

# Project SEARCH is Coming to the Area

## Mercer Health Will be the Host Organization

Young adults with disabilities will have an exciting opportunity to participate in a work-readiness program this fall as they move from school into the world of work.

Project SEARCH is a nationwide program that uses a network of sites in small towns and large cities. Mercer Health, headquartered in Coldwater, has agreed to serve as the Project SEARCH site locally.

This is not the first time that Project SEARCH has found a home in the area; previously, Otterbein SeniorLife–St. Marys hosted the program for three years. COVID-19, of course, made it too difficult to continue the program there.

This iteration of Project SEARCH is open to young people from Mercer and Auglaize Counties. It also includes a classroom component. Young people will begin their day with an hour in the hospital's classroom, then

move on to the department to which they are assigned. Their teacher will work them on the soft skills they will need for the workplace, following a curriculum supplied by Project SEARCH.

“Communication skills are a big focus. Also handling their finances, and their personal and work schedule,” said Amy Bihn, who as the Mercer ESC’s Special Education Coordinator will supervise the program for the Mercer County Educational Service Center. “Project SEARCH will help them learn the rigor of what it means to work.”

Time in the classroom at the beginning and end of every day will allow the teacher, Julie Grieshop, to discuss concerns with participants as they come up. Initial plans called for the Project SEARCH participants, called interns, will rotate in the hospital’s housekeeping, nutrition services and linen departments, said Jody Schulze, Mercer Health’s Human Resources Manager.

Project SEARCH has identified five young people who will take part in the program’s initial year. “It’s a small class size starting out, but we’re thrilled with that number,” Bihn said. The program



Project | SEARCH

“We are beyond excited about this. Everything fell in place for this to happen—it’s the right place at the right time.”

— Beth Gehret

is designed for up to 12 interns. Interns must be 18-22 years of age to participate, must have completed their high school requirements, and be accepted based on Project SEARCH criteria.

Project SEARCH will follow the same calendar as Tri-Star/Celina City Schools.

Parents who think that Project SEARCH would be a good opportunity for their child may talk to their child’s teacher or to their school’s Special Education Supervisor to learn more about it. The application process for next  
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**Shortage of Direct  
Service Providers  
Creates Crisis**

*(See page two)*

# DSP Shortage Has Reached Critical Stage

As I write this, the sky is falling on the eight residents of MRSI's Wayne Street Group Home in Celina.

Recent staff shortages have resulted in the inability of MRSI to effectively staff the home and it is likely that the eight residents will be temporarily moved to multiple nursing homes to maintain the care that they need.

We are working closely with the management team at MRSI to overcome this obstacle and to limit any complications they might encounter. We are all doing our best to limit the stress and worry that might be felt by the residents and their families.

The warning signs of a crisis like this have been present for quite some time. For years, we have talked about the Direct Service Provider (DSP) shortage and worked with provider agencies to recruit and retain staff. We have recognized a few DSPs for providing exemplary service and offer all DSPs an annual thank-you gift.

The agencies report that starting wages have increased, but not to the point that those wages are keeping up with private industry. Despite the less-than-average pay, DSP jobs can be some of the most rewarding and fun jobs within our communities. It might be a little overwhelming and intimidating at first—but for

those who stick with it, it can become a life-long passion, as it has for many DSPs.

To continue our efforts, the Mercer County Board of Developmental Disabilities

is offering some new programs and incentives to recruit DSPs into our system. We have recently started an education reimbursement program that will allow up to \$2,000 per year for college tuition and book fees. We are definitely targeting Wright State Lake Campus students with this program, but I am sure that there are other local individuals who are furthering their education and could benefit from these dollars.

Also, the Board of DD is hiring interested candidates to join our team and ease into the DSP career. There are many types of services that are required to serve all of our clients, and we are hoping that we can recruit, educate and train people to become DSPs without being overwhelmed.

If you or anyone you know would be interested in more information, please contact me.



Mercer DD is offering incentives to those willing to explore work as Direct Service Providers, including a college-cost reimbursement program. Call 419-586-2369 to learn more.

## Project Search is Coming

*(Continued from page one)*

year will begin in December.

Those who participate are unpaid interns in the program, which is partially funded by Opportunities for Ohioans with Disabilities the Opportunities (OOD).

Beth Gehret, Support and Service Administration Director for Mercer DD, is on the steering committee for Project SEARCH, which she said is a partnership across all the agencies involved. "We are beyond excited about this," she said. "Everything fell in place for this to happen—it's the right place at the right time."

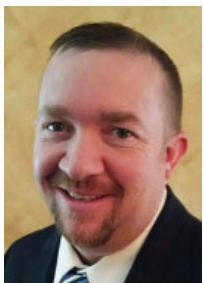
It's a great program for everybody, including the host, said Schulze. "At the end of the year, the interns will have further

developed skillsets that will be an asset to the Mercer Health organization, should a position be open," she said.

Not all of the young people who participate in Project SEARCH are served by Mercer or Auglaize DD, which is another real bonus for young people in the area.

"We're mandated to serve people who are eligible for our services," Gehret said. "It's hard for us to have to say that we can't serve somebody. This program picks up those kids who need help—but they don't necessarily qualify for our services."

"We're glad to be at the table with this initiative," she said. "We have the expertise to help, and we are ready to help."



**Mercer DD  
Superintendent  
Shawn Thieman**

# “It’s Good to Know What’s Out There”

It’s nearly as accessible as the air we breathe, though it’s not exactly free and sometimes comes at a great price.

Social media has become an important part of many people’s lives, especially young people. They may not have wisdom to discern if it is helping them live a full and happy life, or hurting them.

It could be doing both.

## “Always a Little Behind”

“This is a broad topic and we don’t know a lot about it when we look at the research. But there are reasonable strategies out there to use” for most situations, said Dr. T.J. Nestheide, a psychologist with the Hamilton County Developmental Disabilities Services. He was one of the presenters earlier this summer at a Zoom meeting sponsored by Cincinnati Children’s Hospital, “Being Safe in the Community and Online.”

“It’s important for families at least to understand what the platforms are, and how they are used,” Dr. Nestheide said. As adults, “we’re always a little behind the curve on what is popular and what’s being used. It is important for families and caregivers to know what their loved ones are doing on these apps.”

The apps include Twitter, Facebook, Snapchat and Instagram but are not limited to those. “Video games often have a chat feature, so there are many ways for people to connect with one another virtually,” he said.

## There are Many Positives

And most people are participating in life online—up to 98 percent of adolescents with ASC (autism spectrum condition) used

a computer or smart-phone for an average of five hours per day, he said.

“There are many positives in the use of social media,” he stressed. “It can allow people, especially young people, to have additional forms of connection, outside of school. In a study of adults with ASC, 84 percent of them used social media—and those who used Facebook were found to be happier than those who did not. Social media used by adults with ASC may enhance wellbeing in this population.”

Parents, too, often turn to social media for support. “These channels can give people a sense of community, and help them if they struggle with a sense of isolation.”

## Safety is a Concern

Social media—including dating apps—can remove some of the communication barriers that inhibit relationships for people with developmental disabilities. But Amanda Tipkemper, Autism Services Director of the Heidt Center of Excellence at the Children’s Home of Cincinnati, agreed with Dr. Nestheide that parents and caregivers need to be aware of the apps’ benefits and dangers.

“If you’re a caregiver of someone trying to navigate this world, it’s good to know what’s out there,” she said. “A dating app can be a relief for someone who has trouble making connections. There are a lot of positives to online dating. I’ve worked with a lot of individuals over the years, and this is often the way they have met

*Parents and caregivers can help young people navigate the tricky world of social media, including dating apps—but first they have to educate themselves.*

the first person they ever dated. These apps can help people who struggle to create relationships.

“But we do worry about safety, about people being taken advantage of. There are people who present false images.”

## “You Can’t Skip It”

There are dating and other apps coming out that are specifically for people with autism. Hiki, for instance, is a friendship and dating app for people with autism “where being atypical is celebrated,” she said. “There are others.”

The main thing is not to be blind to the possibilities and pitfalls of these apps, she said. “They’re like puberty—you can’t skip it, you have to go through it,” she said. Parents and caregivers “should not try to avoid it. Educate, educate, educate.”

Dr. Nestheide agreed. “There are families who decide, ‘We’re just going to block all this stuff,’” he said. “But people will find a way. They’ll just get on a friend’s device. If you know these things are going to happen, try to introduce them in a safe way. It’s important to have some sense of who they are talking to, and what they are doing.”

Schools are often good allies, he added. “Most schools do some version of digital citizenship, teaching students how to be safe and be smart online.”

# Welcome to our new staff members!



**Rachael Marchal**



**Jamie Thobe**

Mercer DD is happy to welcome three new staff members.

As of May 24, **Sarah Flenar** is the business manager for Mercer DD. Sarah, who lives in St. Henry, formerly was the SSA manager for Auglaize DD and prior to that, she spent four years as its financial support specialist.

As business manager, she oversees all financial functions, including budgeting, cost reporting, financial and payroll reports, among other responsibilities.

She knows the business manager position comes along with many different responsibilities. “I’m not afraid to take on new challenges. I enjoy learning, and I’m willing to help out wherever I can,” she said.

She’s happy to be a part of Mercer DD. “We help people—it’s hard not to enjoy an organization like that. It’s great coming to work here every day.”

Also new to the staff are two new Support Services Administrators, **Rachael Marchal** and **Jamie Thobe**. Rachael, a native of Fort Loramie, previously worked at Allen County Job and Family Services.

Jamie, a Coldwater native, formerly worked as a mental health therapist in Portland, Ind.

Both started in their new positions on July 6.



**Sarah Flenar**

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