

## Older Youth with Special Needs: Maintaining Successful Connections during the COVID-19 Crisis



*Cassie Halder with Michigan Rehabilitation Services*

Even before the coronavirus pandemic struck, the challenges of closing equity gaps for high school students with disabilities preparing to enter the workforce have been significant, said [Michigan Rehabilitation Services](#) (MRS) Counselor Cassie Halder, an adviser assigned to high school teens in Ingham County. Michigan is one of only a few states that requires special education services from birth to age 26. MRS is the agency that is tasked with helping youth and families transition from educational services to workforce participation and other strategies toward independence. With persistently low high school graduation rates for young people receiving special education, and workforce participation among people with disabilities starkly lower – just 20.8 percent compared to 70 percent of people without disabilities – the services that MRS provides are essential to help at-risk teens who have physical and cognitive impairments, learning disabilities and behavioral challenges work through barriers to success and beat those odds.

Since the pandemic struck and schools closed, the pre-employment transition services MRS has been delivering using private contractors in school-based and afterschool programs across the state were interrupted with some vendors now re-emerging after retooling their programs to an online format.

And among new discoveries that spin distance learning experiences in a positive direction are two. Teens and young people who have grown up communicating in the virtual world can be counted on to adapt to structured learning online so as long as they have strong, set expectations for participation and engaged coaching to set the stage. The other: There's a case to be made for engaging sequestered parents in their son or daughter's meaningful online learning as well, ensuring better participation by students in the process.

Among the first MRS vendors to transition online were the founders and operators of Lansing-based [Career Training Camps](#) (CTC), headed up by former NFL football star and motivational speaker Todd Duckett, and partners Lloyd and Teresa Bingman. CTC recently resumed a 40-session curriculum using Zoom and Facetime with Sexton High students who receive special education services. They're among eight vendors Halder regularly



*Todd Duckett and Lloyd Bingman are among the key principals of Career Training Camps, a contractor for services through MRS.*

works with; they also work with other MRS counselors in Calhoun and Kalamazoo counties. With a heavy focus on boosting students' self-confidence along with career training instruction, CTC helps build job readiness skills such as writing a resume, setting goals and practicing mock interviews wrapped up in a strong inspirational and motivational focus designed to help students take ownership of their future. "They've been able to help students see they have a chance for success, inspiring and giving them hope that they can be whatever they want to be in the future," Halder said.

**Students who** voluntarily choose services like CTC want to work. They just need some additional support. "Sometimes they have a learning disabilities, and need an extra accommodation in a specific subject like reading or math. We also work with students with cognitive and physical impairments – deafness or hard of hearing, and autism," Halder said.

After some uncertainty that MRS would see staff furloughs or cuts like other agencies dealing with state revenue losses brought on by the crisis, for now they are considered essential and spared, Halder said. If social distancing requirements remain in place this summer, all of MRS's vendors plan to continue providing their instruction online in the busy summer months starting in June, she added.

Duckett and Lloyd Bingman, who refer to one another as coach and use sports talk to energize their students, calling the curriculum their playbook, said moving the course content to an online Zoom classroom has developed into an effective alternative to in-person sessions because of teens' general comfort and familiarity with electronic devices of all kinds. They practice recommended techniques for online communication – ensuring eye contact on screen with participants being a major one– to maintaining personal connections essential to helping students grow in confidence and knowledge. "The last class we had was the best one yet in person or over Zoom – anytime," Duckett said. Students were enthusiastic and engaged; the atmosphere was up-tempo with laughing and joking. If a student disappeared from the screen, the coaches were quick to call them back to the group. "The coaching energy we bring is authentic; it's real. I told them to leave everything on the screen. Give it your all, no matter what," Duckett said. "It's a passion we have. You can't stop that through computers."

The most recent class meeting was a welcomed change from the initial two Zoom sessions following the closing of schools and related disruption to schedules and lifestyles. Initially, fear and uncertainty were visible in the expressions of uneasiness on students' faces. "For students, this is a whole new system. In this day and age, there is no system, and the future is uncertain. Being in the midst of this chaos is hard and self-doubt kicks in," Duckett said.

**Building self-esteem, confidence** and skills for collaboration and team-building are part of the CTC formula whether in in-person classrooms or online. The program also challenges the students to identify personal goals, write them down, share them with the class, and be accountable to them. Bingman described their program as simply another resource to complement the work classroom teachers do to bring out the best in young people. The personalized coaching they offer is especially important to help students with disabilities overcome opportunity gaps. "When we push them a little bit further than 100 percent of the time each student finds a new gear," Duckett said. "Some have challenges greater than others, but they still can find the confidence to pursue their goals, work on their challenges, and do their best to live their dream."

Specialists like CTC also play another important role in ensuring equity in young people's preparation for life after their traditional schooling ends, Bingman added. Not all children have parents who have attained a certain educational level – a degree or even high school completion – that can guide their own children's post-secondary education. "Researchers tell us that parents with higher education will

disseminate that information to their children. But if you're in an urban community for example that lacks that then how can that parent relate to their studies? he said. "Our program doesn't replace the parent, but we can be an alternative to help educate that student."

**The new online format** has revealed another welcomed, new aspect during the crisis – the opportunity for parents who are sheltering at home with their children to become involved in their children's CTC work. Duckett and Bingman said they're in the process of thinking through new ways to engage parents even further. Bingman, who years earlier worked for the Department of Education to develop tools to help parents engage in their children's learning, said students benefit greatly when their parents are involved in their education. Students tend to stay involved and achieve more. Before launching the online version, they called each parent or guardians to encourage family support and collaboration in their student's learning. "As a result, parents said, oh yeah, I'll be there with you, and they called in," Bingman said.

Halder said that specialists like Duckett and Bingman fill an important niche in the state's responsibility for students who receive special education services with IEPs (Individualized Education Plans). "They are able to connect with students who come from a more at-risk population who may not necessarily have the support systems at home that some of our other students may have. And both being minority men, some of the students in our county can benefit from learning from someone who looks like them," she said.

And as the new COVID reality bears down on all aspects of life, including education and job training, it becomes increasingly important that the students that MRS shepherd continue to progress and aren't left behind or forgotten. Their futures depend on it.