

# Project Advance

By Liz Mineo/Framingham Tab Staff Writer  
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Forty-seven year old John Buie battled mental health problems for some time before he quit his job as an administrative assistant in a MetroWest company.

Unable to work for two years, Buie longed to get back to work, but wasn't sure he could do it. With help from a local career placement service, Buie overcame his fears, gained new skills, and landed a job at Bob's Stores.

"I was very nervous," said Buie, of Wellesley, who has worked at the retail store since last year. "I didn't know if I was going to be able to get a job and keep it. I was proved wrong. I was happily proved wrong."

Buie is one of many success stories of Project Advance, a career and job placement service that helps those like Buie, whose careers have been interrupted by mental health problems. Without that help, Buie said it would have been more difficult to get a job, and to get his self-confidence back.

"I'd still be searching," said Buie. "They gave me the support to do it. They make me feel that I could get a job. They gave me my self-esteem back."

Project Advance, created in 1989, teaches skills needed to work in the private sector and to overcome behavioral and emotional barriers to employment.

It trains participants in resume development, interviewing and networking to help them get back into the workforce; it helps them during the job search offering support groups and counseling; and it sometimes places them in jobs obtained through an Employment Advisory Board, made up of local businesses and corporations.

The project is the brainchild of Programs For People, Inc., a 30-year-old day treatment and rehabilitation center for adults with mental illness. Every year, Project Advance serves about 50 people, many of whom receive treatment and rehabilitation from the center.

Over the past three years, there has been an increase in the number of clients, said Robert Charpentier, center employment services manager.

"We're seeing more people now," said Charpentier. "But, unfortunately we're placing fewer people or we're often placing them in jobs beneath their abilities. Now, it's more difficult to find jobs, and we have record numbers of people looking for work."

In 2001, 22 of 42 people were placed in jobs; in 2002, only 14 of 52, and in 2003, 16 of 47. The low numbers are due to a combination of several factors, said Carpentier. The economic slump is the major factor, as many companies are not hiring, but there are other factors as well.

"Some clients don't feel ready to go back to work, others are in the process of searching for a job," said Charpentier. "It doesn't mean they fail." Like many other social services agencies across the state, Project Advance has suffered cutbacks and a drop in donations. The program receives most of its reimbursement from the Massachusetts Rehabilitation Commission, but only for services provided. To finance other costs, the program holds an annual fundraising event.

Along with financial difficulties, the program faces other challenges. Though many more companies are open to hiring people with disabilities or with mental illness, there are many others that are still reluctant to do it.

"There is a stigma associated with mental illness," said Charpentier. "People think they're violent, and it's less than 1 percent that is actually violent. People are afraid to hire them because they think they're not capable."

Part of Charpentier's job is to educate companies about people with mental illness. As chairman of the MetroWest Work Opportunities Coalition, his group will host a seminar, "Guide for Success: A Toolkit for Employers Dealing

with Mental Health Issues in the Workplace" March 3rd at TJX Companies. Mark Vonnegut, son of well-known writer Kurt Vonnegut, will be the keynote speaker.

The program offers counseling support for employers and consultation services to employees. If prospective employees accept to have his mental illness disclosed to his new employers, staff will help both (the client and employer) deal with any issues. It's an agreement that suits many Project Advance clients.

Such is the case of Rose Pisano, 50, who works as a cashier at WalMart, a job she found through the program.

"When you disclose, you don't have to worry about your disability," said Pisano. "People are supportive and understanding, and they help you maintain your job."

Pisano, who has suffered from depression for many years while working at other retail companies, credits the program for helping her get back on her feet.

"I don't know where I'd be without the program," she said. "It took a lot of determination on my part, but it took a lot of support too."

"It fills a big need," said Iris Carroll, Programs For People's Director. "Many people see a therapist but they don't have a place to go for employment consulting."

Project Advance clients agree. "People would be lost without it," said a former Ashland businessman who suffered from depression and didn't want to be identified. "It offers you more than a crutch. It helps you get back on your feet."

All those interested in helping Project Advance can call (508) 620-1730.