

MASWM

Dignified and meaningful employment for people with disabilities...Quality services for Missouri.

Workshops Face Challenges and Success

Dear MASWM Members,

Happy New Year to each of you! As we step into 2025, I want to take a moment to express my gratitude for your dedication, passion and commitment to our shared mission. Together, we form a community of strength, resilience, and unwavering support.

This year will undoubtedly bring challenges, as every year does. But I am confident that by working together, sharing our ideas, and leaning on one another, we will overcome these obstacles and emerge stronger than ever. As the saying

goes, “A rising tide lifts all ships.” When we support one another, we elevate not only ourselves but the entire association and those we serve.

Let’s embrace this new year with optimism, unity, and the determination to make a difference. Thank you for being an integral part of MASWM. I look forward to the amazing things we will accomplish together.

Warmest regards,
Tim Poepsel

President, Missouri Association of
Sheltered Workshop Managers



MASWM President Tim Poepsel

The Missouri Difference is REAL, but Pressure Continues

by Kit Brewer, executive director of Project CU and MASWM legislative chair

The Missouri Association of Sheltered



Legislative Chair Kit Brewer

Workshop Managers (MASWM) continues to have an active approach to outreach, legislative activities and education in Missouri and federally. This past year has been no different.

Within the state, MASWM continues to press for full funding of the Extended Employment Sheltered Workshop program (EESW) within the Department of Education Budget, HB2.

For decades, each of our 87 member workshops has worked hard to foster and grow local relationships with our elected officials. Most representatives and state senators feel a local tie to a sheltered workshop and recognize the economic and social importance of workshops within their region. In FY25, EESW did receive full funding, and we are very appreciative of the longtime support shown to our program and to the individuals that we employ. Our members employ nearly 5,000 men and women with intellectual and developmental disabilities

(IDD) across the state of Missouri.

Despite the growth of other employment service programs, and some lessening of barriers to conventional employment for much of the disability community, individuals experiencing the most significant intellectual delays or living with greater behavioral or mental health concerns have not shared in the benefits of these programs. Our employees still find the safety, security and supports available in sheltered workshops to provide them with a successful work experience. It remains their desired choice.

If only the rest of the nation could understand and experience the Missouri Difference. In Missouri, emphasis on manufacturing jobs with employers providing significant accommodation and staff support regulated under the Department of Education are the hallmarks of the Missouri Difference. State and county funding rather than federal Medi-
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Mission

Sheltered Workshops in Missouri share a common mission of providing dignified and meaningful employment opportunities for people with disabilities.

The Missouri Difference is REAL

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caid dollars make the program more independent and adaptable than in other states. Nonetheless, 14(c) Certificates are an integral part of our operations

Federally 14(c), the certificate program under which sheltered workshops operate, remains under attack. Twenty-two states have now ended or severely limited this opportunity. As these programs have been phased out, men and women lose their opportunity to have a successful work experience, lose their individual choice for employers and providers and all too often lose their employment altogether.

In recent years we have partnered with other state associations and joined in several coalitions to provide shared outreach and education efforts. The Coalition for the Preservation of Employment Choice, which includes members from 20 other states, is made up of providers, state associations, individuals, family members and other stakeholders to focus advocacy and legislative outreach specifically toward sheltered employment. It is now the recognized leader in this space, having met with more than 250 congressional offices, the White House and all levels of government.

Early in 2024 the Department of Labor issued notice of an upcoming Rules Proposal to further limit or eliminate 14(c) Certificates. In March the coalition submitted a FOIA request for documents from the DOL, DOJ, White House, OMB, Congressional Correspondence and other agencies related to 14(c), commensurate wages, sheltered employment and other related terms. That request remains unfulfilled.

As the Proposed Rule date approached, the coalition requested and received an HB12866 Hearing with the White House Office of Management and Budget. The hearing included a dozen officials, including director-level officials from OMB, DOJ and DOL.

On Dec. 3, 2024, following the recent presidential election, DOL Wage and Hour Division finally published the proposed rule. Its key components were to: 1) eliminate 14(c) Certificates upon implementation and 2) to end the 14(c) program within three years of implementation.

It is important to realize that 14(c) Certificates are renewable every two years and that most shops in Missouri are due to renew in 2026, meaning that Missouri's shops would lose certification in 24 months or less.

A public comment period for all interested stakeholders was opened from Dec. 4 until Jan. 17, 2025. MASWM and Missouri A TEAM, our employees' self-advocacy organization, organized a series of educational outreach sessions for employees, families and providers to maximize Missouri's participation.

The task of analyzing the comments and making a final decision on the rule now falls to the incoming administration. The possibility of extensions and legal challenges exists. MASWM and its members will continue to provide employment opportunities for these individuals, but loss of the special wage considerations under 14(c) will add further financial stresses on providers, state and county funding sources and ultimately cost jobs.

This job loss would force individuals into other programs including day habilitation services. These services are not the preferred choice of the individuals and are themselves already lacking funding and staffing to provide for their existing caseload.

We simply cannot let this Rules Proposal move forward.

(Kit Brewer serves as the vice president of the Coalition for the Preservation of Employment Choice.)

MASWM Website Offers Information

The MASWM website at moworkshops.org offers extensive information on workshops, their services and more.

Among the highlights is background on the people we serve, various programs and related information.

There's also a searchable database of workshops with their products and services and a list of MASWM events, news and more.

Workshops in St. Louis County Partner with SB40 Board

St. Louis County's SB40 funding entity, the Productive Living Board (PLB), has partnered with five supported sheltered workshops on an innovative communications program. The effort includes the development of targeted videos for use in community engagement and social media outreach efforts.

Supported by a special grant from the PLB, the five workshops – Heartland Industries, Lafayette Industries, Project CU, Canterbury Enterprises and Valley Industries – individually produced a package of three distinct videos, plus social media clips, tailored for each workshop. The three “themed” engagement videos – advocacy, community outreach and business development – are designed for maximum effect with different audiences: civic and legislative; schools and the local community; and businesses and potential customers.

This effort was driven by the fact that many community individuals knowledgeable about the value and benefits of sheltered workshops either voluntarily left the workforce or retired during COVID, leaving a substantial knowledge gap in key referring St. Louis County organizations such as the St. Louis County Special School District, Vocational Rehabilitation, Department of Mental Health Regional Center, other providers of services to individuals with developmental disabilities and corporate partners.

Each shop's new, individualized and tailored videos will allow it to reach out with compelling messaging and imagery to increase community awareness of the shop's history, mission, capacity for new hires and offered business services.

Mark Zimmerman of Moving + Still (<https://movingandstillimages.com>) was chosen as the winning vendor and provided all videography and editing services.

Collectively, the shops wish to extend their heartfelt thanks to all board members and staff of the PLB for their collaboration, encouragement and funding of this endeavor.

For questions, please contact Mike Macauley, Executive Director of Heartland Industries. He can be reached at 314-487-7200 or by email at mmacauley@heartlandindustries.org.



Rob Libera, MASWM past president and executive director at Lafayette Industries



Chris Word, parent



Krystal, employee

This Parent's Thoughts Are Shared by Many

General Manager Marla Mason recently shared a letter from the parent of an employee with disabilities at Callaway County Extended Employment in Fulton. Although parents of people with intellectual and developmental disabilities are unique, these thoughts are like those of many who face these challenges:

For my son I take the liberty of writing this letter today to share some thoughts from the deepest recesses of my heart. My name is Mike Brown, and I am a proud father of an extremely tenacious and resilient individual, my 44-year-old son, Joseph Michael Brown. I write to express how significantly having employment has enriched Joseph's life. This simple act, which many take for granted, has been a beacon of light in his life, bestowing upon him a sense of self-worth and responsibility. Moreover, it has instilled in him the essential elements of teamwork and the ability to cultivate numerous other qualities he has needed to navigate through life's countless challenges.

Joseph has battled his fair share of adversities, yet he tenaciously sustains a positive outlook on life. Despite enduring disappointments in his pursuit of full employment, he has remained consistently undeterred, pushing forward and continually fighting through life's ruthless and sometimes unforgiving tide daily. For over

five years, Joseph found solace in his workshop; it's more than just a place of work to him. It's a sanctuary where he unwaveringly dedicates himself day after day. I'm ecstatic to report that he takes pride in his daily routine, which, in return, grants him the motivation to rise spontaneously each morning eager to kick start his day.

Removing opportunities like these workshops, specifically geared for individuals like Joseph, who seek employment but are often overlooked due to their unique circumstances, would lead to substantial and unfortunate consequences. My son faces a number of barriers, including a speech impediment and learning disability. However, despite these obstacles, he remains undeterred, his spirit unbroken. These workshops represent more than just a job to these individuals. They provide a platform where they can connect, collaborate and uplift one another despite their varying shortcomings. They are places where laughter echoes, joy is nurtured and valuable skills and experiences are shared.

Giving my son the opportunity to work has kept him active and motivated, reducing his dependency on his wheelchair and boosting his overall physical health. In closing, I must note, Joseph's job has been his beacon of hope, something he looks



Joe works at Callaway County Extended Employment in Fulton, and his father has written a beautiful essay on what workshop employment is all about, and what it means for Joe.

forward to and cherishes every day. I am pleading with you to consider the plight of individuals like my son. They yearn for nothing more than the everyday opportunity to get up, go to work, to be productive and enrich their lives with the respect and dignity they so greatly deserve. Thank you for taking the time to read our story. Your understanding and support could truly change the lives of many.

Workshop Products and Services Day Is First of Three 2025 Events

MASWM legislative consultant Lynne Schlosser has arranged with our state leaders for the 2025 Sheltered Workshop Products and Services Day on Wednesday, Jan. 29. Setup will start at 8:30 a.m.

The event will be in the same place as last year: Missouri State Capitol, 3rd floor rotunda, on the senate side.

This event has proven to be a very popular opportunity for shops to present their goods and services to state leaders. It's also an excellent networking opportunity.

Day of Choice

The annual Day of Choice will be Wednesday, March 5, 2025, from 10 a.m. to 1 p.m. in Jefferson City.

This event features groups of

employees in green T-shirts visiting the state capitol. This year, the gathering will be in a new location, the capitol building's downstairs rotunda, and will be more of a rally with a welcome speech



Workshop managers networked with Missouri legislators during the 2024 Products and Services Day in Jefferson City.

and testimony from employees and parents. As always, the event will promote the importance of employment choice for people with disabilities.

Groups are urged to arrive between 8:30 and 8:45 a.m. to allow time for getting items through security.

Annual Meeting

The MASWM Annual Meeting will be held Wednesday, April 30 through Friday, May 2 at Lake of the Ozarks, with a reception on the 30th and key meetings Thursday and Friday, May 1 and 2. Last year's meeting was a major success with outstanding breakout sessions and presentations. More details, including location, will be announced when available.

National Coalition Helps Workshops, Supporters Have a Voice

Attacks on workshops and other 14(c) programs share several misconceptions that can be dismissed by firsthand looks.

“These are programs that help individuals reach their highest potential,” said Colleen Stuart, president of the Coalition for Preservation of Employment Choice and a 49-year veteran of nonprofit services. “For many, the option would be sitting at home or in day programs that are not their choice.”

Since its founding in 2021, the coalition has grown to include representatives from over 30 states, including MASWM and Missouri workshops. Comprised of parents and others who have direct experience with these issues, the Coalition holds information exchanges with advocates nationwide, views possible legal action to block efforts to close workshops and related services, and much more.

The Basics

A major focus involves Section 14(c) of the Fair Labor Standards Act allowing special wages based on an individual’s abilities. Although the law sets rigorous standards for use, critics argue the law is outdated and results in wages below \$1 an hour for a few with the most severe disabilities.

Stuart serves as C.E.O. at Venango Training & Development Center, Inc. in Pennsylvania. She agrees with other supporters that workshop pay is only part of the story – and far from the most important part. “There are so many supports individuals receive that people are not recognizing,” she said. “Most of the employees are receiving Medicaid and Social Security Disability, transportation and other government funded services and supports they and their families need because of their significant disabilities. In addition, federal and state funds paid for by Direct Support Professional Services that provide training and support while working are not considered. If you add all of the funding supports and the wage they earn while in training, individuals with significant disabilities receive more than a commensurate income. The point is that today’s 14(c)s are truly ‘training programs’ with the opportunity of a paid work component.”

Many workshop employees face serious disabilities, some that require help eating lunch or going to the restroom. Others

have a dual intellectual/mental diagnosis that makes them prone to outbursts. Again, these are not issues that will be supported, even tolerated at a private business. With member parents and workshop staff who see these issues daily, the Coalition knows better.

“Most of the providers of these services now have CIE employment programs,” Stuart added. So, if individuals want to get a job, we will do everything we can to help them find a job and support them. The 14(c)s are for those who are not ready or the severity of their disability is a significant barrier. For those individuals, the 14(c) can provide the accommodations necessary for them to be able to continue learning, working and receiving a paycheck,” Stuart said.

Numbers and the Lack of Them

Coalition members have also seen what happens when workshops are closed. Although there are claims that most workshop employees find community employment, there is little data to back that up and extensive experience that indicates otherwise. Given some employees’ more severe disabilities, that should be common sense. But most opponents claim that community employment with private businesses is a good fit for everyone. Parents and professionals like Stuart

know that it’s not.

“I’ve closed a workshop in a very rural area,” Stuart said. “I had to tell those employees and parents, and I saw their faces. For many, there were no other options.”

Losing that workshop lifeline can be serious in far-reaching ways. “For many, that means they’re sitting at home five days a week. And they lose work and social skills, and sometimes negative behavior patterns come back.”

Ironically, some claim workshops violate employees’ civil rights by “segregating” them from the community. “This may be the only population where being among your peers, people you’re comfortable with, is considered segregation,” Stuart said. “We’ve operated a supported (community) employment option for years, and for some it works well. But we’ve also had a lot of people come back to the workshop because they fail or miss their friends.” Others have also reported feeling like outsiders in private businesses because they were the only person with a disability. In a few cases, that can even lead to bullying and other issues.”

Assembling Information

In part because of urging by the coalition, the Government Accountability Office (GAO) is attempting to gather hard

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New State Representative Visits Camdenton Workshop

Newly elected Missouri Rep. Jeff Verneti (R-123) recently visited Lake Area Industries in Camdenton after an invitation by Executive Director Natalie Couch.

During the visit, one of the workshop employees, Aaron Bledsoe, asked if he could take a picture with the representative.

Couch later sent the photo to Rep. Verneti, along with a letter that Aaron had written for the National Disabilities Employment Awareness Month celebration. The letters were aimed to inform legislators how employees feel that workshops are integrated in the community.

Aaron closed his letter with a plea that others should hear as well: "Please don't take our jobs away when it matters most to us."

Aaron has been at LAI for nearly nine years, starting when he was 19. He is an amazing worker and often puts industry standards to shame when labeling. He likes to study the weather and often captures amazing weather-related photos and videos. Like many workshop employees, his family has requested his pay NOT be raised because that would jeopardize his benefits that cover things like health care.



State Rep. Jeff Verneti (R-123) met with employee, Aaron, during a recent visit to Lake Area Industries in Camdenton.

National Coalition Helps Workshops, Supporters Have a Voice

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numbers on employment for people with disabilities after workshop closings. In the handful of states where workshops have been closed, reliable numbers were not kept, and some of the data presented is questionable.

"They (workshop opponents) keep talking like employment increases for people with disabilities after they close workshops," Stuart said. "But if that's true, then overall employment should have increased in those states, and it didn't."

Increasingly, the coalition is trying to raise these questions and get answers. They've even retained K&L Gates to ensure the questions aren't ignored or "kicked down the road." "This is the population nobody is listening to," she said of employees with disabilities. "They

have no voice. It shouldn't be all or nothing for them."

Choice Matters

Stuart and other 14(c) proponents are not saying workshops are the only answer. They see workshops as one of several options that the diverse population of people with disabilities should have. But for a large group that increasingly seems overlooked or even ignored, workshops can provide a critical option.

"The individuals in this program are learning vocational skills," Stuart said. "They're not ready for competitive employment, and some of them have such serious disabilities that they may never be. But this option should be there for them if they need it."

Communicating all of this is a major challenge, but simply visiting a workshop is a great step. Seeing the joy of em-

ployees with disabilities as they come to work and greet their friends, share new challenges and take pride in their work is hard to imagine until experiencing it in person.

"It's their choice and their parents' choice," she said. "We provide an environment where they can keep progressing or, if not progressing, at least maintaining their skills. If not for that, they're home and losing skills, not just work skills but social skills."

All of this explains why "choice" is a key issue. "We're not saying these programs are for everyone," Stuart concluded. "But we need to get this all-or-nothing concept out of the conversation. The family members say that. The employees with disabilities say that – they're just so happy to be there. It should be their choice."

Higginsville Shop Reports Busy Season

Executive Director Suzanne Smith reports that Lafayette County Enterprises, Inc., in Higginsville has been busy. Representatives of the Higginsville workshop participated in the Country Fair Parade and received first prize in their division, winning \$200.

The employees were so excited they wanted to be in the Higginsville Christmas Parade which was one of the coldest evenings to date, but they participated and had a blast! Their theme for the parade was Caring and Sharing, and employees and staff donated gifts to the Higginsville Rotary Club for their gift giveaway to children in need in Lafayette County.

To increase the recycling of non-working Christmas lights, our staff and employees donated empty containers that they had in the workshop basement. The group placed them in different businesses all over Lafayette County to collect lights. They picked the containers up the first week in January. This effort was very popular with all the businesses they partnered with.

The workshop also received a new job from Old World Spice this fall. In the project, they built display cases of their spices. The employees had to label the spices, shrink-wrap them and place them in display cases. This has been a great partnership with this company.

With winter quickly approaching, it was discovered that employees and staff



that work at the rest area, the truck lot, and on the cardboard truck did not have adequate gear to be out in the weather. All

of those employees and staff received a reflective/water resistant winter parka, bibs and boots.



Everyone at RISE Community Services celebrated when the new location of RISE Racks in Warrensburg's downtown was recently voted "Best of the Burg." The move also provides more room and better visibility for the thrift store. For more information on this and other RISE news, see the article on page 10.

Amazing Transformation at Workshop

Amber Butler at Earthwise Industries in Troy shared a message from one of the shop's parents and added a comment of her own. Together, they also tell a story beyond one workshop.

"My 35-year-old son has been working in a sheltered workshop setting since leaving high school at age 21. He would not have success in a traditional workplace setting so a workshop is best suited for his abilities and likely his only employment opportunity. For my child, the self-esteem, mental wellness and outlook, earning money and friendships he's forged from his employment have greatly improved the quality of his life. As his em-

ployment opportunities are vastly limited, his quality of life would be greatly diminished should he be unable to work at a workshop. I would implore whoever needs to know that eliminating sheltered workshop workplace settings would be detrimental to many, many individuals. – Submitted by Rhonda P."

Butler noted that when she joined the Earthwise staff, Rhonda's son was very shy and kept to himself but that changed. "As time has passed, he has become a very happy and friendly person who has many friends he works with," she said. "His transformation is a blessing not only for us, but also for his family."

Sanity Saver: Funding Roadmap and Acronyms

By Katie Jones, chief program officer, Organizational Employment and Advocacy, Boone Center Inc. (BCI)

DESE

In Missouri, the Department of Elementary and Secondary Education (DESE) provides both authority and funding for Sheltered Workshops. The Extended Employment Sheltered Workshops (EESW) department under DESE provides oversight to these individually owned and operated businesses that employ adults with disabilities who face barriers to employment. The U.S. Department of Labor (DOL), through its Wage and Hour Division, issues 14(c) certificates to Sheltered Workshops that meet compliance requirements. A 14(c) Certificate allows workshops to pay employees at a rate commensurate with their productivity, which can be above or below the minimum wage. The 5,000 adults with disabilities employed in sheltered workshops are not included in the Department of Mental Health (DMH) labor counts. 2025 Concern: The DOL has proposed the end of 14(c) certificates, potentially eliminating employment opportunities for these adults.

SB40

In addition to DESE funding, some Sheltered Workshops also receive support from local SB40 boards. Funding provided to these workshops varies by county. The funds are sourced from the collection of Real and Personal Property Taxes, which are crucial for supporting a variety of agencies that serve individuals with Intellectual and Developmental Disabilities (I/DD). This financial support from the SB40 boards can be essential to many organizations and without it the support could fall back on the state or the services be eliminated altogether. 2025 Concern: Proposed changes to Personal Property Tax laws could eliminate this local funding resource for families.

DMH

State-funded services are typically provided through the Department of Mental Health (DMH). Individuals who meet specific eligibility requirements –based on their disability and Medicaid status – may qualify for DMH services and supports. These services are provided through a “waiver,” which allocates specific funding for each individual’s needs. The support can include therapies, trans-

portation, residential services, day programs, respite care and career planning. The staff members who deliver these services are known as Direct Support Professionals (DSPs).

Missouri is unique in that it is the only state to support Sheltered Workshops without relying on Medicaid dollars, making it a significant advantage for Missouri’s residents with disabilities. 2025 Concern: DMH services are currently facing a waitlist, with no new services being granted to families since July 2024. There are already 500 families waiting for services.

Key Acronyms Defined:

DESE – Department of Elementary and Secondary Education

EESW – Extended Employment Sheltered Workshop

14(c) – Certificate under the Department of Labor’s Wage and Hour Division

SB40 – Senate Bill 40 boards

I/DD – Intellectual and Developmental Disabilities

TCM – Targeted Case Management

DMH – Department of Mental Health

DSPs – Direct Support Professionals

A Letter From a Workshop Parent

Parents of children with disabilities are often very involved in the workshops where their children are employed.

Linda and Howard at Southeast Enterprises in Kansas City are not unusual. They recently helped create art for the workshop’s annual art crawl “Picture Me Perfect.” Linda also wrote an open letter explaining the value the workshop is to her family.

To Whom It May Concern:

I have a son that will turn 51 in a month who has been employed by Southeast Enterprises since 1994. I can remember my fear and anxiety as Chad was approaching the end of his time as a student aging out of the school system as to what lay ahead for him. My husband and I were thrilled when Chad was accepted at Southeast Enterprises into their work program.

Southeast was operating and supporting individuals under the federal policy

of 14(c) for eligible individuals with developmental disabilities like our son. We knew that with his disability, Southeast and the 14(c) program was the only viable choice for a work environment for him. A competitive and integrated employment program was never a realistic or desirable goal for him.

On behalf of the many families that have a need for a safe and supportive environment that will allow individuals with significant disabilities to thrive in an employment setting that is tailored to their needs and can help them reach their full potential, I ask that you please continue to support the 14(c) program. I am very concerned for the choices Chad would have for a life that would provide him the mental and social interaction that he needs to have meaningful and rewarding employment. For individuals like our son, it is not about the competitive wage but the wage that fits his skill



Parents Linda and Howard at Southeast Enterprise recently helped create art for the workshop’s annual art crawl

level. Southeast Enterprises has greatly increased the wages over the years with their leadership and caring staff who actively seek work to provide individuals with the most significant disabilities a place to work, keeping them from being forced into a day program or just sitting at home. I ask for your support and understanding for our sons and daughters as to the ramifications and detrimental impact the eradication of 14(c) would have on their lives.

Iron County Hosts Elected Officials, Community Members

Manager Deb Stulce, other staff and employees of Iron County Sheltered Workshop in Arcadia recently hosted a meet and greet with elected officials and other community members.



A-Team Missouri Celebrates 2024 and Pushes into 2025

The Missouri Association of Sheltered Workshop Managers Advocacy Committee had an incredible 2024.

The committee includes Heather Pugh (Ideal Industries, Richmond), Charlie Fischer (Canterbury Enterprises, Shrewsbury), Natalie Couch (Lake Area Industries, Camdenton), Mike Macauley (Heartland Industries, St. Louis) and Parent Advocate Tammy Flores (Lake Area Industries, Camdenton). These volunteers focus on developing membership with A-Team Missouri, motivating and encouraging each workshop across the state to construct their own A-Team chapter.

Advocacy Chair Heather Pugh outlined the strategy. "Grassroots efforts play a vital role in creating awareness and social change," she said. "A-Team Missouri encourages these efforts which should be

community driven and involve individuals directly affected by advocacy issues."

Through these grassroots efforts, Pugh believes that our individual workshop communities can mobilize resources much more effectively. These efforts are often more agile and can respond to immediate advocacy needs faster, making them essential in times of crisis. While the committee saw an increase in individual workshop participation, they hope that every workshop will make it a 2025 priority to develop their own A-Team.

Additionally, A-Team Missouri held monthly meetings in efforts to support and promote advocacy issues. The meetings offer focus for Missouri A-Teams and help build awareness and educational opportunities on the importance of advocacy. They also offer emphasis on

legislation issues and legislation enhancement projects. Pugh stated, "It was our hopes that monthly meetings would offer a supportive resource and provide guidance for individual shops." She continued by stating, "Our hope was that it would provide relevant and rooted advocacy topics that would encourage grassroots relationships and build local leadership skills."

The Advocacy Committee continues to look ahead, setting goals of continuing to educate and engage Missouri A-Teams in 2025. A-Team Missouri will continue to hold monthly meetings the last Wednesday of each month, from 1:00-1:30 p.m. These sessions focus on advocacy development, building community resilience, raising awareness of relevant legislation and inspire grassroots engagement.

MASWM Annual Awards Program to Start Soon

MASWM will again present six awards at the Spring Conference at Lake Ozark in April, recognizing the 2024 accomplishments of those who have supported workshops and the people they serve.

The categories are New Manager of the Year, Manager of the Year, Legislator of the Year, Advocate of the Year, Workshop of the Year and the Legacy Award to someone who has dedicated a lifetime of services to supporting people with disabilities, especially in sheltered workshops.

Nomination information will be shared as soon as it's available, with the deadline in late February 2025. Presentation of awards will be at the annual meeting in April.

The awards presentation at the 2024 Conference was a major highlight, with most recipients receiving recognition at the annual dinner. Those honored were Heather Pugh, Ideal Industries, Inc., Richmond, Advocate of the Year; Bruce Young of Central Missouri Subcontract-

ing, Columbia, the Legacy Award; Lt. Governor Mike Kehoe, Legislator of the Year; Natalie Couch, Lake Area Industries, Camdenton, Manager of the Year; Jason Auffert, NoCoMo Industries, Maryville, New Manager of the Year; Ginger Williams, Missouri Community Improvements Industries, Farmington, the President's Award; and Vocational Services, Inc., Liberty and North Kansas City, Workshop of the Year Award.

Highlights and Reflections from RISE in Warrensburg

This year marked significant strides for the RISE Community Services Vocational Center. The program continued its mission of empowering individuals with disabilities by providing vocational training, meaningful employment opportunities and fostering greater independence. These jobs not only helped employees develop workplace skills, but also allowed them to earn income in a supportive and inclusive environment.

In 2024, 55 employees actively participated in the vocational center, gaining valuable hands-on skills. Employees contributed a remarkable 7,000 hours to warehouse sorting for the thrift store, showcasing their dedication and productivity. The production team also expanded its capabilities by taking on a new contracted job with Duke Manufacturing out of Sedalia. Through the use of jigs, enhanced staff training and a commitment to meeting strict deadlines, the team demonstrated its ability to handle increasingly complex tasks.

Two of the highest-output projects this year included producing posts and caps for batteries through EnerSys in Warrensburg and building broom segments for industrial street sweepers. Both businesses continue to express confidence in the team's ability to exceed expectations and

ensure on-time delivery. These achievements reflect the hard work and determination of RISE employees and the collaborative partnerships with businesses that believe in their potential.

Shaun Duncan has dedicated 19 years to RISE Community Services. He has been an integral part of the success of the broom team. He consistently shows up ready to work and currently contributes four days a week in production. Shaun enjoys movies, working and being around family. Over time, he has demonstrated



Sandy worked on sorting caps in one of the projects at RISE Community Services in Warrensburg. The workshop made several important advances during the past year.

significant growth in building connections with staff and peers, and he now plays a key role in coaching new employees. While Shaun is a man of few words, his hard work, positive attitude and dedication make him an exceptional employee.

The move of the RISE Racks location to Warrensburg's downtown area was another highlight of 2024. This change has been transformative, as it increased the store's visibility and community connection. RISE Racks was voted "Best of the Burg," featured on Fox 4's Zip Trip as a main attraction in Warrensburg and actively participated in community events like UCM's Get the Red Out Window Painting, Shop Local campaigns and the Dickens Christmas celebration. Employees and staff have embraced the downtown atmosphere, enjoying the opportunity to meet new and loyal customers each month while fostering a deeper connection to the community.

Through continued dedication and innovation, RISE Community Services remains steadfast in its mission to empower individuals with disabilities. By providing meaningful opportunities and the tools needed for success, RISE is helping create a brighter future for all its employees and the communities it serves.

Houston Workshop Celebrates in Many Ways

Opportunity Sheltered Industries, Inc. in Houston used funds from the new DESE Grant to buy a Ford Transit Cargo Van for



use with their healthcare linen service (at right). Plans are to expand the facility by adding a building specifically for the laundry to be housed. Current linen contracts include a local hospital, a nursing home in an adjoining county, three funeral homes, a pet crematory and one of their county's township uniforms.

Through a Walmart grant, the workshop in Houston was also able to buy each of their certified employees a winter coat and stocking hat (at left). The coats are cold-weather gear with hoods and will keep their employees warm this winter. The coats were purchased through their local MFA store.



Small Community Provides Big Support in Reynolds County

Reynolds County Sheltered Workshop in Bunker is one of Missouri's smaller workshops, serving 27 employees with disabilities from three counties. But Manager Janis Gordon stresses their positive work environment is second to none, with safety, respect and good work ethics at the forefront of every workday.

"We have a wide variety of jobs available as we serve our community and area businesses," she said. "During the summer, we provide lawn service. In the winter, we haul firewood. All year long, our employees perform jobs in the areas of woodworking, sewing, quilting and crafting." The workshop also has a sawmill that is used almost daily, serving local sawmills, a lead mine and pallet mill.

"The workshop is valuable to our community, not just for our employees," Gordon said.

The shop's employees with disabilities agree. One said that she enjoys her job at the workshop because it gives her the

chance to learn new skills, make extra money and make new friends. She says working at the workshop has helped her grow into a responsible, hard-working, young adult with skills she never thought possible.

Another employee stated that she is glad she has a job because it gives her something to do besides sit in her room at the residential home where she lives. Her job helps her feel a little more financially independent.

A male employee said that he hopes to continue to work at the workshop because he has learned a lot of new things at the workshop that he has been able to use in odd jobs around the community. He earns extra money with these odd jobs that have helped him buy his own lawnmower and weed eater and even a side by side.

Another employee says he's glad to be a part of the workforce at the workshop, and he enjoys talking with his friends and

doing things his supervisor asks him to do during the day.

Most of the shop supervisors are retired and work there to keep active and to earn extra money that supplements their social security and retirement benefits. A couple of other supervisors are glad to have a job close to home and to have the opportunity to work with challenged employees.

One of the guardians of an employee said she is glad her daughter has a place to work where her challenges are met with accommodations that allow her to be successful. She says her daughter takes pride in her job, and her self-esteem is greater knowing that she accomplishes things at work and receives a paycheck that she likes to cash at the local bank. She then gets to spend that money however she wants to on things for herself or others.

Everyone at the business agreed that closing the workshop would have a negative effect on the community, staff, employees and businesses.

DOCO Hosts Annual 'Friends and Family' Event

Executive Director Dawn Cox reported that staff and employees at DOCO in Ava recently hosted their eighth annual Friends and Family Thanksgiving Luncheon. They deep-fried 12 turkeys and baked eight hams while employee and their families supplied side dishes. Approximately 350 members of the Ava community came for the delicious food and fellowship.



Workshop Visitor Seeks Ways to Help Others at Home

Vocational Services, Inc. has been used as a model for other organizations, but rarely have the circumstances been so dramatic as the recent visit of a woman from Africa.

VSI has provided employment and other services for people with disabilities in Clay and Platte counties since 1966. With three locations in Liberty and North Kansas City, its programs are frequently used as models by other nonprofits. Still, the recent visit by Anne Njeri Wachira for Compassionate Hands for the Disabled Foundation (CHDF) is unusual. Some in her world believe that disabilities are a punishment from God. Infants with disabilities are thrown “into the bush” where they perish.

Tough Start

Wachira was born with cerebral palsy affecting her right side. Despite cultural and community norms, her mother chose to keep her even after Anne, her single mother and two sisters were excommunicated from the community. To survive, they had to move to the slums of Nairobi, where Wachira was forced to crawl if she left their home.

Then a woman from the Catholic Church found and sponsored Wachira, giving her the healthcare and education needed to survive and thrive. “I wouldn’t be here without that support,” Wachira says today. “I started my life with a real disability.”

Wachira walked at nine years old, was able to complete her education and go to college where she earned a degree in mass communications. Since then, she has earned additional degrees in special education and theology, and today is the founder and director of Compassionate Hands for the Disabled Foundation in Nairobi, Kenya.

Meeting the Need

When it started in 2008, the foundation collected donations of food. It began with a bucket or two of milk or wheat to help feed a growing number of children. Later, they sought building supplies like a bucket of concrete to help build things like a water purification system that supplied purified water to the children, as well as the surrounding community. Another building is used to raise up to 600 chickens. From its original 11 children, the foundation now serves over 100, ages



Anne Njeri Wachira (second from right, front) recently visited Vocational Services, Inc., to gather ideas for her organization that helps children with disabilities in Africa. Those on hand included (from left, front) Teresa Swope, VSI human resources manager; Diana Perry of Missouri First Steps; Paula Torkelson, VSI board member; Wachira; Lydia Goodwin, speech therapist for Liberty Public Schools and an ambassador for Wachira’s program; Sherry Summers, VSI associate director; (back) VSI board member Jared Gudehus; and VSI Executive Director Kimbal Mothershead.

3 to 18. The staff has grown to 10. All of this has been accomplished solely through donations.

Wachira has learned from others and made her recent U.S. visit to study other organizations while raising awareness of the foundation. Coincidentally, the chief ambassador for the organization is Liberty Public School speech therapist, Lydia Goodwin. Looking for organizations to research, she contacted Diana Perry of Missouri First Steps, which utilizes VSI’s commercial printing service. Perry recommended VSI as a good source for Wachira’s research.

“She (Wachira) is taking it all in and already implementing some things,” Goodwin explained. “She visited more than a dozen organizations during a weeklong trip, including a Liberty middle school and high school.”

Adapting to Disabilities

One of the items that caught Wachira’s attention at VSI involves “jigs,” custom-made adaptive devices that help employees with disabilities do work that

otherwise would be difficult or impossible. If an employee has trouble counting, a jig can be built to hold the proper number of items for packaging. If several items must be aligned for assembly, a jig can help.

“It’s something we look for with every job,” explained VSI Executive Director Kimbal Mothershead. “We ask ourselves, ‘What do we need to design to help them be successful?’”

VSI Past President Paula Torkelson said that as in Africa, people with disabilities were often excluded in the U.S. before organizations like VSI were created. “They weren’t included,” she said. “They were in a closet somewhere. Now they have opportunities.”

For more information on Compassionate Hands for the Disabled Foundation, see its page on the international fundraising organization, Global Giving. (<https://www.globalgiving.org/donate/78931/compassionate-hands-for-the-disabled-foundation/>)