

# Nonprofit Solutions at Work helps workers with disabilities fill region's labor gaps

The coronavirus pandemic had an immediate and painful impact on the jobs-focused nonprofit Solutions at Work (SAW). The Cleveland-based 501(c)(3) immediately shuttered six activity centers that provided Clevelanders with developmental disabilities vocational rehabilitation services and group employment opportunities.

While SAW reopened its leased Cuyahoga County facilities in summer 2020, not all of its corporate partners followed. As of 2023, the organization has a core group of 10 businesses giving potentially life-changing jobs to adults with disabilities. With a shortage of skilled workers impacting all levels of industry, SAW is doing what it can to fill those gaps, noted CEO Judith Carey.

Founded in partnership with the Cuyahoga County Board of Developmental Disabilities, SAW provides vocational, group employment and adult daycare services to 509 individuals in total.

Would-be workers aged 18 to 60 receive training either on a job site or at one of SAW's adult activity facilities, with graduates working in group employment settings at L'Oreal, PCC Airfoils or other area organizations contracted by the nonprofit.

At L'Oreal, an eight-person cohort may pack and label the company's hair care products with the guidance of a specially trained supervisor. Among SAW's other devoted partners is Solon electrical systems firm nVent, which brings in workers to assemble clamps for electrical conduits.

"We do seven or eight clamps for the company," Carey said. "It's a great job for us, because individuals, depending on their disability, can use a jig to do this work. Some people can do it without the jig, so there is lots of paid work for people with different levels of ability."



A SAW participant working from the organization's Beachwood facility strips corrugated circles as part of a job for Welch Packaging.

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## A focus on critical 'soft skills'

Temp programs new to the SAW portfolio put six to eight people into short-term projects before relocating them to a different company. Trained labor benefits businesses, while participants become accustomed to changes in their lives.

"For clients working long-term at a job training site, it's harder to move them into a full-time job because they're so used to going to that particular place," Carey said. "This can be an issue even for people without disabilities."

Easing a client's transition into independence is a vital facet of the nonprofit's mission. To that end, SAW provides "soft skills" training around teamwork, communication and the positive attitudes and behaviors that reinforce those talents. Temp programs are part of that process as well, Carey said.

"Training workers on-site and then moving onto the next location helps them transition," Carey said. "Once someone does it a few times with support of a supervisor, it's easier for them to make the change."

Welch Packaging, a Valley View company that provides cardboard boxes to businesses throughout Northeast Ohio, has enjoyed a 20-year relationship with SAW. The nonprofit's workers with special needs strip truckloads of corrugated circles for Welch, completing this work at area SAW facilities.

"It's simple work, but we are giving them 300,000-piece orders," said John Gabrylski, a senior estimator and purchaser at Welch. "It's a never-ending story for the type of work we're giving them."

In the past, SAW has handled basic box-gluing tasks, allowing Welch to keep down labor costs and concentrate on its bottom line.

"We don't have to hire extra people to do the job, and SAW does outstanding work for us," Gabrylski said. "If there's something (the workers) don't understand, we'll send a rep over to explain. But they do a good job in getting things done on time."

## Hard at work

A nationwide labor shortage has affected SAW's ability to hire direct service staff, Carey said. Funding is another pain point, as the state of Ohio only pays for 90 days of services once someone is placed in a job.

SAW bills Medicaid to pay staff members, a result of becoming an independent nonprofit in 2020. However, Medicaid only pays the equivalent of \$12.78 per hour for every individual taken on by SAW, a problem for an organization intent on paying staff a living wage.

Recent years found SAW fundraising its \$8.3 million budget through grants, family donations and direct mail campaigns. Carey will always be concerned about finances, but shepherding her charges into sustainable work makes the journey worth it. Median retention rate for SAW workers is about eight to 10 years, proving how much this historically underserved group has to offer.

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