



## Board of County Commissioners

Leon County, Florida

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### Agenda Item Executive Summary

Tuesday, October 27, 2009

**Title:**

Presentation on Project SEARCH: Transition from School to Work for Individuals with Disabilities and Request for Board Direction on Creation of a Project SEARCH Program for Leon County

**Staff:**

Parwez Alam, County Administrator  
Lillian Bennett, Director of Human Resources  
Chansidy Daniels, Employee Relations Manager

**Issue Briefing:**

This item seeks Board direction of a new "Project SEARCH" pilot program for Leon County that would provide internships for students with disabilities (Attachment #1). Representatives from the Agency for Persons with Disabilities will provide a brief presentation on the Project SEARCH program.

**Fiscal Impact:**

This item has a fiscal impact. The Agency for Persons with Disabilities would provide funding in the amount of \$100,000 for the first year of the Project SEARCH Pilot program. The first year funding of \$100,000 would cover the cost of providing an instructor, approximately four job coaches and classroom materials needed to assist 12 students with disabilities in their internships with various departments within Leon County. The Agency for Persons with Disabilities indicates that the second and future year funding for the Project SEARCH Program would be funded with per pupil funding by the Leon County School Board. At this time, the Agency for Persons with Disabilities has not entered into a formal agreement with the Leon County School Board to participate in the Project SEARCH Program or received a commitment from the School Board to provide per pupil funding for the Project SEARCH program in the second and future years of the program. Staff recommends that, if the County chooses to create the Project SEARCH program, the Agency for Persons with Disabilities receive a written commitment from the School Board prior to Leon County establishing the Project SEARCH program.

Additionally, staff is requesting funding from the FY2010 general fund in the amount of \$15,225 to hire a 30-hour a week OPS graduate student to assist in the development and implementation of the Project SEARCH Pilot Program for the first nine months. Funding is available in the general fund contingency account. A full-time Project SEARCH Coordinator position would be requested in the FY 2010/11 budget to administer the program for Leon County on a continuing basis. Future funding in this project should be addressed during the FY 2011 budget process.

**Staff Recommendation:**

Board Direction.

**Background:**

At the September 22, 2009 meeting, the Board directed staff to bring back an agenda item regarding the creation of Project SEARCH program for Leon County. Representatives from the Agency for Persons with Disabilities will provide a brief presentation on the Project SEARCH program (Attachment #1).

October is recognized as Disability Employment Awareness Month. Nationally, qualified individuals with disabilities are not working at a level that is consistent with the able-bodied workforce. Although tremendous strides have been made in employing persons with disabilities, significant barriers still exist. According to the U.S. Department of Labor, the unemployment level of qualified individuals with disabilities is 70%. During this economic downturn, the unemployment rate for persons with disabilities is 15.4% and for those without a disability it is 9.7%. Thus, getting a job and keeping a job is more challenging for persons with disabilities than other population groups.

With the 20th Anniversary of the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) approaching, the State of Florida, Agency for Persons with Disabilities, has requested that Leon County evaluate the feasibility of creating a Project SEARCH pilot program for Leon County that would provide internships for students with disabilities.

**Analysis:**

Project SEARCH is a one-year, high school transition program that was developed in 1996. Project SEARCH provides training and education leading to employment for individuals with disabilities. Project SEARCH serves as a workforce alternative for students in their last year of high school. The cornerstone of Project SEARCH is total immersion into large business. Each day, the student reports to the host employer, learns employability skills in the classroom and job skills while participating in three to four rotating internships/experiences during the year, approximately 10 months. Students also participate in monthly progress meetings to define their career goal and plan necessary steps to achieve their goals.

Project SEARCH is a national employment model to help the most vulnerable individuals with disabilities gain work experience, be competitive, and transition into full-time work. Project SEARCH is based on a partnership that includes the Florida Agency for Persons with Disabilities, the identified and selected local business, the school board and other designated agencies. All partners are vital to the success of the program and must all be on board and in agreement with their role and responsibilities in order for the program to work.

Roles and Responsibilities

Attachment #2 provides an outline of the Project SEARCH Roles and Responsibilities for the entities involved in the program. Roles and responsibilities outlined are:

- Student Intern
- Instructor
- Job Coach
- School Board Administrator
- Vocational Rehabilitation Counselor - (Would provide approximately four Job Coaches)
- Employee (once student becomes hired!)
- Job Developer (may be Instructor or Service Provider)
- Follow Along (MRDD or APD or Service Provider)

Staff has reviewed the primary roles and responsibilities for Leon County to participate in the Project SEARCH Pilot Program. Additional resources required are shown in italics as follows:

*Business Liaison (Host Employer):*

- Works with instructor and job coach to develop three to four job rotations, job descriptions, and job modifications for approximately 12 students with disabilities.
- Arranges for detailed job orientation and training to the intern.
- Provides a mentor to the intern who would be available during the same work shift.
- Assist with interview process for student interns before their job rotations.
- When possible, provides educational talks regarding their areas of business to interns before and between job rotations.
- *Provide classroom space to be set aside for instructor and approximately four job coaches. Space would be needed at each designated worksite location.*
- *Identify and fund internal staffing needs for Project SEARCH Coordination*
- *Serves on Agency for Persons with Disabilities Advisory Committee*

*Co-Worker / Mentor:*

- A co-worker who works the same shift as the intern and provides on-the-job support (answers questions, introduce them to co workers, provide friendship).
- Provides natural supports to the student intern and orientation to the work environment.
- Notifies the immediate supervisor and job coach of any concerns that arise.

*Department Supervisor:*

- *Provides detailed job orientation and minimal training to the intern. Job Coaches would need to provide primary training in order for Leon County's program to work effectively.*
- Provides immediate supervision to the intern.
- Completes intern evaluations.
- Works with the job coach and teacher to address areas of development.
- Works with *Leon County Project SEARCH Coordinator*, manager, teacher and job coach to develop appropriate job descriptions for interns.

The goal of Project SEARCH is to simulate a true work environment as much as possible. This includes going through initial job orientation and training, shadowing other employees (if this is how new employees are generally trained), taking normal breaks, eating lunch with peers, clocking in and out, providing and wearing the correct uniform, dealing with a supervisor and being evaluated on performance. The role of the instructor is to provide classroom training on these job skills. The role of the job coach is to assist the employee in being successful in these tasks with as much independence as possible.

In general, workers with disabilities do best when instructions are clear and precise. Detailed training from Job Coaches together with written instructions and mentoring would be large factors in a successful experience. The roles of the members of the team are "cogs in the wheel" of a successful placement.

#### Project SEARCH Host Businesses

Currently, the Project SEARCH Program has primarily been implemented in hospital environments (Attachment #3). Florida governmental agencies that have implemented Project SEARCH Pilot Programs include the City of Miami and the Miami Metro Zoo. In staff discussions with the City of Miami staff, they indicate that the program is rewarding but requires a significant amount of staff time, coordination, and County resources, including space allocation and funding. A dedicated staff person spends up to 75% of their time administering and planning the Project SEARCH program annually. They also recommend the use of one job location site to accommodate the classroom space needs of the instructor and job coaches and to immediately address any issues that may arise on the job site with department managers/supervisors. Since Leon County has several locations throughout Leon County, space needs would be an important consideration in the development of the Project SEARCH Pilot Program.

#### Project SEARCH Funding

The Agency for Persons with Disabilities would provide funding in the amount of \$100,000 for the first year of the Project SEARCH Pilot program. This funding would cover the cost of providing an instructor, approximately four job coaches, and classroom materials needed to assist 12 students with disabilities in their internships with various departments within Leon County.

The Agency for Persons with Disabilities indicates that the second and future year funding for the Project SEARCH Program would be funded with per pupil funding by the Leon County School Board. The Leon County School Board would be responsible for funding the costs associated with providing the instructor (FTE's from students + weights), Job Coaches, any additional teaching staff; providing the curriculum and classroom supplies (Attachment #4). At this time, the Agency for Persons with Disabilities has not entered into a formal agreement with the Leon County School Board to participate in the Project SEARCH Program or received a commitment from the School Board to provide per pupil funding for the program in future years. Staff recommends that representatives from the Agency for Persons with Disabilities receive a written commitment of participation and funding from the School Board prior to Leon County embarking on creation of the Project SEARCH Pilot program. If for some reason the School Board does not fully fund the Project SEARCH Pilot Program, Leon County may be expected to fund and continue the program in future years.

Attachment # 3  
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Additionally, if the County moves forward with Project SEARCH, staff would request the amount of \$15,225 to hire a 30-hour a week OPS graduate student to assist in the development and implementation of the Project SEARCH Pilot Program for the first nine months (Attachment #5). The position would be responsible for working with Project SEARCH staff, instructors, and job coaches, as well as identifying job sites, developing student tasks and responsibilities and job descriptions. The position would also coordinate with supervisors and manage those involved in the Project SEARCH program. A full-time Project SEARCH Coordinator position would be requested in the FY 2010/11 budget to administer the program for Leon County on a continuing basis. The cost of providing dedicated classroom space at several potential internship site locations and any cost associated with rehabbing, and making any potential accommodations that may be required to the space(s) would also need to be determined.

### Summary

Project SEARCH is a one-year, high school transition program that was developed in 1996 and provides training and education leading to employment for individuals with disabilities. Project Search has an employment model with identified roles and responsibilities for all involved entities that requires significant coordination and commitment by all parties. The Agency for Persons with Disabilities will provide funding for the first year of the program which includes 12 high school student interns with disabilities, an instructor and approximately four Job Coaches. However, in future years, the Agency for Persons with Disabilities indicates that the Leon County School Board will fund the program. Currently, there is no agreement with the School Board or commitment for future funding from the School Board.

Staff would request a 30-hours a week OPS position for the initial planning, development and implementation of the program and will request a full-time Leon County Project Search Coordinator in the FY 2010/11 budget. The Project Search program model would need to be adapted to work within the Leon County government structure, including determination of the number of students that can participate in the first year, space allocation for classroom use at multiple locations and the number of jobs and job rotation positions available that meets the skill level and needs of the student interns within the Leon County workforce. This would be a new program for Leon County. If the Board wishes to pursue the Project Search Pilot program, staff recommends Options #1, #2, and #3.

**Options:**

1. Direct Agency for Persons with Disabilities to provide written confirmation from the Leon County School Board of its student participation in the Project SEARCH Program for the 2010/11 school year and commitment to providing pupil funding in the second and future years of the Project SEARCH Program.
2. Direct staff to create a Project SEARCH Pilot Program for Leon County that would provide internships for students with disabilities and bring back for Board review and approval once confirmation of participation and future year funding is received by the Agency from Persons with Disabilities from the Leon County School Board.
3. Approve budget amendment and funding in the amount of \$15,225 from the general fund for a 30-hour a week OPS position to assist in the development, implementation, and monitoring of the Project SEARCH Pilot Program for the first year beginning in January 2010. Include a request in the FY 2010/2011 Budget for a full-time Leon County Project SEARCH Coordinator position to administer the Project SEARCH Program for future years.
4. Do not direct staff to create a Project SEARCH Pilot Program for Leon County.
5. Board Direction.

**Recommendation:**

Board Direction.

**Attachments:**

1. What is Project SEARCH
2. Project SEARCH Roles and Responsibilities
3. Project SEARCH Host Businesses
4. Project SEARCH PowerPoint Presentation
5. Budget Amendment for OPS Position

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