

Vocational Rehab helps people find jobs

Storm Lake's Iowa Vocational Rehabilitation Services office helps clients with a variety of medical and psychological conditions find work, says Susan Irwin, rehabilitation counselor at the Voc Rehab office in Storm Lake.

During the month of October, which is National Disability Employment Month, Irwin put us in touch with Jeff Foell and Cody Sievers, in an effort to highlight the services that her agency provides.

Foell, 23, has a hearing loss. Sievers, 24, has a mental disability. Both were able to benefit from services offered through the local Vocational Rehabilitation office at the AEA building in Storm Lake.

Foell, the son of Jim and Terry Foell of rural Storm Lake, is a 2005 graduate of Saint Mary's High School. He graduated last spring from Saint John's University in Minnesota, with a degree in business management.

The Storm Lake native says that he knew as he was growing up that he had a hearing loss, but didn't take any action until he was a junior in college. A hearing test at that time showed that he had about a 50% hearing loss in both ears.

On the recommendation of a family friend, Foell went to the Vocational Rehabilitation office in Storm Lake. The agency purchased hearing aids for him, a \$5,000 expense, and also



Foell is now serving as part of a management team that is coordinating a software upgrade at Xcel Energy in Minnesota.

provided tuition assistance for two semesters.

Upon his graduation from college, Vocational rehabilitation helped Foell find employment as a business analyst consultant for

Genesis10, in Woodbury, Minn. Foell says he was one of 10 hired from an interview of about

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Students have an ever-ready supply of clean glasses, thanks to Cody Sievers' work in the dish room at Buena Vista University.

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1,100 candidates.

Since last July, Foell has been working as a business analyst consultant with a Genesis10 client, Xcel Energy. He's part of a management team coordinating a software upgrade for the company.

Vocational Rehabilitation assisted with the school-to-work transition, Foell says. It covered the cost of clothing required for his new job and also paid his first month's rent. There was also a

tax benefit for the company, he says.

Sievers, who has moderate mental retardation and attention deficit hyperactivity disorder, lives in Storm Lake with his parents, Michael and Regina Sievers. Though he's a Storm Lake native, for most of his growing-up years he lived in Muscatine. The family moved back to Storm Lake a year ago last June.

With the help of the local Vocational Rehabilitation Services office, Sievers found part-time work with Sodexo, the food service provider at Buena Vista University. He's been working there since last February.

Working in the dish room at the servery in the BVU Forum, Sievers off-loads dirty dishes, sends them into the dish machine and stacks the emerging clean dishes. He also does miscellaneous jobs such as loading the ice machine and taking out the garbage.

Sievers' work for Sodexo is mostly on evenings and weekends, with some weekday work, about 20 hours per week. He also delivers The Advertising Guide, with a route running west from Lake Avenue.

Vocational Rehabilitation reimbursed Sievers for a few weeks during a pre-employment evaluation at Sodexo, Irwin says. Cody learned the job quickly and was hired when the evaluation was completed, she says.

Foell and Sievers and demonstrate the range of clients that Vocational Rehabilitation is able to serve, says Irwin, who as a counselor at the local office handles a caseload of about 120 people from Buena Vista and Sac Counties.

About 25% of her clients, like Sievers, have mental disabilities, Irwin says. Some may have bipolar disorder, schizophrenia or autism.

Others may have physical impediments such as back injuries, repetitive stress injuries, diabetes, arthritis or asthma.

Clients must have a permanent disability. Some are as young as high school sophomores.

"So many people are so used to dealing with the issues they have that they don't think of themselves as having a disability," Irwin says. She's seeing some people now who have been gainfully employed despite their disabilities, but who have lost their jobs due to the economy.

The agency attempts to fit the employee to the job. It provides college and other training to prepare people with disabilities for the workplace. Although IVRS doesn't supplement the pay of employees, it does provide a stipend during a pre-employment evaluation, as it did in Sievers' case. It may also pay half of the new employee's wages during on-the-job training.

Vocational Rehabilitation supports employers by offering workplace accommodations and assistive technology, Irwin says. Financial incentives may be provided, including tax breaks for hiring or accommodating people with disabilities. In some instances, Vocational Rehabilitation Services offers staff training to help other employees work with a person with a particular disability.

Advice and financial assistance from Vocational Rehabilitation, Foell says, "helped me embrace and excel at my professional career." In a job market where only 20 percent of his classmates had a job at graduation, he says, Vocational Rehabilitation helped put him in the successful minority.