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## *How an organization transformed its vision into reality*

*By Jodi Meerovich, Midwest Special Services, Inc.*

Until four years ago, our center’s day training and habilitation (DTH) program capably served approximately 30 adults with disabilities, four of whom had autism spectrum disorder (ASD) and were integrated with the other consumers. Although a traditional DTH program is an excellent fit for many disability populations, including individuals with high needs, it isn’t designed structurally or programmatically to effectively serve persons with ASD.

Our vision to provide services for individuals with ASD began with an acknowledgment of a need for customized services to serve this population. Noting an increase in the numbers of persons with ASD, Dakota County Social Services asked us to create a program that would be tailored to the unique needs of adults with ASD.

We looked into the possibility of retrofitting an existing building for an ASD program, but eventually concluded it was more cost-effective and efficient to design a customized center in a new location.

### **PLANNING IS ESSENTIAL FOR THE VISION TO TAKE FORM**

We relied on careful planning, good communication, and support from our stakeholders when we identified our early challenges:

- Find the right location. This was a daunting decision between “not too far” and “not too close.” We wanted to be near a bowling alley, library, the zoo, and other

**In 2011, CARF’s Employment and Community Services customer service unit hosted a conference that brought together service providers, persons served, governmental professionals, and payers from across the United States and Canada.**

**CARF is sharing two presenters’ stories in a two-part newsletter series. In this issue, we trace how a CARF-accredited organization pioneered an innovative autism program. CARF’s ECS Promising Practices newsletter previously profiled this autism program. Here, we discover why the innovative program became successful.**

**In the next issue, we’ll highlight the value of supported education for consumers.**

public sites that we frequently visited with our consumers. Yet we wanted a bit of distance between our existing facility and competitors. Finally, we had to be mindful of the amount we could afford to pay in rent. We intended to lease, not own, the new space.

- Retain staff members who might have a longer commute. Although none of the persons served used public transportation, we were aware that the new location's proximity to their homes, major streets, and bus or rail lines would be a concern for staff members.
- Reroute our organization-provided transportation without inconveniencing persons served and their families. This consideration convinced us to remain in the same general area as our existing facility so that we would not have to tell consumers they lived too far away to participate in our program.

Our board members were supportive of our plans, and we often sought their guidance for financing, budgeting, location, and transportation issues. We also conducted frequent meetings to keep them, our staff, families, and other stakeholders updated on the new program's progress. In these meetings, we listened as well as talked. Through active listening, we wanted to ensure that we had not overlooked any issues and were following a wise course.

We eventually secured a newly constructed building that gave us the opportunity to design the interior space—a much more appealing

*All photos in this article courtesy of Midwest Special Services, Inc.  
Below: Chris creates art.*



## ABOUT AUTISM

The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention estimates one in 110 children in the United States has autism. The agency clarifies, “Autism spectrum disorders (ASDs) are a group of developmental disabilities that can cause significant social, communication, and behavioral challenges. People with ASDs handle information in their brain differently than other people.” The agency continues, “ASDs affect each person in different ways, and can range from very mild to severe. People with ASDs share some similar symptoms, such as problems with social interaction. But there are differences in when the symptoms start, how severe they are, and the exact nature of the symptoms.”

According to the American Psychological Association, “autism is the most severe developmental disability. Appearing within the first three years of life, autism involves impairments in social interaction—such as being aware of other people's feelings—and verbal and nonverbal communication. Some people with autism have limited interests, strange eating or sleeping behaviors, or a tendency to do things to hurt themselves, such as banging their heads or biting their hands.”

Autism has no known cause and no known cure. There is an increasing demand for services for individuals with ASD, not only as children, but also as they become adults.

challenge than trying to fit our program ideas into an already built-out space. Everything inside could be designed with the program in mind. Our vision was coming closer to being transformed into a program!

We knew that, for the ASD program to succeed and grow, certain facility features had to be in place to serve such a unique population. One of these features was specialized rooms designed to teach specific skills, de-escalate destructive behaviors, and incorporate enough stimulation to meet the sensory needs of people with ASD.

Lighting was an important sensory consideration in our facility's design. Throughout the building, certain rooms were planned to have no windows to minimize distractions, dimmer switches to control bright lights, and skylights to take advantage of natural light.

In conjunction with the design, we began planning how to structure the day and activities to provide predictable and familiar routines—a proven technique for success in serving individuals with ASD. We also began planning how we could implement a daring but core part of our vision: teaching persons with ASD the skills to cope with changes in their daily routine.

### **TEACHING PERSONS WITH ASD TO DEAL WITH CHANGE WAS CHALLENGING**

Change can be exceedingly difficult for people who engage in repetitive behaviors. Yet we recognized that a too highly structured and repetitious program did not prepare them to accept the inevitable changes in life.

Aware of how hard it is for so many of our consumers to do simple transitions like getting on a bus or venturing into the community, we strove to ease the anxiety associated with change and transition. In our program, changes are built into the day in the form of transitions.

Each group of consumers transitions to a different room every 45 minutes, where they engage in a variety of activities specific to the skills being taught in each room. This was an enormous challenge in the beginning stages of the program. Many of the individuals had been accustomed to being in one assigned area or room for their entire day.

In each room, the structure and routine are communicated to the persons served through picture schedules and individual picture strips for each person to set up. The pictures highlight activities they will be participating in while in each room. Large therapy balls in the rooms are alternatives to chairs for individuals who prefer bouncing and movement over sitting for long periods.

Working with the persons served was not our only challenge. Early on, a few parents claimed that, by transitioning the persons served in regular intervals throughout the day, we set them up for failure. The parents stressed that their child had a hard time coping with transitions. We explained that we wanted to help consumers adapt to change and asked the parents to give the program a

**CARF introduced standards for services to support persons with autism spectrum disorder and their families in the 2008 *Employment and Community Services Standards Manual*.**

**A year later, a set of standards for supports for children with autism was added.**

**Current CARF standards manuals can be purchased in the Online Store at [bookstore.carf.org](http://bookstore.carf.org).**

chance. They agreed, although several called our chance of success a long shot.

Through many countless staff trainings, picture schedules that depict activities, and auditory cues and visual reminders to prepare for a transition, the transitions slowly became part of the consumers' daily routine. Change has become less intimidating.

Small groups have been a key to the program's success. Group sizes ranging from four to five consumers minimize behaviors prompted by large groups and over-stimulation. We are fortunate to be able to provide a staff-to-consumer ratio of 1:4.

*Right: Kristi cooks.*



## ABOUT MIDWEST SPECIAL SERVICES

For more than 60 years, Midwest Special Services, Inc., has supported adults with developmental disabilities and their families in meeting the challenges of vocational education, employment, and community access. The organization's five centers provide services for more than 550 individuals in the Minneapolis–St. Paul area. The organization's website is at [www.mwsservices.org](http://www.mwsservices.org).

Responding to a growing demand for autism services, Midwest Special Services created a specialized program for adults with ASD at a newly constructed Minnesota site. What began as a bold vision became a pioneer program, earning accolades for its innovative and creative style of working with adults with a high level of needs.

The new site, which opened in 2007, contains:

- A gym in which persons with ASD can work on gross motor skills such as walking and running and burn off excess energy in activities such as bowling and swinging.
- A multisensory room that is used to relax; explore different textures, smells, or visuals; and calm or stimulate the senses.
- A vocational room where work skills are taught and practiced.
- An art room to stimulate creativity.
- A garden room that encourages hands-on gardening or simply enjoying the smell of fresh herbs or listening to the gentle hum of a hydroponic system.
- A life skills room where persons with ASD learn practical daily living skills such as money and time management, personal hygiene, self-advocacy, and social skills.

We continue to refine the program. For example, initially persons with ASD transitioned every half hour. However, staff members reported that 30 minutes didn't allow enough time for the persons served to settle in, make the association between the picture on their schedule and the activity they were doing, and then work on their activities. We added an additional 50 percent to the time between transitions, to 45 minutes.

The transitions have helped individuals in the ASD program to learn that change is part of life. Many of the individuals in the program are now able to cope with last-minute changes in their schedules, routines, and our organizational staffing. Moreover, many of their families report that the coping skills learned at our facility have helped the persons served to manage changes at home and in the community. One mother told us that she was able to take her son to a shopping mall for the first time. Before he became acclimated to transitions, he would have been unwilling to move from store to store.

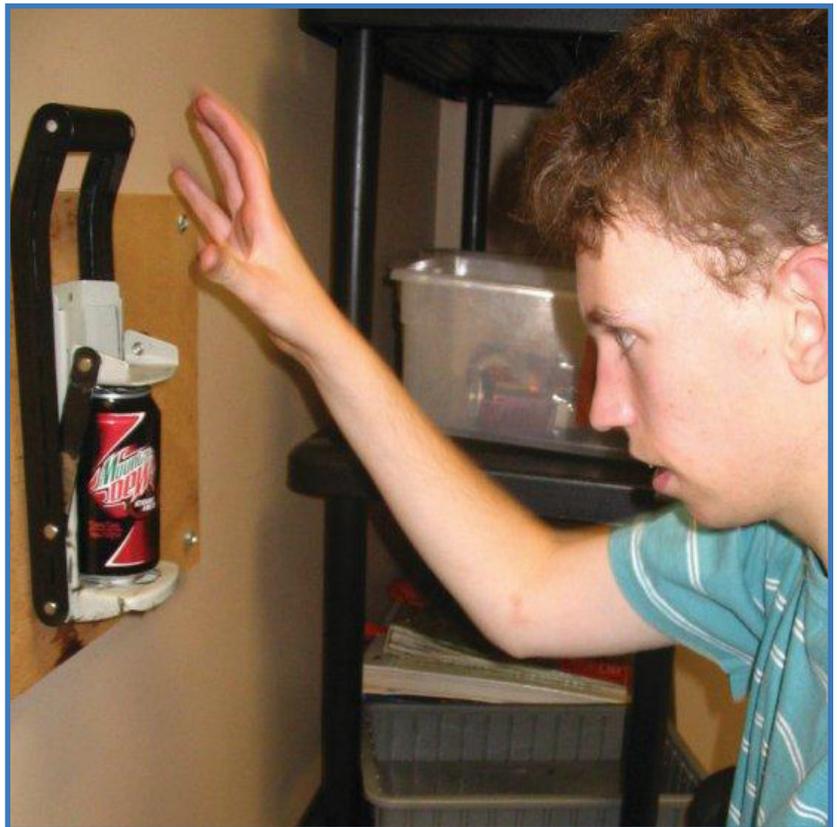
### **WITH SUCCESS, OUR VISION IS NEVER COMPLETE**

We believe our efforts to grow the program and integrate persons with ASD into the community are successful. The facility now serves close to 20 people in the ASD program plus approximately 40 adults in the traditional DTH program. Many of the individuals in our program are able to participate in community outings such as going to the zoo, museums, shops, and the bowling alley. Most also serve the community through volunteering at shelters or Meals on Wheels®, and almost all of them have opportunities for paid work.

All persons served in the ASD program participate in weekly social skill and self-advocacy groups. They also benefit from our library of Social Stories to help them better understand or cope with certain life events and behave appropriately in social situations.



*Above: Kristen experiences the sense of touch.  
Below: Brent crushes cans.*



Our program extends to the consumers' families, too. Several families are active in an ASD parent support group, which meets monthly and finds speakers to address or train the group on various topics.

An ASD advisory committee meets quarterly to give us input and support. The committee includes teachers, professors, parents, board members, and others who have experience with or knowledge about ASD.

The vision of our organization to create a successful, unique program specializing in services for adults with ASD endured many challenges, changes, and criticisms in its early stages of development. Yet, one by one, each challenge was addressed directly, each change was incorporated into a new idea for the program, and each criticism was put to rest as families, residents, staff members, county officials, and other stakeholders saw the positive impact of the program on individuals with ASD.

Today, we can report we have successfully:

- Earned the first **CARF** accreditation for ASD services in the state of Minnesota.
- Duplicated our ASD program at a second center.
- Been involved in numerous public events, conferences, and media articles.
- Established a reputation for emerging leadership in the disability field.

We realize, however, our vision will never be fully realized. We continue to strive to grow, learn, and enhance the quality of our services.

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## **ABOUT THE AUTHOR**

Jodi Meerovich is program director and autism services specialist at Midwest Special Services, Inc. She has worked in the rehabilitation field for close to 15 years.

Before coming to the organization, Jodi worked with children with ASD in a variety of settings, including home-based programming, center-based facilities, and school consulting. She holds a master's degree in special education with an ASD certificate.

Jodi says, "I love the challenges of working with adults and being involved in designing the ASD program at Midwest Special Services and being responsive to the needs of our persons served and their families."

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## Entertainment Industries Council releases special PRISM Awards podcasts

The Entertainment Industries Council (EIC), a nonprofit organization dedicated to encouraging the art of making a difference, presented the 15th Annual PRISM Awards Showcase on September 25, 2011, recognizing accurate depictions and portrayals of substance abuse and mental health.

The nationally-televised magazine-style show also discussed the societal impact of entertainment and the roles science, engineering, technology, and mathematics play in recovery.

Podcasts featuring actors and supporters of EIC's PRISM Awards have been created to enhance the PRISM experience.

- Executive Producer **Marie Gallo Dyak** interviews PRISM Award winner **Tony Denison** (below left) about his character in *The Closer* and the character's battles with alcoholism on the show. Denison was honored for "Best Performance in a Drama Episode":

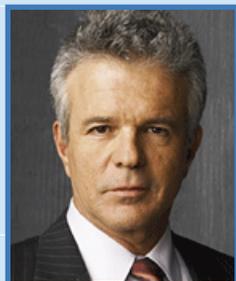
[www.youtube.com/watch?v=1LfoXJr0b7I](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=1LfoXJr0b7I)

- Actress **Sharon Lawrence** (below center) discusses the importance of accurate depiction of substance use and mental illness in entertainment media, the impact on the American audience, and her role on *NYPD Blue*:

[www.youtube.com/watch?v=sM5ZvDADbQ0](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=sM5ZvDADbQ0)

- Rick Stephens** (below right), senior vice president of Human Resources and Administration for The Boeing Company, discusses the blending and collaboration of art and science to impact substance abuse and recovery:

[www.youtube.com/watch?v=XwcXMzePqHA](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=XwcXMzePqHA)



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