

Dept. of Workforce Development: First Lady Kathy Evers, DWD Secretary-Designee Frostman visit University Hospital, highlight Project SEARCH

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MADISON – Department of Workforce Development (DWD) Secretary-designee Caleb Frostman and First Lady Kathy Evers today visited University Hospital (UW) in Madison to highlight UW's and the William S. Middleton Veterans Hospital's (VA) Project SEARCH program and to highlight the efforts of all employers throughout the state who have chosen a diverse and inclusive workforce as well as the contributions of individuals with disabilities to Wisconsin's world-class workforce. The UW/VA site is the oldest operating Project SEARCH site, dating back to 2008. During the 2018-2019 school year, the site had 11 enrollees.

The Project SEARCH program operates in the United States, Canada, the United Kingdom and Ireland. The partnership includes a local high-status business, a school or schools, DWD's Division of Vocational Rehabilitation (DVR), and a vocational services agency. The business provides onsite training in both a classroom and work setting while the school provides the instructor and DVR works with the service agencies to provide job coaches and other supports to individuals while they participate in the program. The program in Wisconsin has expanded from 1 site in

the 2008-2009 school year to 27 sites statewide for the 2018-2019 school year.

“Last year alone, Wisconsin’s Project SEARCH program experienced a 97 percent graduation rate – a testament to the effectiveness of this program and its partnerships,” DWD Secretary Frostman said. “That’s why The Peoples Budget introduced by Governor Evers continues to fund the program throughout the biennium and allocates funding to add additional sites if demand increases continue.”

The vast majority of program graduates are gainfully employed by their host site business or another business in their community shortly after graduation. Wisconsin has graduated over 600 individuals from the Project SEARCH program since its inception in 2008.

Project SEARCH was developed at Cincinnati Children’s Hospital Medical Center, a research environment that fosters visionary thinking and innovation. It all began in 1996, when Erin Riehle was Director of Cincinnati Children’s Emergency Department. Erin felt that, because the hospital served individuals with developmental disabilities, it made sense that they should commit to hiring people in this group. She wondered if it would be possible to train people with developmental disabilities to fill some of the high-turnover, entry level positions in her department, which involved complex and systematic tasks such as stocking supply cabinets. As a starting point, Erin presented her ideas to Susie Rutkowski, then the special education director at Great Oaks Career Campuses. Erin and Susie formed a partnership that was instantaneous, and together they launched Project SEARCH.

More information on Wisconsin’s Project SEARCH program can be found [here](#).