

Community Options Settles Into New Location, Expands STEP Program



COMMUNITY OPTIONS SETTLES IN: After Town Topics newspaper moved out of 305 Witherspoon Street, the staff of Community Options moved in. From left: Stefanie Rinaldi, Wendy Williams, Meghan Hunter, Deborah Napoleon, Teresa Snyder, Awee Taylor, and Keaira Askew gather outside the building that will house Community Options' new and expanding STEP program, which provides employment opportunities for young people with disabilities. For more information, visit: <http://www.comop.org>. (Photo by Kathryn Sampson)

Shortly after Town Topics moved out of 305 Witherspoon Street, the building it had occupied since 2007, local residents wondered what would be taking its place. That question was answered last week when the staff of the non-profit Community Options, Inc. began setting up their offices there. The building will house Community Options' expanding School-to-Employment Program (STEP).

For 25 years, the non-profit organization has worked to develop housing and employment programs for people with disabilities. Its guiding philosophy is that all people — regardless of disability level — should live and work in the community with dignity, choice, and self-determination.

Founder and President/CEO Robert Stack likes to say that people with disabilities have some of the same problems as celebrities. "They are surrounded with people who are paid to be around them and what Community Options wants is for them to be in the regular workplace," he explained. "We try to jumpstart that process through STEP and a chance at giving them a regular paid job."

As to meeting obstacles along the way? "Everyone has obstacles that we have to figure out how to deal with; we can't put ourselves in a bubble," he said.

Before acquiring its current building, Community Options had offices in the Daily Plan It, which was, said Mr. Stack, "bursting at the seams." The new location provides space for the STEP program and for staff from its Mercer County office.

"We hope that our local presence on Witherspoon Street will give parents of children with disabilities the vision that their son or daughter can in fact have a job just like any other student who is close to finishing school regardless of the fact that they have disabilities," said Mr. Stack.

Thanks in part to a grant by the Kessler Foundation, STEP was launched in New Jersey in 2008 in response to the youth employment rate for individuals with disabilities. The job training/transition program serves high school students and young adults with special needs, through real world, hands-on training. The goal is to improve future opportunities for competitive employment and/or post-secondary education.

In recognition of the contribution made to STEP by the Kessler Foundation, Elaine Katz will receive the Community Options Betty Pender Award this Friday, May 15, at the organization's national headquarters on Farber Road in Princeton. "Elaine has been tireless in getting employment for people with disabilities and has given us our first grant for STEP," said Mr. Stack.

"Most people without disabilities find training for jobs as teens during high school but teenagers with disabilities rarely have that chance," explained Mr. Stack. "That's where STEP comes in, with unpaid internships in a variety of jobs.

So far, the non-profit organization is working with the University Medical Center of Princeton at Plainsboro, the Robert Wood Johnson hospital, and others, offering experience in food service, maintenance, custodial, inventory, and other work. "One of our teenagers loves to work in patient transport, taking patients from X-Ray to their hospital room or from there to the hospital's main lobby, for example," said Mr. Stack. "We find that if we place a person in a job that is a good match for them, it works well and so far we've had a 90 percent success rate." That means that 90 percent of the time, the intern has been hired into a paid job. STEP places students aged between 16 and 19, who are on the autism spectrum or have some intellectual or physical disability, filling a gap in what is available from government programs such as ARC, which, according to Mr. Stack, has a waiting list of well over 6,000.

"We are very well-known in the area and a lot of parents want their kids in our program, which currently has 27 students from the area," said Stefanie Rinaldi, who oversees STEP. "And that number is likely to double by the end of the year."

Ms. Rinaldi explained how the program works. "For our student interns we hire coaches; each intern is paired with a paid coach who does not have a disability and who works alongside the intern in the job, until they are able to do it on their own. At that point the coach is no longer needed and can 'fade.' We call it 'fading,'" she said, adding that Community Options is always looking to hire coaches. "If there are people in the area who want to work with

Community Options as coaches, they should get in touch and this is a great place to get work experience; we have hundreds of such part-time per diem employees; some are retired, some are college graduates looking for a stepping stone, often in social work, education and psychology.

Community Options was founded by Mr. Stack in 1989, some years after he moved to Princeton in 1981. "I had been working with kids with disabilities for a long time but when the place I was working for went out of business, I realized that a non-profit group was needed that would follow a business model," said Mr. Stack. Since then, the organization has grown to include 275 group homes nationwide, 104 in New Jersey, including 17 in Mercer County. It now serves thousands of people with disabilities through 38 offices across 9 states, including Arizona, Kentucky, New Jersey, New Mexico, New York, Pennsylvania and South Carolina.

With an operating budget of \$107 million, it currently has some 3600 employees nationwide, at least 1,000 in New Jersey, and 30 in Princeton. Its funding comes from private sector donations as well as from state and federal government.

Locally, Community Options operates a home built from the ground up in Hopewell and a renovated home on Harrison Street in Princeton for persons who use wheelchairs.

The excitement of moving into a new space was tangible last week as computers were set up and staff members figured out the logistics of the newly-painted building. Still there might be one downside to the new location, laughed Mr. Stack. "Our staff might be growing in another sense now that we are within walking distance of Conte's Pizza!"

For more information, visit: www.comop.org.

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