

HMEA supports children and adults with disabilities

Redemption center in Sterling accepts bottles and cans for recycling

by Danielle Ray and Susan Staudaher

Sterling residents may not be aware that a redemption center in town gives back more than just 5 cents per can or bottle. HMEA (Horace Mann Educational Associates) Inc., which opened the doors of their Sterling facility in January 2011, is part of a network that supports more than 3,800 children and adults with disabilities, and their families in 110 Massachusetts communities.

The redemption center at 3 Bartlet's Pond Way (take Chocksett Road to Northeast Boulevard to Bartlet's Pond Way) in Sterling replicated a business model that has proved successful in HMEA's facility in Plainville, and offers job opportunities for people supported by HMEA.

The HMEA redemption centers are a revenue source for the organization – the centers contributed more than \$28,000 to HMEA's fiscal year 2012 budget by processing over 600,000 Massachusetts redeemable bottles and cans.

According to their particular needs and interests, the individuals with disabilities who benefit from HMEA can choose to split their time between community-based day supports and day habilitation, or employment programs and day habilitation. In addition, children's services, family support, and residential services are offered by HMEA's 600 caring staff members.

Five employment programs are currently operated by HMEA across central and southeastern Massachusetts, supporting over 200 individuals with disabilities. Each employment services location has a career options center that is used as a training site to provide classroom and hands-on instruction in the following areas: developing vocational interests, skill identification and development, job readiness, career exploration, and on-the-job support and training.

Stephanie Guitard, director of Day Habilitation, Employment and Transportation for HMEA, said, "Our Career Options program allows people to learn skills that will be necessary to be in the workforce. Some examples include writing resumes, how to dress for and be successful at interviews, how to look for jobs, and communicating to job coaches on the kind of jobs they are looking for." Some of HMEA's clients work competitively in the community at places like Stop & Shop, T.J. Maxx, and local colleges.

At the HMEA redemption centers, Guitard said, "adults with developmental disabilities are able to work toward

full-time employment in the building as well as in the community". In addition to the work related to bottle and can redemption, the Sterling location provides jobs on site for companies like Hilco and Apple & Spice. The tasks can involve putting packaging and medical supplies together to be shipped to local companies.

Our redemption center", Guitard added, "allows us to be part of the local communities and help recycle". Local organizations such as the Boy Scouts and the Autism Resource Center organize fundraising bottle and can drives through HMEA's redemption center.

HMEA Day Services Supervisor Richard Murphy believes that the staff of HMEA has a positive impact on the lives of people with disabilities. "We are talking about adults who start at a disadvantage because of the nature of their learning curve, and a lot of people, even in our industry, underestimate them," Murphy said. "The things that I enjoy about my job the most are the opportunities to work with the service recipients, working on their skills and chances for maximum habilitation. Even progress that I see as very, very subtle and



Francis Mwangi, HMEA job coach (left), supervises workers Rachel, Eli and Brian (left to right) at the redemption center.

PHOTO by Susan Staudaher

very, very modest I can get really excited about because I know it is real progress."

Murphy's educational background includes a master's degree in Divinity from Andover Newton Theological School, which is not common in his field, but he says is what drew him to human services.

"I felt a call to focus my attention on people who need an advocate, people who are on the margins of society," Murphy said, "whatever responsibility I have is to make rehabilitation happen. If we don't give them the opportunity to acquire and develop skills they may not get it anywhere else.

Murphy has been with HMEA since October 2001, and part of his niche there is creat-

ing and implementing behavior plans that include engaging in group activities such as indoor/outdoor bowling and playing musical instruments.

"I happen to have a feel for what group activities look like, an dhow to engage people and stimulate them," Murphy said. "It's really about designing activities, implementing them, and training staff to implement the activities in a way that is life affirming."

HMEA work centers are used for drop-in programs where people gain access to the services and training, yet they spend the majority of their time within their local communities through work and volunteerism.

"Barriers such as discrimination, accessibility, and negative stereotypes, coupled with a struggling economy, make it very difficult to secure meaningful employment," Murphy said. "Luckily HMEA invests in relationship building with their local communities and has a proven track record of providing a qualified and dependable workforce through job mentoring and coaching."

For more information about HMEA, visit their website at hmea.org.