

Rutgers Job Training Program for Autistic Adults Gets Boost from Local NJ Logistics Company

Bettaway Supply Chain Services collaborates with Rutgers Center for Adult Autism Services, providing local jobs, career path for adults on the autism spectrum

SOUTH PLAINFIELD, NEW JERSEY, UNITED STATES, June 10, 2021 /EINPresswire.com/ -- A year ago,

“

We have people who want to work. Just because someone talks or acts somewhat differently, doesn't mean they are unskilled or incapable,”

*Dr. Christopher Manente,
executive director, RCAAS*

Christopher Manente was excited with the progress of [Rutgers'](#) innovative jobs training program for adults on the autism spectrum. As executive director of the [Rutgers Center for Adult Autism Services](#), he and his colleagues had guided the development of this groundbreaking program from concept through launch and had achieved initial success helping autistic adults thrive through meaningful employment.

The program engaged a very diverse group of adults on the autism spectrum with a wide range of abilities and support needs, providing a structure of ongoing support, training, and placement in on-campus jobs.

Then the pandemic hit. That shut down the university and its on-campus operations – including the on-campus jobs that had been specifically curated and developed to support the successful transition of the autistic adults into their first jobs in the workforce.

“With no students on campus there was no need for dining, recreation, other services and amenities. They all closed, and with them, the work-training and experience opportunities for adults with autism,” Dr. Manente recalled. “We had no place for our program participants to go.”

That's where John Vaccaro and [Bettaway](#) stepped in. Bettaway is one of the largest providers of warehousing, distribution, and supply chain services for beverage producers in the Northeast, a family-owned business which John heads today and was founded by his father some 50 years ago.

Dr. Manente noted that one of the program's longer-term goals was to expand from on-campus jobs into community-based placement and employment with local businesses. The pandemic provided the incentive to accelerate that objective, using Bettaway and its local warehousing and distribution operations as a test bed.

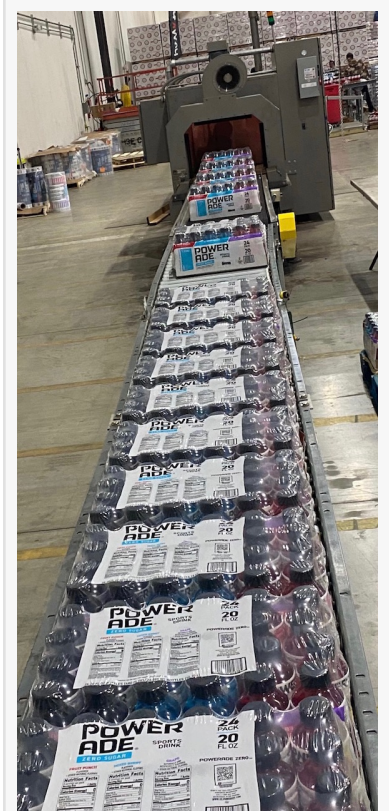
Prior to the pandemic, the unemployment rate for autistic adults was already estimated to be around 80 percent, Dr. Manente explains. Meaningful employment is critical not just for adults on the autism spectrum, but also for their extended families and communities, he noted. "Recent research suggests that adults with autism have about half the life expectancy of those without. And it's not because people die of autism, it's the lack of opportunity to have meaningful work, earn the rewards, both physical and emotional, from a good job that pays the bills, and develop successful, enduring relationships, independence, self-esteem and self-confidence."

Vaccaro and his wife, Laura, whose son Frankie is on the autism spectrum, found out about the RCAAS program during its initial design, and was one of the first local businesses to contribute funding. "There was a real need," Vaccaro noted. "There was really little in the way of quality [state] programs available for kids after they turn 18, and nothing after they turn 21."

His son applied for the Rutgers program and was the seventh autistic adult accepted. Frankie thrived in the program, and by his 21st birthday, was holding down jobs in the university library and one at the on-campus pizzeria -- and learning to successfully navigate the community on his own.

Then the pandemic closed the campus, the jobs went away, and Frankie had to stay home without work. "That was not a sustainable situation and did not offer the best outcome for him," John recalls. At first, he and his wife Laura developed a small-scale work program for Frankie at Bettaway's new Piscataway location, with Laura as Frankie's job coach. Frankie was soon again working five days a week, but both John and Laura realized that the one-off program for Frankie wasn't sustainable long-term and would not scale.

John had thought about approaching Dr. Manente and discussing how a more formalized off-campus program might work at Bettaway. Now with RCAAS' on-campus activities shut down, the need took on new urgency. Several meetings ensued, a basic framework was created, and potential training and job opportunities were identified.



RCAAS interns at Bettaway learn various skills involved in running a warehouse, including operating systems like this automated variety pack line that assembles cases of beverages

In September last year, the first group of eight participants came on board at Bettaway's Piscataway location, beginning as interns. A variety of jobs were matched to each candidate, from data entry to repacking, to filling orders, staging inventory, doing product put away and other warehouse tasks. A highly trained team of job coaches and clinicians led by Dr. Manente were on site providing the support that each adult with autism needed for success, just as they had done with the on-campus program.

As candidates completed their internships, many transitioned to full employment and were placed on the Bettaway payroll. One particular success story was that of Zach Sanborn. A participant in the RCAAS program, he is a graduate of Westfield State University with a bachelor's degree in Management and a concentration in Marketing. Zach, while on the spectrum, "is a highly capable individual and a very qualified college graduate who lives on his own, has a car and drives," Dr. Manente noted. At Bettaway, Zach thrived, quickly progressing from an internship to a full-time position with benefits, making him the first RCAAS Program Participant to achieve this level of success, Dr. Manente noted.

"The primary issue with other potential employers is that they are often predisposed to assume that an autistic adult may not be qualified for a job based solely on the symptoms of their autism, which can include difficulty communicating and connecting with others," he explained. "Unfortunately, in the majority of cases, this results in many very talented autistic people never having a shot at getting a job, no matter how qualified they actually are."

Ultimately, from September last year to present day, some 15 autistic adults have worked at the Bettaway program, benefiting from the opportunity to learn and thrive as they developed competence – and confidence – in their own capabilities and a new vocational skill. Many progressed into salaried positions. Others took the confidence and self-esteem gained from their Bettaway experience and used that as a springboard into other jobs with different employers.

The partnership with Bettaway allowed RCAAS to continue its mission, said Dr. Manente. And today as the Rutgers campus gradually reopens as the pandemic subsides, the on-campus RCAAS program – and its jobs for autistic adults – are returning.

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