriend? He's still around, too. "We've been together 12 years now," Norton said with a smile.



‘Instead of Being Inside a Box in the Institution, He’s in the World Now’

VistAbility opens up the world to participants and families

BY ANNE STOKES

Joyce Carr is her son Tommy’s biggest supporter and staunchest advocate. “I love my son,” she said. “I’m a mother, it’s what we do.”

Tommy was born with Down syndrome. When he was young, Carr was able to care for him, but as he neared adulthood she realized she needed help.

“He was just so hard to handle,” she remembered. “He’d get agitated, sometimes you’d literally have to hold him down.”

At the age of 18, Tommy moved to the Sonoma Developmental Center. But Carr says the facility didn’t meet his needs and denied him access to vital programs like appropriate physical therapy and recreational opportunities. Then 11 years ago, a trip to the dentist nearly proved fatal. Under general anesthesia, Tommy went into cardiac arrest and suffered significant brain damage.

“[Doctors] said he wasn’t going to make it, they were waiting for him to die,” she said. “Tommy came back at 80 percent, he just couldn’t walk and he couldn’t eat. He could move, but he couldn’t always control it.”

After the incident, Carr says the facility seemed even less able to meet Tommy’s needs, even though he was eventually able to walk with the aid of a walker. She went to court four times to fight for her son’s right to proper care.

In 2010, she finally found a better solution through Contra Costa ARC, now known as VistAbility. The Regional Center of the East Bay referred her to the Access program, which provides home and community-based services for people with

significant medical conditions like Tommy. Today, he lives in a house with roommates and round-the-clock caregivers — a much more accommodating and less restrictive home environment than an institution.

“Access helped him get back to being Tommy. They take him places, out into the community, they go to the park, they walk, there’s activities out there,” Carr said. “Access helped bring back my son’s attitude, his happiness, his will to live on. ... Instead of being inside a box in the institution, he’s in the world now.”

It’s not just Tommy, age 47 now, who has benefited from Access. Being able to rely on her son’s caregivers takes an enormous weight off Carr’s shoulders.

“Access helped him get back to being Tommy.”

JOYCE CARR
Mother of VistAbility Access
participant Tommy Carr

“When you have a special needs child, you need a network, a team,” she said. “A lot of times, our children ... miss out when you don’t fight for them. It isn’t like I have a choice. So when I don’t have to fight, it’s like I’ve won the lottery.”



ACCESS

Access provides home and community-based services for individuals with significant medical conditions in the East Bay.

Access is part of the Community Access Services provided by VistAbility for adults with severe and multiple disabilities. It offers individualized services that promote participation in a wide variety of community activities.

For more information on the Access program, visit vistability.org or call 925-706-1921.



For more information on the Access program, visit vistability.org or call 925-706-1921.

After fighting for her son Tommy’s right to appropriate care and quality of life programs, Joyce Carr found the best home for her son with the help of VistAbility Access services.
PHOTO BY GEORGE E. BAKER JR.

ADULT COMMUNITY SERVICES

Inroads

- Designed for more independent individuals.
- Fully-customized program supports all aspects of work, adult education and recreation.

Community Access Programs — Antioch, Concord and Richmond

- Designed for people who need some supervision but want to be active in their communities.
- Options include shopping, going to the park, using an indoor therapeutic pool, cooking or exercise classes, part-time jobs, volunteer work and attending adult education or community college classes.

George Miller Center Adult Programs — Concord and Richmond locations

- Designed for active adults and seniors with more severe disabilities.
- Three separate day programs offer a wide variety of activities for participants; 36 wheelchair-accessible vans provide transportation to and from.

Asian Family Resource Center — Richmond location

- Designed for new immigrants and other residents with disabilities who don't speak English (staff is multilingual).
- Day program and mental health services.

Access

- Designed for people with severe medical conditions that prevent them from attending day programs.
- Services include four hours a day of in-home, non-medical, customized activities such as art, music, recreation and community activities.

Independence is the Goal

Program Coordinator Gay Paris-Arndt works with VistAbility participants to develop skills for independence.
PHOTO BY GEORGE E. BAKER JR.

Stepping into the adult world, one victory at a time

BY ALLEN PIERLEONI

The nonprofit VistAbility, formerly Contra Costa ARC, is in the business of helping those with developmental disabilities find their paths in life. One of the many programs dedicated to that mission is the George Miller Center Adult Program in Concord, where 50 participants ages 22 to 50 gather five days a week to learn independent-living skills under the guidance of Program Coordinator Gay Paris-Arndt and her dedicated staff of 14.

"Our program is all about offering choices, because the folks we serve don't have very many," she said. "Where would they be if we didn't have a day program? They wouldn't have any quality of life or exposure to the community."

"Our program is all about offering choices, because the folks we serve don't have very many."

GAY PARIS-ARNDT
George Miller Center Adult Program coordinator

When participants join the program, they're asked what they want to do with their lives. "Do they want to set up a home, go to school, do volunteer work?" Paris-Arndt said. "We base their specific goals on what they want to learn. We really want to create as much independence for them as possible, with the ultimate goal of self-sufficiency."

Opportunities lead to learning, Paris-Arndt said. Classes include meal-preparation



and cooking, housecleaning, computer skills, music, arts and crafts, reading, how to be safe in the community, writing and other language skills. Direct service and care are provided for those who can't express their needs, such as the non-verbal, she said.

"We have many opportunities in house for them to learn valuable skills," Paris-Arndt said. "If you could see someone learn to use a microwave oven for the first time, or learn to use scissors or write their name. ... We celebrate those moments of progress, because we see such great potential."

Outside the facility, staff members drive participants to ball games, bowling alleys, destinations such as Pier 39 in San Francisco, cheese- and chocolate-making

classes, and wine-tastings. "We see to it they have a full day of inside and outside activities and learning experiences," Paris-Arndt said. "We want them to be able to do anything we can do."

One highlight is the yearly fashion show, for which staff takes participants shopping for new outfits, she said. "They get to walk down a red carpet; and it's videotaped and shown to everyone."

The biggest event is the "official annual meeting," at which participants' successes are celebrated via personalized brochures and videotaped "movies" shot over the previous year. "They feel like rock stars," she said.

Higher Education

Students learn more than just math and English at college — they learn independence and life skills for their futures

BY THEA MARIE ROOD

College is an important time in a person's life — a time to find lifetime friends, fall in love, meet inspiring professors, gain a new perspective. It is also, of course, a time of separating a bit from the supports of childhood and adolescence.

"The [VistAbility] staff helps us, but we have to learn on our own, take the bus there by ourselves," said Isaiah Griffin, who attends Contra Costa College. "I've also met some very good people. And the classes are fun."

"I want to have a job and be independent."

ISAIAH GRIFFIN
Contra Costa College student

Griffin, who is 28 and lives in Richmond with his mother, first started at Berkeley City College in 2012, and has taken a range of classes on both campuses: music, math, English and P.E. "I just finished a badminton class," he said with a smile.

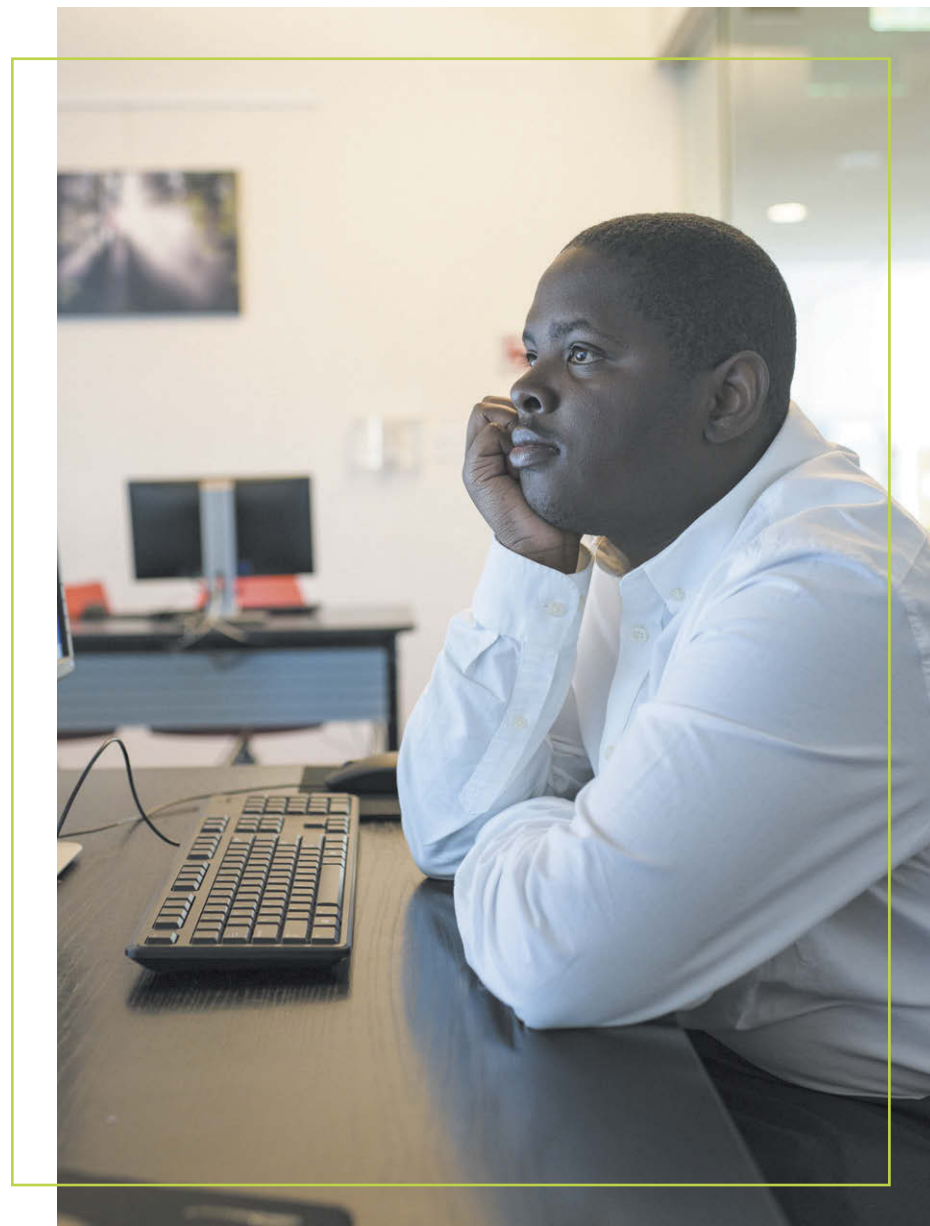
He's met each day on campus by his program manager, D.J. Hiller, a VistAbility Community Support Specialist, who is there to assist several VistAbility students. "At the beginning of the day, I like to discuss how the day is going to go, and help them be prepared," Hiller said. "But also I may stay for, say, the beginning of an art class, but then I'll wean myself away. It takes just a little

time for their personalities to come out and the jitters to go away. And you want them to be on their own."

Hiller also encourages his students to make good use of the Disabled Student Services + Programs Staff (DSSPS). "They are really there, willing to help — they are waiting for you to come in," Hiller said. "They are especially helpful when students are signing up for classes and are very good at having something in the schedule that can be adaptive. They really help students be successful."

Griffin agrees and says it's important to take your time with the course catalog and get some input, so the classes you take are enjoyable.

He is now optimistic about his future, a direct result of navigating a college campus and taking college courses. "My future goals are to get my driver's license, and live on my own," Griffin said. "I want to have a job and be independent."



TAILORED DAY SERVICE

"College is important for our students because they can be more independent [from] me, parents and care providers," said Brandon Agcaoili, Tailored Day Service specialist for VistAbility. "We mostly help them understand ... 'These are the things I have to take care of and no one will be there to tell me what to do.'"

As a result, much of the assistance goes on in the front-end, with help applying to community college and/or making the transfer to a CSU or UC school. Through Tailored Day Service, VistAbility provides ongoing support with:

Transportation:

Students learn to catch the bus at the correct time or make a connection to BART.

Access Disabled Student Services on campus:

All colleges and universities have services to help students with disabilities maintain their academic performance. "We encourage students to explore [these services]," Agcaoili said. "Sometimes they don't even know about them or have trouble understanding [what's offered]."

Make social connections:

Another challenge is learning what to say to college staff or other students. "We do some role-playing or what I like to call 'making a game plan,'" Agcaoili said. "How do you do this? If this happens, what do you do then?"

Contra Costa College student Isaiah Griffin is making progress towards his goals.
PHOTO BY GEORGE E. BAKER JR.



COMMERCIAL SUPPORT SERVICES

VistAbility's Commercial Support Services program provides a wealth of employment opportunities customized to individual participants' needs, abilities and career goals.

Work Activity

CSS connects participants with job training, work experience and referrals to community employment that enable them to achieve their career goals and help them earn a living.

The work activity program provides employment at VistAbility's production centers in Antioch, Concord and Richmond. Individuals are employed directly through VistAbility, which provides structure and training from supervisors experienced in working with individuals with developmental and intellectual disabilities. Local companies and government agencies contract with VistAbility for services such as:

- ▶ Assembly
- ▶ Packaging
- ▶ Mailing

Vocational Training

VistAbility staff members assess participants skills and connect them with a variety of industries. Placements can be with a group of fellow participants or individually. Industries include:

- ▶ Light production and manufacturing
- ▶ Retail customer service
- ▶ Hospitality
- ▶ Janitorial
- ▶ Landscaping
- ▶ Clerical

For more information on VistAbility's Commercial Support Services, visit vistability.org or call 925-370-1818.

Finding Value in Work

Commercial Support Services provides for both participant and business needs

BY ANNE STOKES

Kathy Bell loves her job and it shows. "She's on time, she comes back from breaks on time, she applies herself to her work [and] focuses extremely well when she's working," said her supervisor, Murri Banis. "She's an all-around strong worker."

Bell works for VistAbility's Commercial Support Services (CSS), where she assembles and packages materials. Its work activity program provides employment for individuals with developmental or intellectual disabilities through contract work from local city and county departments, businesses and nonprofits. Participants work directly for VistAbility at one of several Bay Area production centers.

"The purpose of CSS is to help people work as independently as possible," said Banis, VistAbility program coordinator. "They're in an environment of their peers, it's a comfortable setting and they're earning money as well. When somebody is here, they're learning appropriate work and social behaviors. ... listening to people, following instructions, that sort of thing – what we all normally do at a workplace. It's no different than what you and I are expected to do at work."

It's a win-win situation: Businesses' production needs are met – VistAbility ensures 100 percent quality control – at competitive rates and VistAbility participants are gainfully employed. CSS provides a more supportive and structured



*"I feel good when I have a
job and I'm making money."*

KATHY BELL
Commercial Support Services employee

environment for participants than they might find as an employee elsewhere. VistAbility also employs supervisors experienced in working with individuals with developmental and intellectual disabilities.

"The customers I have talked to, we've meant a lot to them," Banis said. "I think they appreciated how careful we were, how accommodating we were for them, and the fact that they were helping people in the process. That's still important to a lot of people."

Bell, who has been with VistAbility for several years, says she takes pride in her work.

"I feel good when I have a job and I'm making money," she said. "When you feel good about your job, you're not frustrated and you don't get mad."

*Kathy Bell enjoys her work, which gives her more
than a paycheck.*

PHOTO BY GEORGE E. BAKER JR.

Not only does VistAbility provide a source of employment, training and other support, its program provides its participants the opportunity for social interaction and friendships.

"People often forget how the social piece plays for a lot of folks," said Banis. "For many people here, we are the only social opportunities, outside of the people they live with."

Bell agreed, saying her peers and coworkers are an important part of her life.

"I would be lost," she said. "I would be empty without them."

On the Job, Changing Lives

Supported Employment program helps participants succeed in workplace

BY ANNE STOKES

For many people, their job helps define who they are. Employment provides an income, independence and the chance to socialize. Unfortunately, for individuals with developmental or intellectual disabilities, jobs can be scarce. VistAbility's Supported Employment program gives participants the opportunities they need to enter — and stay in — the workforce.

"We meet with individuals, we find out what their interests are, what they're good at," said Lauren Fuentes, Supported Employment Program Coordinator. "Then we really drive it toward wherever that person wants to work."

Depending on their abilities, VistAbility can offer people supported employment in group or individual placements. Both allow for varying degrees of training and supervision to accommodate participants' needs and interests, and can include a wide array of jobs in a variety of industries. VistAbility supports employers by meeting any additional training or supervisory needs as well as conducting diversity training to ensure new coworkers are comfortable interacting with each other.

Group placements typically involve three or four participants at a work site with an on-site job coach to help with training, quality control and any other assistance participants or employers may need.

Individual placements apply for open positions, interview and work directly for community businesses and organizations. After several weeks of initial job training with a VistAbility job coach, they then work on their own with minimal support.

"Navigating the hiring process is pretty challenging even for individuals who don't have disabilities," said Fuentes. "I believe the support we provide assists them with



VistAbility participant Jenna Dorman works as part of a group placement at the Contra Costa County Print & Mail Services department, a job she got through VistAbility's Supported Employment Services program.
PHOTO BY GEORGE E. BAKER JR.

"It feels good to help somebody when they need help."

JENNA DORMAN
VistAbility participant and crew supervisor

getting the job and it assists them with maintaining the job."

Participant Jenna Dorman says that without VistAbility's help, she wouldn't have a job she loves. She started as part of a group placement at the Contra Costa County Print & Mail Services

department, putting together application and informational packets for county employment and human services agencies. She did so well that she was offered an individual placement with the county. Five months ago, she was promoted to crew supervisor where she supports and trains fellow VistAbility participants and employees. She says it feels good to be entrusted with the added responsibility that comes with her new position.

"It's a challenge to make sure everyone does everything right," she said. "It feels good to help somebody when they need help."



COMMERCIAL SUPPORT SERVICES

VistAbility's Commercial Support Services staff work with participants to assess their strengths, needs and interests in order to develop individualized employment plans. Soft skill training can include resume writing, interview skills, punctuality and other skills needed for successful employment.

Supported Employment

The goal of the Supported Employment program is to enable participant independence through paid employment. Opportunities and support include:

- ▶ Group or individual placement
- ▶ Assistance finding a job that fits participant's abilities and goals including resume writing and interview skills
- ▶ Training and on-site support from a job coach

Individual Placement

Through VistAbility's Individual Placement program, participants are employed directly by local businesses and government agencies while still receiving support and training from VistAbility job coaches. In addition, VistAbility can help employers with applicant pre-screening and ADA compliance questions. Our participants can be successful in all industries.

Group Supported Employment

This service involves working with fellow participants at an employer's job site. Supervision, support and training is provided by an on-site VistAbility job coach. Our participants are successful in a wide array of services including:

- ▶ Delivery
- ▶ Retail
- ▶ Light production
- ▶ Janitorial
- ▶ Landscaping

Residents of Contra Costa, Alameda, Marin, Solano and San Joaquin counties are eligible for help with employment services. For more information, visit vistability.org or call 925-370-1818.



Nathan Ennik and his family have gotten a lot out of VistAbility's after-school programs.

PHOTO BY GEORGE E. BAKER JR.

Finding a Safe Place

For the parents of a special-needs son, an after-school program has meant new hope and beginnings

BY ALLEN PIERLEONI



FAMILY SUPPORT

After-School Care

- ▶ Designed for students ages 7-22; school pick-up is at 6 p.m.
- ▶ Provides a place for participants to be safe and productive, and is also focused on giving parents and caregivers the ability to work.

Care Parent Network

- ▶ Designed for parents of special needs children.
- ▶ Provides a safe, non-judgmental experience where parents can meet peers for emotional support, mentorship, information, workshops and advocacy training.

The working parents of children with disabilities have more than their share of worries. One of the most pressing is finding a safe after-school environment for their sons and daughters during the work week.

For Aimee and Anton Ennik of Concord, and their son Nathan, the solution has been the George Miller Center After School Program. It's a year-round service for working families who have children with special needs, said Director Claudia Lam.

It's one of the many programs sponsored by VistAbility, a community-based nonprofit whose mission is to "enrich the lives" of youth and adults with disabilities.

"This program has been an absolute godsend for us," Aimee Ennik said. "Before, we didn't have any place for Nathan to go after school. When you have a kid with special needs, socially it can be bit of a struggle. [Often] they're unable to access the social opportunities a typical kid will have in middle school and high school."

"This program has been an absolute godsend for us."

AIMEE ENNIK
Mother

The Enniks enrolled Nathan in the program eight years ago; he's now 20. After high school, he entered the public school district-sponsored Mt. Diablo Adult Transition Program (also known as Bridge), but continues in VistAbility's after-school program.

"The thing we love about VistAbility is that it combines a very heavy social-skills component – communication, sharing, daily group exercise – along with life skills such as cooking, cleaning and how to plan," Ennik said. "It's also fun. They go on field trips and the staff challenges them to try new adventures. They're treated like typical

people, with their own unique interests and personalities."

Early on in the program, Nathan showed a talent for basketball. He went on to play in the Special Olympics and participate in an exhibition at halftime during a Cal-Stanford game.

"Nathan has really blossomed in the program," Ennik said. "We've absolutely seen changes in him, such as his confidence, a willingness to try new things, and how to express himself."

The Enniks have become close to the VistAbility staff because "they're really invested in Nathan's success and future," Ennik said. "They're always telling us, 'This is what he did today, this is what he wants to do, this is what he needs to work on.'"

"We feel really good knowing he's in the best place for him," she said.

VistAbility's new executive director, John Bolle, puts people first.
PHOTO BY GEORGE E. BAKER JR.

Q&A with Executive Director John Bolle

With a new name and a new leader,
VistAbility moves forward

BY THEA MARIE ROOD



► **What, in your opinion, is VistAbility's ongoing mission under your new leadership?**

We help people of all ages with developmental and intellectual disabilities lead richer, more meaningful lives in the community. We help them understand their options and then respect their choices.

► **How do you support staff so they're in turn able to support the individuals and families you're working with?**

The agency has an employee-first culture, and puts people first [in our organization]. That's really how you translate the experience we want to offer our participants.

► **How is this idea also reflected in your new name?**

VistAbility captures the one thing that ties us all together in a unique way. Our agency provides a vast array of services —

community access, employment, advocacy, education, children, adults, seniors, families and many more. But one thing we all have in common is we see (vista) people for their abilities: VistAbility.

► **In terms of who you serve, it's not just children or adults with disabilities, but their families, too; correct? Why is that important?**

Families rely on places their son or daughter, for example, can go where they know he or she is safe and enjoying life. [This allows] parents to work and live a more normal life themselves. Our services are life-changing.

► **Why is early intervention — therapeutic services for very young children — an important component of your program?**

Early intervention is where you can make a miraculous change in someone's life. If a child with a developmental delay receives

services early enough, it can drastically reduce, or possibly eliminate, the child's needs for supports later on in life. This is why school districts are asking us to expand our services.

► **Are there other examples of how this important work you do is personally quite rewarding?**

People leave for other industries and come back because they miss working with our participants. You can see a child in early intervention, then in the after-school program, then onto work or college, and you can really pull back and look at the progress. We all work together to help people fulfill their life choices.

"If you look at our participants and staff, it is not one-sided — all of our lives are enriched."

JOHN BOLLE
VistAbility executive director

What is VistAbility?

VistAbility offers an expansive range of services for individuals with intellectual and developmental disabilities that are directed at increasing participants' level of independence.

Among its resources, VistAbility has production centers where individuals develop skills to successfully acquire and maintain employment with local businesses. Additionally, participants are supported in achieving greater community access through such activities as field trips in the VistAbility after-school program and in participant-driven community-enrichment programs.

The organization also hosts several programs to support young children with any social delays, developmental delays or behavioral challenges to learn the skills they need to transition into a promising school setting.

Success in these early intervention programs comes from a robust team of licensed professionals, well-trained and dedicated staff and, most importantly, the family.



FIND THE SERVICES YOU NEED!

- Discover what early intervention service is perfect for the child in your life at vistability.org.
- Learn about the employment resources available through VistAbility at vistability.org.

CONTRIBUTE

- To make a donation of a vehicle or any other donation, go to vistability.org.

WHY VISTABILITY IS VALUABLE

“ We have been involved with Contra Costa ARC [now VistAbility] for over 15 years. My daughter has attended their program since junior high school. The director and staff are so compassionate of their clients. My daughter has developed some valuable skills through their program. ”

Cyd Antang,
Associate Director at California
Academy of Sciences

“ George Miller Center, what an excellent program for [our children]. The staff that works with them are very dedicated and tolerant. We feel this program fills a tremendous void in their lives; they are so excited about going to their program everyday. This program also makes life for Mom and Dad easier. ”

Norma North,
parent of VistAbility participants

VistAbility

For more information on services or
to donate,
give **VistAbility** a call at

925-370-1818

Or visit our main office:

VistAbility
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Martinez, CA 94553