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Project SEARCH gives students with special needs some exposure to the workplace

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Published: Thursday, January 15, 2015 at 11:00 p.m.

A new program is giving high school students with disabilities real-world working experience at the Tuscaloosa Veterans Affairs Medical Center.

Project SEARCH, which began this school year, allows students with significant disabilities to work in various internships at the Tuscaloosa VA during what would normally be school hours.

This year there are nine students from the Tuscaloosa County School System who are doing three rounds of internships prior to finishing their last year of high school, said Reese Grantham, a vocation rehabilitation counselor with the Department of Rehabilitation Services.

“Rather than going to the high school, the students go to their internship, and we have sites all over,” Grantham said. “Students work in patient transport (and) pharmacy, food services, doing different rotations.”

The experience gives the students with disabilities — which range from autism to Down syndrome — real-world employment experience that they can put on their resumes and use to help get a job after they finish school.

“The key is giving them a life that is more independent, and a better quality of life,” said Greg Woods, the development coordinator for the Arc of Tuscaloosa County. “The students go into a work environment and see real-world, every-day obstacles, from figuring out how to get to and from work, what to do about lunch and how to relate to coworkers not like them. It makes them step up and become more independent.”

Of the nine students participating in the program, one has already found regular employment, Grantham said.

“Project SEARCH is a wonderful program,” said Carrie Franks, a student who is interning in research and development at the Tuscaloosa VA. “It helps us see not just who we want to be, but who we need to be. It teaches us to work and to be a better student but also better people.”

Fellow student Maria Fields agreed.

“I’m in human resources now, and I really like it,” Fields said. “It teaches me different things and how to do different jobs.”

Project SEARCH began in Cincinnati in 1996 and is now worldwide. The Tuscaloosa County School System was notified last summer that the local program had received



Photo | Kirsten Fiscus

From left, teacher Edna Womack, Project SEARCH intern Spencer Nelson and director Maria Andrews applaud as they listen to speakers Thursday during an open house at the Tuscaloosa Veterans Affairs Medical Center.

approval, and it officially began in August.

Partners in the local program include Alabama Departments of Education, Mental Health and Rehabilitation Services, the Alabama DD Council, Tuscaloosa County School System and the Arc of Tuscaloosa.

The Tuscaloosa VA Medical Center is partnering with them as their host business and is only the second VA hospital in the nation to host a Project SEARCH program, said Damon Stevenson, spokesperson for the Tuscaloosa VA.

On Thursday, the VA hosted the open house for the program to help attract future participants but also to let area businesses know more about the program.

“The program has been valuable to the Project SEARCH students and VA employees ... (and) the students have provided a tremendous support to us in serving the veterans,” Stevenson said. “We hope they have enjoyed it as much as we have.”

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