

## Job Link

Linking Employment, Abilities and Potential  
Cleveland, Ohio  
(216) 696-2716, [www.leapinfo.org](http://www.leapinfo.org)

**Approach:** A three-year career education program for high school youth with disabilities, most of them developmental. The program spans from sophomore through senior years, providing small-group meetings and instruction, support services and summer jobs. Much of the program is carried out in school.

During the first year, program coordinators meet with the youths twice a week in small groups to focus on access to support services, work skills training, career exploration and use of public resources.

"They very much serve as mentors," says Program Director Sandra Carlson. "They develop a rapport."

During meetings with their coordinators, students discuss their relationships with their families, friends and communities, their employment preparation and their plans for the future.



**Lending a Hand:** Job Link's career readiness services include this "Job Shadowing Day" at Cleveland City Hall.

"What happens during meetings is individualized, based on the group and their level of functioning," she says. Coordinators engage the youths in career exploration through role-playing, interactive activities, video-tapes, community outings and hands-on learning.

Job Link connects youths with

internships tailored to their interests and abilities. Many participants work at the local Veterans Affairs medical centers, performing such tasks as keeping track of medical records and staffing the retail store, cafeteria and mailroom.

In the 10-week summer work program, participants work three days each week, accompanied by Job Link coordinators. "It's an opportunity to make mistakes and not get fired," Carlson says.

Participants eventually prepare for the work force with mock interviews and vocational profile development. Job Link also works with them on keeping jobs.

"Once our students graduate, the schools are finished with them. We continue to work them until they meet career goals," Carlson says.

**History and Organization:** Job Link was launched in 1994 as a pilot program in a Cleveland high school, after a troubling rise in unemployment rates among youth with disabilities, according to a 2001 PEPNet report. It was started by its first executive director, the late Doris Brennan, and its current executive director, Melanie Hogan. Job Link now serves six high schools in Cleveland.

Job Link is one of six programs operated by Linking Employment, Abilities, and Potential (LEAP), a nonprofit that serves people with disabilities.

**Youth Served:** Most participants have developmental disabilities, according to Carlson. Those include mental retardation, autism spectrum disorders, deafness and hearing loss.

Participants are identified by vocational evaluators, work-study coordinators and teachers during their freshman year of high school. The program serves about 100 students each year, 75 of whom are still in school. The others have graduated and are receiving services through employment specialists.

**Staff:** Carlson, the program director, is joined by four program coordinators and two employment specialists.

**Funding:** Job Link's \$500,000 annual budget is funded by the United Way of Greater Cleveland, the U.S. Department of Labor (through the Workforce Investment Act), the Cuyahoga County Board of Mental Retardation and Developmental Disabilities, and LEAP, among others.

Job Link is provided at no cost to the school or the youths.

**Measuring Impact:** Job Link reports that 84 percent of its graduates from 1994 through 2004 were in jobs, job training or further education. In comparison, a 2004 Harris poll found that the national rate of employment among working-age people with disabilities was 35 percent.