



MAKING WORK, “WORK” FOR PEOPLE WITH “HIDDEN DISABILITIES”

How Peckham is helping those with mental illness gain a foothold in the world of work

Lansing, MI – Peckham, Inc., a national award-winning organization and named one of Michigan’s Best and Brightest Companies to Work For, employs a vibrant, diverse and inclusive workforce, with 80% of its employees living with one or more disabilities.

“There is a misconception that because a person doesn’t use a wheelchair, or doesn’t have the physical disability traits, they can’t be disabled. That’s just not true,” said Sarah George, Organizational Employment Manager.

Peckham’s largest population served is individuals with mental illness, disabilities not visible to the eye. Because individuals with mental illness do not ‘look’ like they have a disability, they may be reluctant to disclose their disability to employers, or ask for accommodations. Stigmas associated with mental illness present unique barriers to entering in and maintaining successful employment.

Work behaviors may be the first sign noticed by an employer. This may include attendance issues, difficulty focusing or managing stress. Too often these work behaviors are viewed as the person being unproductive, ‘lazy’ or ‘anti-social’ and often lead to termination.

“People living with mental illness face many challenges, including employment rates under 18% - a staggeringly low rate. Individuals with mental illness are much less likely to secure employment as compared to other individuals with disabilities,” says Margaret Keeler, Vice President National Alliance on Mental Illness, Lansing. “Peckham is leading the way in providing the supports, training and flexible environment for people living with mental illness to not just have a job, but to thrive.”

Peckham employee Neva VanHouten agrees, “Most of my life I had difficulty with depression and had to close my business when diagnosed with Major Depression, Post-traumatic Stress Disorder and Bi-Polar Disorder. When looking for work people didn’t understand my disabilities because I looked normal.

Peckham has changed me, I am living on my own, have my own car, and am independent. Peckham has given me the opportunity to do what I love again, work.”

Employment is a critical step in recovery, providing income, self-esteem and the opportunities to learn and practice adaptive strategies for success.

“When employers visit Peckham, they are amazed at our diversity and how we make work ‘work’ for individuals with a wide range of disabilities,” adds George. “Peckham is intentional about creating opportunities for employment that respect each individual’s ability, skills and talent. We believe in the capabilities of people with disabilities.”