

Latrobe Bulletin

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Nonprofit partnership gets adults with disabilities engaged in community

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Marc Boyle and Kevin McElhinny volunteer for the Greater Latrobe-Laurel Valley Regional Chamber of Commerce stuffing envelopes as part of the Community Integration program.

Assisting are Ryan Browne, direct support professional, and Jeff Minkovich, Community Integration counselor at the Chamber. Photo by Ernie Sisteck

Area adults with developmental disabilities are able to get out and get active in their communities with help from Community Options Inc. and its collaboration with the Greater Latrobe- Laurel Valley Chamber of Commerce.

Community Options is a nonprofit agency operating in 11 states. The company opened its first Westmoreland County location in 2012 and now runs 17 group homes in the county. Its staff of more than 140 in Westmoreland County serves 36 clients, executive director Lacie Parker said.

“Our mission is very simple. We support adults with developmental disabilities to maintain employment and community residences within their own community,” she said.

In addition to operating group homes, Community Options also provides a community-based day program called Option Quest, which gets clients out in their communities volunteering and doing other activities.

“It’s a nontraditional community-based day program,” Parker said of Option Quest. “It really focuses on getting the individuals we support integrated into their communities and to establish some social connections and build up social capital so they can be productive members of their own community.”

Community Options has been working closely with the Greater Latrobe Laurel Valley Chamber of Commerce to coordinate volunteer opportunities for adults with developmental disabilities.

“It’s been fantastic. Ever since Community Options has become a member, the Chamber has taken a

very active role in the development of our clients and helping us out,” said Jeff Minkovich, a community integration counselor with Community Options and a member of the GLLV Chamber board. “We’ve been volunteering here (at the GLLV Chamber’s Neighborhood Visitor and Information Center in Unity Township), and a couple other places like Gutches Hardwoods have been utilizing our clients for volunteer work. We’re reaching out to any local business that wants to save on payroll and utilize our clients, who are very self-functioning and they can get the job done. They really enjoy it because they feel more a part of the community in which they live.”

Parker said Community Options clients also volunteer with Meals on Wheels, animal shelters and senior centers in addition to working with the GLLV Chamber and other businesses.

“Volunteerism is one aspect. Another aspect would be just building up their social capital and their social networks,” Parker said. “They may go to the park and go fishing or go walking with different social groups. Some of our individuals go to Idlewild during the summer. They maybe play some sports or do different craft activities in the community.”

Parker and Minkovich said getting adults with developmental disabilities out and involved in their own communities is a rewarding and important role.

“It’s just as much their community as it is ours and they have every right to be a part of it. They feel a sense of belonging,”

Minkovich said. “We have clients that are going to be volunteering for the upcoming (Great American) Banana Split Celebration, they’re very excited to be a part of that and we’re excited to have them there to help us. Just seeing their growth is a pretty rewarding experience.”

GLLV Chamber President Allen Martello said working with Community Options has been a benefit to all parties involved.

“It is a joy to work with the staff and clients at Community Options,” Martello said. “As a nonprofit ourselves, the Chamber is always looking for volunteers to help be a part of our mission. Community Options staff and volunteers have helped make events like the Great American Banana Split Celebration and Steelers Fest at Latrobe better by being a part of our team.”

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