



As focus shifts away from workshops, Mobile ARC is looking for employers willing to give the disabled a chance

Loading Photo Gallery

Carol McPhail | cmcphail@al.com By Carol McPhail | cmcphail@al.com

[Email the author](#) | [Follow on Twitter](#)

on August 26, 2014 at 9:57 AM, updated August 26, 2014 at 11:36 AM

MOBILE, Alabama – On a hot Thursday morning at Hank Aaron Stadium, Keith Gates is hard at work – a broom in one hand and dustpan in the other. High above the field, he's making his way between rows of seats where he has picked up trash. Now he's sweeping up peanut shells.

"I never stop," says Gates, 40. "I just want to keep on going."

Gates, a Mobile resident with intellectual disabilities, works on a crew from Mobile ARC that does contract work for the **Mobile BayBears** before and after home games. This kind of out-in-the-community work experience will be increasingly important for Gates and others as federal and state agencies shift funding away from sheltered workshops for people with disabilities, and toward services that support employment in the regular workforce.

"The support is not going away, but how the support is delivered will be changing," said Courtney Tarver, associate commissioner for the Division of Development Disabilities at the state Department of Mental Health. By October 2015, the state will need to show that it's making progress toward that shift in order to comply with the Americans with Disabilities Act and continue to receive matching Medicaid funds from the federal government, Tarver said.

As a result, **Mobile ARC** is looking for employers who would be willing to give people with disabilities a chance at employment. "We can add diversity to your workforce," said Ginger Druhan, Mobile ARC director of vocational programs. "We've got people who want to work. They're eager."

Recently, Druhan was at the B&H Food Store on Halls Mill Road with a group of people in the Mobile ARC program. On that day, they were bagging groceries for donations to McKemie Place and to get a little on-the-job experience. Employment specialists were on hand to coach the group and pitch in when needed.

"We want to showcase people's abilities," said Andrew Acklen, Mobile ARC program director. "That should be the option for any adult."

The idea is to invest less in "sheltered workshops" -- which employ the disabled exclusively -- and into job coaching and other support services that help them find and keep jobs in the community.

Pat Houston was placing groceries in plastic bags at the end of a checkout counter. If she were at the sheltered

workshop, Mobile ARC Enterprises Southern Division, she would have been using a screw gun to make Adirondack chairs.

"You focus on your job and pay attention," said Houston, describing what she was learning at the store. "You have to separate the bread."

B&H Manager Don Henderson said the group's efforts gave him an opportunity to consider potential employees. "A lot of people look at a job in retail as not a real job," Henderson said. "A lot of people don't put forth the effort."

RELATED: Life Stories: Jane Tate Moore 'changed the world' by founding the organization that became Mobile ARC

About 130 people are employed at the sheltered workshop, including the Southern Division, which makes cypress chairs, swings, footrests, loveseats, gliders and grows Bibb lettuce, vegetables and herbs; and the Central Division, which makes plant sleeves and historical-grade lattice.

Those workshops would "mostly likely remain open," but people's ability to receive job training may be "time limited," said spokesman Gretchen Crane.

Bradley Reynolds, director of sales for the **Mobile BayBears**, said he sought out the relationship with Mobile ARC in part to become a better community partner. "One of the goals this year is to get into the community," said Reynolds. "You name it, we want to be there."

What's more, the crew's performance is consistent and complete, he said. "They bust their tails for us."

As he joked with Gates, Reynolds explained that the interaction with the group from Mobile ARC has been enriching for the entire office staff.

As for Gates, he nods when asked if he likes working at the stadium. "I hang around with him," he said, smiling and pointing to Reynolds.

© 2014 AL.com. All rights reserved.