



# 'Just Add Water' in Hillsborough is Community Options' newest employment opportunity for people with developmental disabilities

By Tiffani N. Garlic/For The Star-Ledger  
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David Gard/For The Star-Ledger

Christina arranges flowers at Vaseful in New Brunswick.

Next year, people with developmental disabilities will have another opportunity for employment as Community Options opens its sixth business in New Jersey.

The national non-profit's president, Robert Stack, said the organization has specialized in finding housing and employment for people with developmental disabilities since 1989.

"We have designed and implemented the most progressive employment options giving people with disabilities a choice about the type of work they do and where they do it. We offer people with disabilities real work for real pay," he said.

Workers are placed into one of the new businesses sponsored by the non-profit and give on-the-job training in each aspect of running a business - from drafting business plans to marketing to interacting with customers. Stack's hope is that the employees eventually will operate businesses of their own.

Last month, the organization broke ground on it's newest project, "Just Add Water," a cafe-style tea shop in Hillsborough that will be staffed almost entirely by employees with disabilities. "This will prove to be one of the greatest achievements for improving the lives of New Jerseyans with disabilities in the next decade," said Stack, noting employees get to hone their skills while on the job.



David Gard/For The Star-Ledger

Christina's finished arrangement.



Tiffani Garlic/For The Star-Ledger

Robert Stack, president of Community Options, swings a sledgehammer at what will become Just Add Water in Hillsborough Department of Labor Commissioner David Socolow sees the businesses as a way for workers with disabilities to increase their participation in the work force.

Potential employees are referred to Community Options through the Department of Labor's Vocational Rehabilitation Program. So far, the organization has employed 429 New Jerseyans.

"This is one of the most creative things we can do to ensure that people with disabilities have jobs," Socolow said.

The Hillsborough location for Just Add Water is a one-story building on Camplain Road. Scheduled to open in January, renovation plans call for the building the house a café, a full commercial kitchen, a conference center and 10 meeting rooms.

Just Add Water will join six other businesses sponsored by Community Options. They include a Flanders gift shop called Presents of Mind, a New Brunswick flower and gift shop called Vaseful, and a copy center called The Daily Plan It with locations in Princeton, Morristown, Moorestown and Dallas.

Tara Loversidge, regional director of Community Options, manages Vaseful and said the shop gives employees a better sense of interaction.

"The type of environment that we want to create is safe, but not to the point where it's confining or restrictive," she said. "We want to help them reach their fullest potential and see them blossom into more independent people."

Loversidge said one of the store's success stories is 27-year-old Christina.

Christina, who requested her last name not be used, started working in the shop in 2004. She has worked her way up from maintenance duties to flower arranging and making deliveries. The North Brunswick resident said the job gives her confidence and helps her stay active in the community.

"I like it because everyone's nice and it's a little challenging at times," she said. "It makes me feel like a usual person, like anyone else."

Christina even gave Loversidge a few pointers on flower arranging.

When she leaves Vaseful, Christina hopes to become a special education teacher.

Mary Santasine, 57, of Highland Park, has worked at the flower shop for almost two years and said she enjoys meeting new people.

"There's a lot of new people from different communities we can be introduced to," she said. Santasine said the community exposure helps foster understanding.

"We want to prove that we can be independent for ourselves," she said. "It's important for people to know that you can be very independent and do things."



David Gard/For The Star-Ledger

Mary Santasine wipes down the cabinets at Vaseful in New Brunswick. After she leaves Vaseful, Santasine wants to work in a library or community center.

Although the cafe is a business, Christopher Dixon, executive director of Community Options, said it can also serve as an inspiration.

"The beauty of Just Add Water is that it demonstrates that the American dream of entrepreneurship, owning one's own business, and making a positive impact on one's community is without barrier," he said. "Anyone, with hard work and the right innovation, can live this dream."

For more information on Community Options visit [www.comop.org](http://www.comop.org).

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