Improving employment outcomes for Indiana citizens with disabilities is a priority for the Bureau of Rehabilitation Services. Vocational Rehabilitation Services (VRS) is taking steps to improve transition services and to increase corporate job development in Indiana. In support of these efforts, VRS is partnering with the Center on Community Living and Careers (CCLC) at Indiana University’s Indiana Institute on Disability and Community, as well as with collaborative teams of adult employment providers, school systems, and local businesses in the development of Indiana sites for Project SEARCH.

Project SEARCH, based on a model developed at Cincinnati Children’s Hospital in 1996, provides transition-age students with quality internship experiences in preparation for competitive employment.

Students in transition—those with disabilities who are in their last year of high school—have found successful employment through the Project SEARCH model, which relies on:

- Strong partner collaboration
- Braided funding of multiple systems
- Full immersion in the workplace culture
- High expectations of all
- Job training in real work settings
- Employability-driven curriculum and activities

Students chosen for Project SEARCH Indiana are considered to have severe disabilities and experience the most obstacles to successful employment. Project SEARCH partners, however, work with the students on interviewing, learning expectations of employment, acquiring specific skills, and acclimating to job-site cultures. Student interns hold jobs in everything from scanning, filing, and performing data entry of documents to stocking medical supplies, running labs, and transporting patients. In addition to in-class instruction time, interns work a minimum of three eight-week rotations. Students will either be employed by their Project SEARCH Indiana site or exit the program with a portfolio detailing their skills and work experiences that includes photos, recognitions, and letters of recommendation.

The first Project SEARCH Indiana site was established in Indianapolis in February 2008, through a partnership of Easter Seals Crossroads, the Indianapolis Public Schools, Community Hospital East, the Indiana Office of Vocational Rehabilitation, and CCLC.

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Five separate hospital departments hosted five student interns for a single rotation of 10 weeks. Beginning with the 2008-2009 school year, this partnership team welcomed 10 interns for three separate rotation experiences each and served as a resource to two additional Project SEARCH Indiana teams. Through these two new sites, 22 additional interns were supported through the collaboration of VRS and CCLC along with:

- Floyd Memorial Hospital, New Albany/Floyd County School Corporation, and Achieva Resources
- Indiana Government Center, Avon Community School Corporation together with Metropolitan School District of Wayne County, and Sycamore Services

Four additional sites are in various stages of development, with target dates of internship rotations beginning during the 2009-2010 school year. They include:

- Gibson General Hospital, Gibson-Pike-Warrick Special Education Cooperative, and Gibson County Area Rehabilitation Center
- La Porte Regional Hospital, the La Porte School System, and Michiana Resources
- St. Mary’s, Gibson-Pike-Warrick Special Education Cooperative, and Southern Indiana Resource Solutions
- Union Hospital, Terre Haute Schools, and Spectrum Services Hamilton Center

Stone Belt Arc, in conversation with VRS and CCLC, is proposing a fifth site, exploring the adaptation of the Project SEARCH Indiana model for young adults who have already left school and who are now seeking employment.

Three additional Project SEARCH Indiana sites, in collaboration with VRS and CCLC, could also be selected by December 31, 2009.

For more information about the Project Search model and Project Search Indiana, contact Margaret Gilbride at the Center on Community Living and Careers, (812) 855-6508, or mgilbrid@indiana.edu.