

Via

of the Lehigh Valley, Inc.
By Ann Marie Slavick

Mission Statement: *Via will provide leadership, support, opportunities and resources for people with disabilities, so that they may be independent, productive and enjoy full lives within the community.*

As I waited in the lobby of Via of the Lehigh Valley, it was buzzing with energy and activity. I was greeted by pleasant and friendly people, all products of Via's environment, working at jobs Via helped them to find. From all the happy faces, it is apparent Via is achieving its mission.

Via, a private non-profit human services agency has been operating locally in the Lehigh Valley since 1954 providing assistance to those with disabilities. A very valuable asset to our area, it provides Children's Services, Community and Volunteer Services, Employment and Residential Services. Covering about 1,000 individuals and families with developmental delays and disabilities including, but not restricted to: epilepsy, muscular dystrophy, autism, down syndrome, cerebral palsy, sensory issues, and short-term and long-term physical handicaps. Sitting with two ambitious young women, Lisa Walkiewicz, Director of Communications and Julie DePhillips, Director of Children's Services, it was apparent how very passionate they are about their work and the lives they affect in a positive way.

Via helps adults with disabilities find jobs and also partake in volunteer activities like Meals on Wheels. Via's purpose is to give people the tools and knowledge to get ahead in life despite their disabilities. Partnering with Lehigh Valley businesses like Wegmans, Just Born, Inc. and Martin Guitar they are able to place people in employment positions where they can interact with others in the community. As Lisa Walkiewicz looks to the future, she says, "Our vision is to have people working in the community alongside everybody else instead of a segregated setting." And they have been accomplishing that. Like Lisa says, "Adults with disabilities should have the same opportunities as everyone else." Preparing them for college, accompanying them to classes and helping them find affordable and accessible housing is the key to a successful future.

Within the Children's Services department there are 2 programs, Early Intervention and Inclusive Childcare. Early Intervention is a state program providing speech and physical and occupational therapy for children from

birth to age 3, provided by Via staff. The instruction takes place in the child's natural environment, in their own homes or in child care centers with caregiver participation required.

Another important program, according to Julie DePhillips, Director of Children's Services and a social worker, is Inclusive Childcare. "I can talk about it all day," she says with bright eyes. The program operates thanks to a 3-year grant from the United Way and a \$5,000 grant from Just Born, Inc., which enabled them to hire 5 full-time inclusion specialists. The specialists, all with degrees are trained in inclusive practices and have daycare experience. They work with 1,000 children and families, and teach 250 staffers. Working with children and staff at child care centers, they teach the staff how to make adaptations in order to include those children with physical or behavioral issues into their current curriculum without changing the centers' programs. According to Via's press release in May 2007, Janeen Sproul, a Via inclusion specialist says, "It is apparent that children with disabilities significantly benefit from receiving care alongside typically developing peers." Julie believes, "Children deserve a bright and healthy start in life and all children should have the same opportunities to learn and grow in their community."

The program reduces the pressure on parents and allows them to go back to work. "Finding proper childcare for many families is heartbreaking and more stressful when you need to have confidence in caregivers to meet the special needs of your child," says Julie. Via gives caregivers the tools and knowledge so that changes are sustainable over the long term. Via is beneficial to the community because it helps disabled children become independent adults. They become productive and contribute to the economy and society in a positive way. "It strengthens the community by providing the services we do," Lisa says.

In order to continue their great work and expand into the future, funding is needed. Some funding comes from the local counties for Early Intervention and Inclusive Childcare operates from the 3-year United



Way grant and the \$5,000 Just Born, Inc. grant but a 20% discrepancy still exists.

You can help in many ways with fundraising, volunteering or donating to the Via Thrift Stores. The Thrift Stores collect items like house wares, clothing, or anything that can be resold in its current condition including furniture, which they will pick-up.

The new Westgate Mall Thrift Store will be opening this summer, with more designer clothes and more of a "boutique feel," with smaller household items. Volunteering opportunities at the Thrift Stores, Via events and event planning is also encouraged.

Contact Via

336 W. Spruce Street
Bethlehem, PA 18018
610-317-8000 • fax: 610-867-5385
Register for events at:
www.vianet.org
Email: via@vianet.org

Schedule of Events:

Golf Tournament
Friday, August 24, 2007
Southmoore Golf Course ~ Bath, Pa
Scramble begins 11am

Lehigh River Relay Marathon Run
Sunday, September 9, 2007
Lehigh River Canal Towpath

Thrift Stores:

1249 Liberty Street, Allentown, Pa 18102
610-437-4562

Fountain Hill
1401 Broadway, Bethlehem, Pa 18015
610-866-6776

New! Via Thrift Boutique
Featuring designer fashions and accessories.

Westgate Mall
2285 Schoenersville Road
Bethlehem, PA 18017 ■