

# Center breaks down clients' barriers to employment

**CENTER OF VOCATIONAL** Alternatives aids people with mental illness, addiction and other disabilities.

BY MELISSA KOSSLER DUTTON  
| FOR BUSINESS FIRST

Amid budget cuts and downsizing, Laura Donahue has found a bright spot for her clients at the YMCA of Central Ohio – a new partnership with the Center of Vocational Alternatives.

The YMCA recently hired COVA to provide employment counseling and services to the residents of its men's shelters because the agency could no longer fund an in-house position.

COVA, the area leader in vocational rehabilitation services for people with mental illnesses and other disabilities, has provided some "outstanding" results, said Donahue, who serves as the director of supportive services for the YMCA.

"We couldn't even dream that we could have results that good," she said.

## NEW CONTRACTS

It was budget cuts at Clintonville-based COVA that made the agency go after new contracts. The organization, like all Alcohol, Drug and Mental Health Board agencies in Franklin County, has seen a 25 percent reduction in funding in response to state budget cuts, said Robin Hepler, COVA's director of marketing. The cuts totaled about \$250,000 for 2010.

COVA has responded to the cuts by creating new contracts, working through state and federal programs and accepting private-pay clients. The agency also is working to create a skills-building program to support men and women with mental illness who are leaving the prison system.

"(The cuts) have been a catalyst to reach out to other funders and to innovate alternative services," said Judy Braun, COVA president. "We're taking our skills to another organization."

A \$500,000 federal stimulus grant Sept. 1 more than made up for the budget cuts experienced by the agency, however. The money will be used for a one-year program in which the



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One of the things Center of Vocational Alternatives clients can do is access the Clintonville nonprofit's Resource Center, where computers and staff members are available to help in their search for employment. Clients such as Robert Manning, right, who has been looking for work for a month, also can use the center's phone and fax machine. Staff members, such as COVA Vice President John Finch, left, can aid with resume preparation and job-hunting skills.

agency will do a new type of service for the Ohio Rehabilitation Services Commission, which is experiencing a backlog of work because of a hiring freeze, Braun said.

COVA is helping the state agency perform back-to-work assessments and orientation for clients with mental illness or physical or developmental challenges.

## 'WHAT THEY CAN DO'

For many of COVA's clients, joining the work force improves other aspects of their lives, Braun said.

"Think of all the benefits a

person derives from work," she said.

Work provides opportunities for socializing, improves feelings of self worth and creates a source of income, she said.

The dedication and quality of COVA staff gets results, added Linda Jakes, clinical director of Concord Counseling in Westerville, which uses the agency to provide employment services to clients. Two COVA counselors are assigned to Concord Counseling, which provides a continuity of services, Jakes said.

The job counselors have a way of making people with se-

vere mental disabilities change their focus from "what they can't do" to "what they can do," Jakes said.

COVA also focuses on helping clients keep their jobs, which is critical, Jakes said.

COVA staff members remain in touch with clients – and their employers – after they've accepted jobs. This ongoing relationship provides a way for clients and employers to address concerns about scheduling, job performance or other issues. Having an advocate to resolve problems makes it much easier for clients keep working, she said.

"It's huge," Jakes said. "It's really a good thing. This program makes sure things are going well."

The comprehensiveness of the program is key to helping clients "have the highest quality of life, the fullest life they can have," Braun said.

*'Think of all the benefits a person derives from work.'*

Judy Braun | Center of Vocational Alternatives



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