

MASWM

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

MASWM President Sees Opportunity in 2026

To Members of MASWM,

As we welcome a new year, I want to extend my warmest wishes for a happy, healthy and prosperous 2026. Each new year presents fresh opportunities for us to grow, strengthen our programs and continue the vital work we do for the individuals we serve throughout the great state of Missouri.

I encourage every one of you to stay engaged, get involved and take full advantage of the many resources MASWM provides. Be sure to participate in the many opportunities we have to come together – Workshop Products and Services Day on Jan. 28th and the Day of Choice on March 24th, both held at the Capitol

in Jefferson City. Additionally, our Spring Conference will take place April 26th, 27th, and 28th at the Capitol Plaza Hotel in Jefferson City. Your involvement in these events strengthens our collective voice and advances the mission we all share.

Thank you for your commitment, your leadership and your passion. Together, we truly make a difference in the lives of those who depend on us. I look forward to all we will accomplish in the coming year.

Warm regards,
Tim Poepsel
President, MASWM



MASWM President Tim Poepsel

A Year of Education, Advocacy and Funding Successes



Legislative Chair Kit Brewer

By Kit Brewer, MASWM Legislative Chair

Over the past year, the MASWM Legislative Committee has demonstrated dedicated leadership and strategic advocacy in support of individuals with disabilities in Missouri. The committee works with our lobbyist, Lynne Schlosser, to ensure full funding of the EESW program. A \$30M line item for EESW within HB2 survived untouched despite substantial cuts to other programs. An additional \$2M was entered into the budget for a competitive grant opportunity.

As an active member of the Coalition for the Preservation of Employment Choice, Legislative Chair Kit Brewer has worked tirelessly to ensure that employment options remain robust and well-supported. Brewer serves as the Coalition's Vice President.

Education and Legislative Outreach

The Coalition for the Preservation of Employment Choice (CPEC) is committed to maintaining and expanding employment opportunities for individuals with disabilities nationwide. During this past year, CPEC met with 130 members of Congress, met with the leadership of departments and committees with jurisdiction over 14(c) and wrote a significant response letter to the Department of Labor against a proposed rule to eliminate FLSA Section 14(c). CPEC's response was then quoted by DOL when they rescinded the proposed rule and requested a meeting. MASWM is a member of the coalition.

Engagement with DOL

In July, Brewer accepted a pivotal meeting in Washington D.C. He was accom-

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Mission

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

A Year of Successes

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panied by MASWM Advocacy Committee members, Heather Pugh and Natalie Couch, and members of the firm K&L Gates. The group convened at the Frances Perkins Building, where they met with senior DOL staff, including Jennifer Sheehy, Deputy Assistant Secretary of the Office of Disability Employment Policy (ODEP); Candee Chambers, Director of the Office of Public Liaison; Robin Fernkas, Deputy Administrator, Workforce Development; Garrett Buttrey, Chief of Staff, Wage and Hour Division and Sam Smith, Division Director, Education and Training Administration. For the first time in recent memory, the conversation was balanced and even supportive of sheltered employment as a part of a continuum of employment services.

The meeting included a roundtable session on policy challenges and funding mechanisms, during which the committee outlined the urgent need for flexibility in federal regulations and requested continued support for state-level initiatives. These exchanges fostered mutual understanding and opened new channels for collaboration, ensuring that this employment option was acknowledged at the federal level.

DOL has requested an additional meeting, which will happen in 2026.

Securing Missouri Budget Victories

One of the MASWM Legislative Committee's most notable accomplishments in 2025 was securing full funding for the Extended Employment program in the Missouri state budget. Legislative Committee members, Advocacy Committee members, self-advocates and MASWM's membership ensured that legislators understood our program and protected it from cuts in a constricting state budget.

In addition to ongoing program support, the MASWM Legislative Committee championed the creation and funding of an improvement grant fund. This new initiative is designed to enable employment providers to invest in facility upgrades, staff training and innovative programs aimed at improving the quality of services. The grant fund represents a forward-looking commitment to strengthening Missouri's workforce infrastructure and supporting the long-term sustainability of extended employment

options.

Seventeen shops were awarded funding for a variety of improvement projects.

Conclusion

The MASWM Legislative Committee's activities over the past year reflect a deep commitment to employment choice, advocacy and pragmatic solutions. Through coalition leadership, federal engagement and successful state budget negotiations, the committee has made a lasting impact on Missouri's employment landscape. The achievements of 2025 not only address immediate needs, but also lay the groundwork for continued progress in the years ahead.



There's a lot going on at RISE in Warrensburg. In the Café, Ella (top) says "I like to cook" while Krystle concentrates on the Jewelry Jars project. See the full story on the next page.

MASWM Advocacy Efforts Achieve Success

By Heather Pugh, Advocacy Chair

The MASWM Advocacy Committee made significant strides in 2025 by strengthening education, engagement and collaboration across Missouri's Sheltered Workshop community. Through focused initiatives and consistent communication, the committee worked to ensure that the voices of providers, employees and stakeholders remained strong and unified in advocacy efforts.

One of the cornerstone activities of 2025 was the monthly MO A-Team meetings. These meetings created a dependable forum for communication, planning and alignment, allowing members to stay informed on policy developments and to maintain a clear focus on advocacy priorities for the months ahead.

The MO A-Team continued to serve as a vital link between workshops and the broader advocacy mission of MASWM.

Engagement remained a key priority throughout the year. Advocacy efforts encouraged members to deepen and maintain relationships with local and state stakeholders, reinforcing the importance of ongoing dialogue and education. These connections are essential in building understanding, trust and long-term support for the services and employment opportunities provided by sheltered workshops.

The Advocacy Committee is also excited to be partnering with the MASWM Legislative Committee on the adaptive wage case study. This collaborative effort will help provide meaningful data and

real-world insights to inform future discussions and policy considerations, further strengthening advocacy efforts.

Looking ahead, we are already building momentum for 2026. Save the date for the 2026 Day of Choice MO A-Team Rally at the Capitol, which will be on March 24. This event will once again bring advocates together to highlight choice, opportunity and the value of inclusive employment. More details will be shared in the coming months.

Thank you to all Advocacy Committee members, MO A-Team participants and partners for your dedication and commitment. Together, we continue to educate, engage and advocate for a stronger future for Missouri's Sheltered Workshop community.

Warrensburg Program Nourishes Its People, Community

RISE Community Services in Warrensburg wants all employees to feel connected, valued and able to fully engage in their day.

As part of that commitment, the RISE Meal Access Initiative offers a warm, nutritious meal each day to their vocational employees at no cost. This program is designed to ease daily stress while supporting personal wellbeing, growth and a strong sense of belonging within the RISE community.

RISE Community Services' Vocational Center is excited to share two new, unique production jobs developed through their sheltered employment pro-

gram: creating one-of-a-kind gift baskets for all occasions and assembling jewelry jars. These hands-on roles are designed to build skills, support meaningful daily work and expand opportunities for the individuals they serve.

These new production jobs were made possible through the continued flow of donations that support RISE's warehouse operations. Thanks to community support, the RISE vocational center (VC) team identified new ways to turn incoming donations into structured, purposeful work – creating additional options for participation, productivity and pride. The team has sold more than 100 baskets in the last six months and will focus on expansion into 2026.

Finished items are then sold at the RISE Racks thrift store, and customers can also place specific orders directly through the Vocational Center. RISE is proud of the creativity and commitment of their VC team for developing these new opportunities and continuing to grow meaningful work options.

In a related area, RISE Cafe has realigned its training model to better reflect the mission at the heart of that work. Over time, the program became too heavily focused on customer service, which pulled attention away from the primary purpose of the RISE Cafe: pro-



Kirsten said she enjoys the Jewelry Jars work as "I get to put them together, and I like jewelry."

viding meaningful, skills-based training and employment support.

Beginning in early 2025, RISE simplified that approach to create more consistent, reliable learning opportunities for employees. They reduced the catering menu and shifted the focus to Meals-to-Go, allowing employment training to practice on core tasks with greater repetition and confidence.



Behind the scenes in the RISE Café in Warrensburg, Michael makes noodles for hungry customers.

Workshops Get Creative to Increase Opportunities

Missouri workshops are known for their packaging and assembly services, but as Legislative Consultant Lynne Schlosser recently noted, “They also do so much more.”

As nonprofit private businesses, workshops must be creative. Although most receive some state and county revenue, the bulk of workshop income comes from business contracts. When large industries are nearby, packaging, assembly and similar services can be significant. But even in large communities, that’s often not enough to support employment for dozens or even hundreds of people with disabilities. For workshops in small communities and rural areas, those opportunities often don’t even exist. That’s where workshop managers become savvy entrepreneurs, developing original products and programs to build opportunities and create jobs.

These efforts include everything from first aid kits to medical supplies and furniture refinishing to laundry services. In most cases, they are the result of insight by managers and hard work by staff to fill a local or regional need. Here are some examples:

Growing Jobs

Lake Area Industries in Camdenton operates Gifted Gardens, a retail garden center that has become a popular business in the region.

Manager Natalie Couch shared that the best aspect of the center is not even the income. “It helps us connect with our

community and spread awareness,” she said. “We have partnered with many local businesses and non-profit organizations through our garden center, including selling our flowers and mums at our local hospital and splitting the profits with them and donating old dock foam capsules from our foam recycling program (they make great raised beds). Then there’s our local community garden and helping prep for the season. We also plant for businesses that purchased plants and flowers from us, and we even host paint and pot events for a local group of realtors.”

Gifted Gardens was opened in 2011. Lake Area Industries had a greenhouse and grew their own plants from plugs for five years. It was a great job creator, but it was not profitable/sustainable.

“We still don’t make much, however we come out ahead and gain community awareness,” Couch explained. “Many of our customers are repeat because they love



Staff and employees of Lake Area Industries have developed a new opportunity with the workshop’s Gifted Gardens.

our mission, but we also get a lot of new customers who have no idea who we are and what we do. We tell them our story and all about our other services (shredding, cardboard and electronics recycling primarily) and they usually become new supporters!”

Fragrant Opportunity

Southeast Enterprises in Kansas City may have one of the most unusual original efforts: Every Ember, a new line of handcrafted incense cones and custom burn trays at Art Westport, Kansas City’s oldest and largest art fair.

The effort began in September 2025 and is an outstanding example of the imagination, skills and creativity of Southeast’s associates, giving them the opportunity to create something entirely their own, beyond client work.

From blending scents and forming cones to packaging finished products, every step is handled by these employees. In addition, they participated in art classes with Englewood Arts to create the accompanying artistic incense burn trays, adding a personal, creative touch to each item.

Art Westport also offered associates the chance to showcase their work and be front facing with the community, building confidence, connecting with Kansas City residents and celebrating their accomplishments. Every Ember was well received, and Art Westport has expressed

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Staff and associates from Southeast Enterprises joined Art Westport this fall as part of an original product effort, Every Ember.

Innovative Approach Helps Generate Employment in Houston

Opportunity Sheltered Industries in Houston may be one of Missouri's best examples of entrepreneurial efforts to create jobs for people with disabilities.

Manager Sharon Tyger said the 38-year-old shop has consistently worked to build business and retain jobs for employees by considering a range of ideas that might help in this small community.

In 2004, the workshop entered a contract with Texas County Memorial Hospital to launder their hospital linens. Since then, the workshop increased both equipment and employees to fulfill that growing contract. Now the workshop has an ARPA Grant from Texas County for half of the estimated cost of a new building designed and built especially for processing health care laundry. Additional grants and funds have been requested, with Texas County Habilitation Board (S.B.40) being very supportive. The new facility will be equipped with double the current washers and dryers and built to house an additional increase when needed.

The laundry service has increased the workshop jobs for employees. The workshop now processes a nursing home's clothing and uniforms, linens for three area funeral homes, plus a pet crematory. The newest customers include an event center for their curtains and tablecloths.



Missouri Representative Bennie Cook (R-142) toured the screen-printing room at Opportunity Sheltered Industries in Houston.

Still Another Direction

While the laundry was a great addition to the workshop, more production jobs were needed to keep the employees actively and productively employed.

When a local sporting goods store announced it was closing in early 2015, OSI approached them about purchasing their screen printing and vinyl sign operation. After some consideration, the store agreed to sell the business, inventory and equipment to the workshop. Longtime employee Rhonda Neal from the sporting goods store was later hired as the screen printer.

Owning the production company al-

lowed the workshop more flexibility in workflow, more control in scheduling work for employees and a wide range of customers. The diversity of the jobs allows many different abilities to be productive and showcase talents. This shop also prints the green A-Team Missouri T-shirts seen throughout the state.

Team shirts are a specialty with many other workshops and schools ordering and supporting the business. Vinyl signs are an additional product to boost customer traffic and allow the workshop to offer the wide range of products that can be produced in the facility.

Workshops Get Creative

(continued from previous page)

interest in featuring Southeast Enterprises at future events.

Looking ahead, Every Embers is designed to grow into a microbusiness class, giving associates hands-on experience with product development, marketing and sales – skills that could help them launch their own small business ventures. This launch demonstrates how innovation, teamwork and vocational skill-building in a sheltered workshop creates meaningful opportunities and success.

Everyone at Southeast Enterprises is looking forward to further initiatives that combine artistry, skill development and community engagement, while building stronger connections with the community and empowering associates to bring their ideas to life.



Incense makes sense at Southeast Enterprises where an entrepreneurial effort has created employment opportunities and increased community engagement with Every Embers.

VSI Offers Opportunities Through Entrepreneurial Efforts

Vocational Services, Inc., (VSI) an Extended Employment Workshop since 1966, has consistently been at the forefront of creating meaningful work opportunities for people with disabilities. Building on its success in providing contract packaging solutions for some of the world's leading companies, it has expanded into two specialized markets to grow its impact.

In 1990, Show-Me Animal Products, then known as VSI Pet Care Products, built a reputation with a dedicated group of customers who valued its original mission. They focused on providing reliable packaging and assembly services for employees with disabilities through their Extended Employment Shop, while also offering high-quality pet products for both pet and horse owners. This blend of commitment and quality helped them grow and thrive.

It started with a unique first-aid kit designed specifically for horses and later expanded to include kits for dogs, cats and birds. In 1996, VSI's Vet Kit was featured on "HorseWorldTV," a national cable network, hosted by world rodeo champion Larry Mahan, where sales jumped. Then in 1997, VSI was accepted into the World-Wide Pet Industry Association (WWPIA), now known as WPA. Today, these first aid kits are available on Amazon and Chewy, in Canada and the



An employee at VSI in Liberty packages Foaling Kits, one of several pet and equine first aid kits manufactured by the workshop as a way to expand employment opportunities for people with disabilities.

United Kingdom, and on their own website, showmeanimalproducts.com.

VSI's second venture, Printshop Services, was launched in 2010 with a focus on creating meaningful work opportunities for employees with disabilities, much like its Vet Care Products. It aimed to serve customers with basic printing needs and jobs for which their employees were

qualified. Today, VSI proudly offers a wide range of commercial printing services – such as booklets, brochures, manuals, menus, postcards, posters and thank-you cards – and continues to grow its brand. It remains dedicated to delivering high-quality, affordable services and creative design solutions to support those on a low budget.

U.S. Congresswoman Tours St. Louis Area Shop

U.S. Congresswoman Ann Wagner, Representative for Missouri's 2nd Dis-



U.S. Congresswoman Ann Wagner visited Heartland Industries, touring the workshop and meeting employees like Danielle.

trict, recently visited Heartland Industries in St. Louis for a tour and discussion regarding the critical role extended employment sheltered workshops have in providing employment choice for individuals with intellectual and developmental disabilities (IDD) and the importance of protecting 14(c) certificates.

During the tour, Congresswoman Wagner interacted with many of Heartland's 170-plus employees and staff. She noted that it was clear how much the employees enjoyed working at Heartland where they could perform to their highest abilities in a safe, dignified and supportive environment while also being among friends and companions. Employees were excited to demonstrate the

work they were doing and expressed to her how "fun" it was to work at Heartland.

During discussions following the tour, Congresswoman Wagner commented about the unfortunate reality that the vast majority of those who wish to phase out 14(c) certificates and shut down the sheltered workshop industry have never visited a workshop. She reinforced her view that workshops provide purpose, meaning and a strong sense of self-worth to adults with intellectual and developmental disabilities (IDD) who have not succeeded or are not candidates for jobs in competitive integrated employment (CIE). She was adamant that individuals with IDD need more choices and options, not less.

Expansion, Programs Featured in Mexico Publication

(This article excerpt and photo are re-published courtesy of the Mexico Ledger and staff writer Sky Strauss)

By Sky Strauss, Staff Writer

For 52 years, Handi-Shop Inc. has been a place where community members with disabilities are given an opportunity to develop real workforce experience and receive a regular paycheck for their efforts.

Its crowded and outdated facilities are in desperate need of upgrades to increase the efficiency of production, expand partnership opportunities and improve recycling plant operations.

Handi-Shop Inc. has begun the first phase of its \$9 million expansion project, starting with the construction of a temporary building.

“This whole thing got started because we needed a new place to store our large items, and it just kind of grew,” Martin Keller, Handi-Shop Inc. manager, said.

In addition to increasing assembly space, the project will include the expansion of the Seconds To Go secondhand store, the relocation of the recycling plant to a larger, safer space and the addition of a job-training program.

“I cannot hire someone with a disability 25 years of age or younger unless



May Trams assembles parts for 3M respirators at The Handi-Shop. She has been working at the Handi-Shop since it first opened 52 years ago. (photo by Sky Strauss, Mexico Ledger)

they’ve got a vocational training certificate,” Keller said, adding that they are difficult to get. “What we want to do is make it where we can do the training for that, and then they can either work for us with that certificate or the goal is for them to move out into competitive employment.”

The future program will be modeled off of successful programs at Boone Center in St. Peters and will include food service, hospitality and furniture repair training as well.

What is Handi-Shop Inc.?

The Handi-Shop is a sheltered workshop that provides a safe and highly supervised workplace, serving 11,500 Mexico residents and 25,000 Audrain County residents. It partners with a number of businesses in Audrain County such as Continental Products, True Refrigeration, Spartan Light Metal Products, Graf & Sons, Hubbell as well as Songbird Essentials.

Assembly work makes up 63% of the workforce at the Handi-Shop and the organization does a great deal for Gold Crest Distributing.

“We do a lot of assembly work for them, like bird houses and feeders,” Keller said.

The Handi-Shop employs roughly 55 people with intellectual or developmental disabilities, aged 20 to 82, who work six-

hour days doing assembly work for local manufacturers, shredding, recycled paper sorting, donation sorting, shelf stocking and baling clothes.

Keller said that the Handi-Shop is hiring, and the number of employees changes almost daily due to the nature of working with individuals with disabilities. He also struggles to find younger employees because of the difficulties associated with obtaining the vocational certificate.

Slow and Steady

The Handi-Shop’s expansion has been needed for quite some time, but securing essential funding is a waiting game.

“We received \$2 million from the state,” Keller said. “Right now, we are working with a company to get new market tax credits – I think we should get \$1.5 million from that.”

Keller reported that the Handi-Shop Inc. has been very fortunate receiving \$6.7 million in funding so far – \$2.6 million from the community, \$500,000 from the Mabee Foundation and \$3.6 million in public funding.

The fundraising board is in need of \$800,000 from businesses, individuals and foundations to reach its goal.

“Hopefully this month, we are going to break ground on the new recycling center,” Keller said.



Lake Area Industries in Camdenton celebrated the life of Marcia Messer, a 26-year employee who passed in December. The shop had created personalized employee T-shirts for Christmas, with the years of service on the back. Marcia’s was framed and displayed in the breakroom so that her legend will live on. Her mother, Patty, helped hang the shirt. (More employee milestones on next page.)

Workshop Partners with Highway Patrol for Recycling

Gateway Industries in Eldon shredded a whole lot of Missouri Highway Patrol

uniforms, but the department didn't seem to mind at all.



Staff and employees at Gateway Industries in Eldon were joined by members of the Missouri Highway Patrol as they recycled used patrol uniforms in an award-winning new program.

Gateway joined the patrol for an award-winning effort to find new uses for patrol uniforms. Named "To Shred and Protect," the Surplus and Recycling Program also introduced a new award category this year: the Recycling Changemaker.

This award recognizes innovative solutions that redefines the thinking behind waste and sustainability. As a security measure, all damaged or discarded MSHP uniforms must be destroyed using an industrial textile shredder. This requirement previously limited sustainable disposal options, as most clothing "recycling" relies on donation or resale. MSHP, however, developed an innovative partnership that perfectly encapsulates the concept of a circular economy – a system focused on keeping products and materials in a sustainable loop rather than a straight path to a landfill.

By collaborating with Gateway Industries sheltered workshop in Eldon, the shredded uniforms are now repurposed as industrial fill for products like archery targets and door draft shields.

The initiative delivers a powerful dual impact: environmental stewardship and community support.

Employee Milestones Show Human Stories

At the core of Missouri's workshops are the employees with disabilities. It can be easy to think of them as a homogenous group, but they are all individuals, nearly 5,000 of them. Here are some of their milestones from 2025:

Joey Genzlling had worked over 43 years at Earthwise Industries, Inc., in Troy, when he passed unexpectedly last year on Nov. 4.

Joey was mourned by the whole community, his smile, friendliness and dedication a loss shared by many.

Shop manager Amber Butler said that Joey was honored last summer at the shop's employee appreciation picnic for his years of service. Store manager Laure

Danner noted, "Customers loved seeing Joey around the store and on the forklift in the lot, always keeping things running smoothly. He was always kind and ready to lend a hand."

One of Joey's jobs was driving the workshop forklift. Earthwise recently needed to purchase a new one and named it Joey, with his name printed on the side.

DOCOC in Ava lost one of their beloved employees this year, **David Fritz**. David was DOCOC's self-proclaimed protector. There was no one more genuine in his introductory slap on the back, and there was no one who worked harder.

David would do literally anything

Manager Dawn Cox ("Miss Dawn") asked him to do. And while he may have given choice words while doing it, he still did it, always.

He loved to tell how tired he was because of how hard he worked. David was one of eight siblings, six of whom worked for DOCOC. He worked at DOCOC for almost two decades.



Joey Genzlling



David Fritz



Donald (seated) recently retired from Opportunity Workshop Inc. in Stanberry after 38 years. Manager Tom Miller presented him with an award for his years of service.

BCI: Growth, Partnerships and New Opportunities

An extraordinary year at Boone Center, Inc. (BCI), headquartered in St. Peters, included the opening of a 10,000-square-foot expansion of their Moscow Mills location.

The larger space enables them to meet increasing production needs, support more workers with I/DD and expand their services in Lincoln County. The project culminated in a community-wide ribbon cutting attended by Missouri Governor Mike Kehoe, marking a proud moment for BCI's continued growth and leadership.

Strategic Partnership

BCI also welcomed H&M Machine Service, Inc. under their operational umbrella – an exciting partnership that pairs H&M's long-standing precision machining expertise with BCI's operational strength and workforce mission. This collaboration is creating new avenues for skill development and meaningful employment for adults with disabilities.

H&M customers continue to receive the same trusted machining quality, now supported by BCI's resources, efficiency and commitment to inclusion.



Governor Mike Kehoe, BCI CEO Troy Compardo, Cuivre River Electric Cooperative CEO and BCI Director Doug Tracy, and Troy Chamber of Commerce Vice President Sarah Scronce stand with Tamika, Dawn, and Dominick, BCI Employees of the Month, who were honored before the ceremony and invited to take part in the ribbon cutting.

Impact

BCI's employment impact continues to expand across Missouri and Illinois. At the close of FY25:

- 230 adults were employed through the organizational employment (sheltered workshop) program.
- 66 adults received employment services

and transitioned into competitive, integrated employment across the region.

- 35 adults graduated from our vocational training program, earning average starting wages of \$17.19/hour.
- 597 individuals and families received benefits counseling services to help navigate Social Security, employment income and long-term financial stability.
- 14 middle and high schoolers participated in two Summer Inclusion Manufacturing Camps for hands-on learning and career exposure.
- 99 high school seniors worked paid, supported, six-week summer jobs to develop real-world skills and learn workplace expectations.

These outcomes reflect the demand for employment opportunities and the strong partnerships that make this work possible.

Entering Third-Party Logistics

In addition, this year marked BCI's entrance into third-party logistics. They serve as the official pick, pack and ship center for Bond of Brothers cereal, created in honor of John and Matthew Gaudreau, and Coop's Crunch cereal, developed by Philadelphia Eagles star Cooper DeJean to support pediatric cancer patients in Iowa. Through these partnerships, BCI now ships cereal orders and collectible bowls to customers nationwide and around the world. These fulfillment projects highlight the workforce's capabilities and a readiness to innovate in support of their mission.

Shops Work with Their Communities



A Houston School District mascot recently joined employees at Opportunity Sheltered Industries who screen printed rally towels for the pep club.



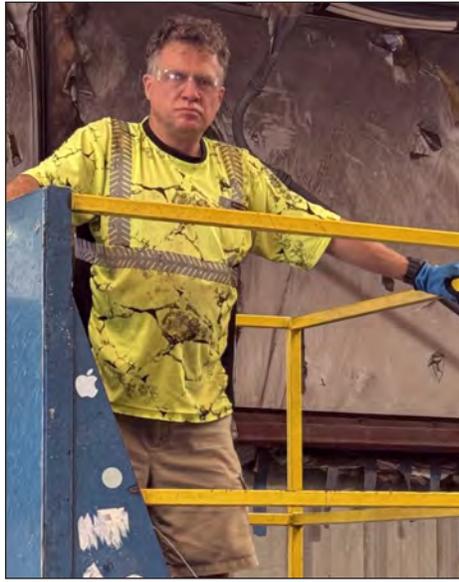
Manager Natalie Couch joined employees at a community garden that's part of their Lake Area Industries' Gifted Gardens program.

Lebanon Shop Provides A Place for Employees to Thrive

Walking through the doors of Laclede Industries in Lebanon, you are greeted by the rhythmic snap... snap... snap of Easter eggs coming together on their production line. Upbeat music hums in the background, mingling with cheerful chatter and the steady pace of purposeful work. Across the floor, bright faces focus on filling colorful eggs with candy and toys, baling cardboard for recycling or assembling parts for local companies.

Everywhere you look, people are working, learning and most importantly – earning. For others, a workday might feel routine, but for the employees at Laclede Industries, it's something far more meaningful. It's an opportunity to show the world what they can do – to build, to grow and to contribute to their community in extraordinary ways.

Alex, who has been with Laclede Industries for seven years, shared his story: "Coming to Laclede Industries I get to meet new people and learn various jobs to make money and depending on the job on how much we get paid and how hard we work. Sometimes we get to watch movies cause we're so fast! We work so hard. I suffered a TBI (traumatic brain in-



Fred started at Laclede Industries in 1989 and, like his fellow employees, continues to thrive there.

jury) as a sophomore in high school and being here helps my mobility and so I don't sit at home and get fat. I come here with people that are more like me. I get up early and start my day like normal and that means something to me."

For Robert, who's been with the company for eighteen months, the job has meant more than just a paycheck – it's a place of belonging. "I have more friends and I come here Monday through Thursday," he said. "The staff and supervisors are nice to me and that makes me happy and I want to come to work every day. I get to spend time with my friends and make money. Even when we're not listening nobody yells at me or makes me feel bad."

And after thirteen years of service, Nathan says his pride comes from helping others feel comfortable at work. "It's a really good place to work and the workplace actually cares about the people that work here," Nathan said. "The supervisors help people any way that they can. I enjoy the rest area. It gives me pride knowing I make a difference for people and give them a clean place to use the facilities."

What is now known as Laclede Industries began with a simple but powerful vision. Originally incorporated as the Lebanon Work Center in 1974, it was founded by parents and community members who believed in focusing on what individuals could do, not what they couldn't.

The first facility, located on East Highway 32, opened with just fifteen employees. Demand quickly outgrew the space, and in 1980, thanks to the Laclede County Senate Bill 40 Tax, the organization was able to expand and build what is now known as Laclede Industries.

Among the early employees were Fred and Emerson, who both started in November 1989. During Laclede the 50th Anniversary Gala, Fred and Emerson were celebrated for their remarkable dedication, alongside other long-term employees whose commitment continues to inspire the entire organization.

What is more difficult to communicate is how important the employees of Laclede Industries are – to the staff, to each other and to the community that surrounds them. Each individual, with his or her unique talent and personality, forms the heart of this organization. Together, they embody the spirit that makes Laclede Industries not just a workplace, but a family, a purpose and a shining example of what it truly means to thrive.

Celebrations Shared with Communities



Missouri Rep. Dale Wright (R-116, left) attended the Thanksgiving event for MCII in Farmington. Welcomed by Interim Manager Gil Kennon, Rep. Wright enjoyed a meal and visited with MCII board members, staff and employees. Rep. Wright was previously a member of the MCII board and has a deep understanding of the mission of sheltered workshops in Missouri. He has remained in contact since being elected in 2018.



DOCOC in Ava recently held their ninth Annual Friends and Family Thanksgiving Luncheon. What began as a way to thank customers and vendors has become a community-wide celebration. In the latest event, approximately 300 members of the community joined with employees and staff of the workshop. Tours were also offered for those wishing to learn about the jobs provided, as well as learn more about DOCOC's mission.

Big Year for Higginsville Program

Lafayette County Enterprises, Inc. (LCE) in Higginsville celebrated their 51st year in business during 2025.

Events included the first annual LCE Piccadilly Dinner & Auction fundraiser. The event was a huge success for the first year, with outstanding support that included attendance and donations from the community. There were 200 tickets sold and 230 in attendance, including staff and employees. The proceeds from the event will go toward a new outside break area. Next year's Piccadilly is already in the planning stages.

LCE was recently recognized by the Higginsville Chamber of Commerce and local businesses with the 2025 Business Lifetime Achievement Award. The workshop also joined the Higginsville Christmas Parade on Dec. 2.

In September, LCE announced that Shelly Harden has joined the staff team as a community health consultant. Prior to

that, she worked for eight years as a community health worker, helping families in the community with various applications and resources they needed. In her current

position, she will assist community members with applications including the Affordable Care Act, Medicaid, disability insurance and food stamp enrollment.



Manager Suzanne Smith and the staff of Lafayette County Enterprises in Higginsville capped off the shop's 51st anniversary year by receiving the 2025 Business Lifetime Achievement Award from the Higginsville Chamber of Commerce.

Manager Looks Back on 47 Years of Workshop Challenge

Opportunity Workshop in Stanberry deals with challenges that many smaller Missouri shops also face.

Located in northwest Missouri about 20 miles from the Iowa state line, the community has just over 1,000 people living there. About half that number are employed in the town, with the workshop's 40 employees representing almost 10 percent of that workforce. Finding jobs with this lack of nearby industry or many businesses is not easy.

Manager Tom Miller has dealt with that challenge one way or the other since joining in 1979 to fill in for an injured driver. "The bookkeeper said the driver had been hurt and asked if I could fill in for a few days," he recalled 46 years later with a smile. "I guess I have been here more than a few days."

Miller, who plans to retire this spring, said the biggest challenge is finding work for his team. "You definitely have to have good customers, and finding them is the first challenge," he agreed. "It's a constant challenge."

Opportunity Workshop has acquired a major contract for woodworking projects and wood products with a large corpora-

tion. They also package respiratory masks for another business. Between these two,



Workshop Manager Tom Miller accepted the Governor's Community Project of the Year Award from then Gov. Jay Nixon in 2010. The award recognized Opportunity Workshop's efforts to build its building.

a range of people with disabilities are employed.

Another key is the workshop staff. "I have a lot of good staff," Miller said. "We're a small shop and our staff isn't large, but they're all specialized and know what they're doing."

Outside of the workshop, Miller brings some surprises. A tournament poker player, he and his wife, Kim, travel frequently. While they have faced some international competitors, they enjoy free poker competition in Stanberry as much as an event in Las Vegas. Miller makes it clear who the team leader is.

"My wife is considerably better," he said. "I just kind of go along for the ride."

Miller isn't the only one retiring from the Stanberry workshop, an issue that concerns him. He shared that older employees are retiring, but younger employees are not coming in equal numbers, a result of regulatory changes that often mean young people with disabilities sit at home and lose job skills after graduating from high school. "It's one of the big problems workshops face in helping people with disabilities," he said. "More than anything, it hurts the people we serve."

Workshop Leadership Changes Include Former President

Recent changes to a St. Louis area workshop's leadership marked another milestone for MASWM.

Rob Libera, CEO and executive director, retired at the end of 2025 from Lafayette Industries. He was succeeded by Stacey Elster, former chief program officer.

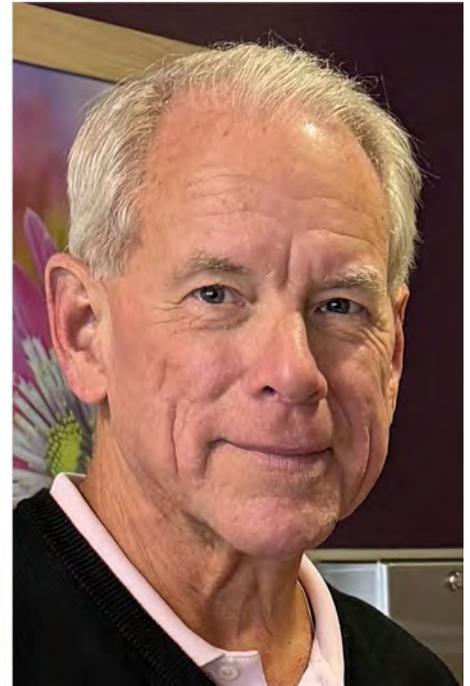
Libera served 22 years with the workshop, always keeping the mission and people at the center of his work. During his tenure, Lafayette expanded from one workshop to three, overseeing the growth in employment from 185 employees to over 450, becoming the largest single full-time employer of adults with developmental and intellectual disabilities in Missouri.

During that time, Lafayette introduced programs such as STEPUP and the Legacy Program and strengthened its reputation as a trusted provider of employment and unique program opportunities for adults with developmental disabilities. Libera guided the organization through periods of change and growth with steady leadership and a focus on creating meaningful opportunities.

Libera's leadership was especially evident during the COVID-19 pandemic. While Lafayette remained open throughout, many employees were quarantined due to residential policies. He launched



Stacey Elster



Rob Libera

the “Keeping On, Keeping Connected” initiative, creating training curriculum and meaningful work employees could complete at home to keep their skills sharp. He recorded weekly video updates for months, ensuring employees and families stayed informed and connected to Lafayette and to each other. This effort helped maintain engagement and readiness so employees could return to work confidently when restrictions lifted. Rob also served as the President of the Missouri Association of Sheltered Workshop Managers (MASWM) during the pandemic.

Although Libera is stepping down from his executive role, he will continue to serve as a consultant, supporting Lafayette during this transition and through their 50th anniversary celebration in 2026. Libera will also remain vice-chairman of SWIM and serve MASWM as past president. His contributions have left a lasting impact, and everyone at Lafayette is grateful for his years of service.

MASWM President Tim Poepsel congratulated Libera and expressed his appreciation for his service to the association. “Your many years of leadership at Lafayette Industries have left an enduring mark – not only on the organization it-

self, but on the entire network of sheltered workshops across Missouri.”

Elster joined Lafayette Industries in 2016 and has since served as chief program officer, where she has expanded and enhanced Lafayette's service offerings through innovative, person-centered programs. She led the creation of Lafayette's positive behavior supports framework, developed a self-regulation program and sensory room, as well as launched the award-winning STEPUP employment training program.

STEPUP focuses on social cognitive skills and real-world business experience, earning both the Missouri Association of County Developmental Disabilities Services' “Cutting Edge” Award and The St. Louis Business Journal's Innovation in Philanthropy Award. Most recently, Elster spearheaded the development of Lafayette Legacy, the organization's new day habilitation/retirement activity center, designed to provide meaningful daytime engagement for adults with disabilities.

In addition to her work at Lafayette, Elster serves on the Missouri Governor's Council on Disability, where she advises on statewide initiatives that improve access and quality of life for Missourians with disabilities.

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 news.

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

For the future, MASWM is currently designing a new website to incorporate more interactive content with updated navigation and technology. Plans call for completion in the spring of 2026.