

First Jobs –

A Win-Win for Business and Youth in Care

Joe Holland pins his Hannaford identification tag onto his baseball cap. He and his sister, Kate Dorr, don bright orange vests and dash out of Hannaford's Windham, Maine store to collect grocery carts from the parking lot. The store manager calls after them cheerfully, "Don't forget – no more than five at a time!"

Joe and Kate are part of *First Jobs Maine*, a pilot employment program providing initial and transitional employment opportunities for youth in care ranging in age from 15-21. The program is funded by the Annie E. Casey Foundation, with technical support from Casey Family Services and the University of Southern Maine's Muskie School, and partners with Employment Trust, Inc. (ETI) of Portland and the Hannaford Brothers Company.

"This program is what 'win-win' is all about," said Mark Millar, executive director of Casey Family Services' Maine Division. Employers like Hannaford fulfill their need for added employees during high tourist season, while youth receive customized job placement, training, coaching and retention support. *First Jobs* combines the expertise of mentors, employers, social service agencies and career coaches to work with youth in a supportive, positive environment.

While serving on the advisory committee for the School to Career program, now administered by the Jim Casey Youth Opportunities Initiative, Rob Franciose, president and founder of ETI, developed the rationale for *First Jobs* to assist youth who have experienced abuse and

neglect, have never held a job and often have learning and other disabilities. "Employment is a functional way to address some of the issues these kids face. It's all about equal access – equal rights, breaking down the barriers to employment for these kids," says Franciose.

Breaking down barriers to employment has been the cornerstone of Franciose's career and ETI's twelve years as a specialty workforce development agency for people with barriers to employment. In October 2003, ETI submitted a grant proposal to the Annie E. Casey Foundation to provide 25 total jobs — 18 in a "Summer Jobs" component and seven in a "Transition-to-Hire" component. By December, the program was funded and within six months, *First Jobs* was up and running.

The Summer Jobs component targets high school students for a 10-week work period. The second component, Transition-to-Hire, targets youth for job placements in regular year-round jobs. Youth in this component are on ETI's payroll until they complete a one- to three-month training program and are "transitioned" to Hannaford's payroll with full benefits.

"Transition-to-Hire is a critical part of the program because it is designed to prevent failure on the job," says Kevin O'Sullivan, ETI Vice-President. According to O'Sullivan, the 15 summer hires in Hannaford's Windham, Standish and Wells stores did so well in the 10-week program, 12 were offered an opportunity for



part-time work during the school year. Kate Dorr was re-employed at the Windham store a couple of evenings a week and on Saturdays. "So, the Summer Jobs Program turned into "Summer-to-Hire," beamed Kevin.

In fact, every aspect of *First Jobs* is designed to make the job experience a successful one for youth who have serious challenges in gaining and maintaining employment. "We want to break the chain of getting a job and losing a job," said Franciose. "If they're on our payroll, we can support them through the learning stages so they don't give up," he said, referring to the training period for which the youth hires are paid.

First Jobs is structured around several other elements that have helped to ensure its success:

- 1) **Job Coaches**, fully trained in the tasks performed by the *First Jobs* Associates, are on site at all times, providing needed support and assistance. Job Coaches are supervised by the Vocational Coordinator, a role fulfilled by another ETI team member, Anthony Taliento. "For many of these

kids, their life experience has been not belonging, feeling like outsiders. This sometimes results in behavior problems that contribute to the cycle of failure in the workforce. We need to bridge the gaps by hanging in with these kids and never judging them,” he says. “At the same time, we need to make sure that the employer gets what they need. So, bridge-building is a critical part of the *First Jobs* process.”

2) The Employability Development Curriculum provides 10 weeks of interactive sessions in which youth are able to knit together their own individual workplace experiences with structured learning about employment. These sessions provide a forum for consistent interaction with trained facilitators from the Portland Career Center’s Training Resource Center as well as guest faculty from Hannaford, banks and other businesses.

3) The Hannaford partnership has been critical to the integrity of the program. Hannaford’s culture of hiring many young people, investing in its employees and focusing on retention makes the grocery chain a perfect corporate partner. Hannaford’s Associate Relationship Managers (ARMS), responsible for day-to-day human resources issues, met regularly with ETI and were an on-site resource for the *First Jobs* Associates. At the end of the summer, Hannaford placed many Associates on “Educational Leave” status, rather than terminating them.

As a result, the youth have the option to return next summer if they choose.

4) The Collaboration and Partnership with Casey Family Services and the Muskie School proved invaluable to recruitment

efforts and facilitating communication with Maine’s Department of Human Services (DHS). Casey and the Muskie School also partnered to create an in-service training program for Hannaford management and supervisory staff, focusing on the issues of youth in care and providing insights, tools and techniques for effective and sensitive workplace communication with young employees.

5) Individualized Job Placement ensured that each Associate was placed in a job that best fit his/her skills, interests and Hannaford’s business needs.

6) Customized Support helped overcome barriers to job success. ETI was the watchdog on any issues that might impede the chances for a youth’s success on the job. The ETI team met with the *First Jobs* Associates over time to learn of any relevant challenges, health problems, or conditions that could affect their work performance. An open door policy on the part of ETI and Hannaford management (through the ARMs) encouraged youth to discuss concerns or questions at any time.

“Helping each Associate through the learning and experience curves, giving them the same ‘life experience’ as many other youth, are the keys to ensuring lasting success in employment,” said O’Sullivan. His colleague, Josh Verville from the Muskie School adds, “Work should be part of foster kids’ exposure. Learning job

skills, hanging in at a job is something they need to do to prepare for life.”

With all these elements in place, no one is resting on the laurels of the first year’s success. Currently, ETI,



Casey Family Services’ Mark Millar, Hannaford and other employers in Maine, and the Annie E. Casey Foundation are exploring an expanded program for 2005 so that more youth may be served.

“We’re encouraged by the outcomes that *First Jobs* has achieved, particularly as we consider promising practices for connecting these young people to opportunities for economic success,” said Brian S. Lyght, Senior Associate in System & Service Reform for the Foundation, who played a key role in funding the program.

As Kate and Joe hang up their orange vests at the end of the day, they look happy. Like many foster siblings, they haven’t lived together since they were very young. But *First Jobs* brought them together in the workplace for a summer. Just like many kids their age, they worked, earned money, met new friends, learned new skills, and most importantly they discovered something about themselves. They learned that they can succeed at a job as well as anyone. For that summer, just like all the other employees at Hannaford, Kate and Joe had the chance to belong.

