



Communications Office
News Release

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Challenge Enterprise Honored for Hiring People with Disabilities

JACKSONVILLE, FL – The first time Susan Bence heard her daughter cry and heard, once again, the birds singing outside, she knew she would never be able to thank Vocational Rehabilitation (VR) enough for all they had done for her. With tears in her eyes, Susan told the audience in the Crowne Plaza Jacksonville Riverfront ballroom of the struggles she faced having slow progressive hearing loss that began 11 years ago.

Susan was in the last year of working on her bachelor's degree when her hearing loss became severe. "It made it very difficult in class," she said. Soon, she was unable to work. "I was scared and unsure," says Susan. "I needed hearing aids that I couldn't financially afford."

Facing a tough economy and crime in her neighborhood, Susan packed up her family and left Buffalo, New York for Jacksonville in hopes of finding better career opportunities. She eventually found a job at a grocery store unloading trucks for very little money, even working weekends. "I was very sad when I looked at my kids," she said. "I couldn't accurately provide for my children and they deserved better."

Feeling hopeless, and at one point, thinking it would be better to give her children away, Susan started doing research and she discovered Vocational Rehabilitation, a federal-state program designed to help people with disabilities find and maintain employment. For Susan, it was the answer she needed.

VR provided her with hearing aids and employability training that helped her land a job with Challenge Enterprise of North Florida. "Challenge Enterprise is a company of beautiful people who looked past my disability and saw my potential and gave me a job," says Susan. She currently works at Mayport Naval Base as a Payroll Clerk and Administrative Assistant. "My job is incredible," she says.

Jerry Proctor, VP of Business Development for Challenge Enterprise, is also proud of the work his company does in the community. "This year we celebrated our 40th anniversary of empowering people with possibilities," Jerry says. Of Challenge's total workforce of 300 people, 81 percent are persons with a significant disability.

Challenge was one of three local businesses that were honored during VR's Disability

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Employment Awareness Celebration in Jacksonville in May. As Jerry accepted the award on behalf of the company, he acknowledged that it was a team effort and encouraged more businesses to do the same. “Our mission is employing people with disabilities and we will continue to honor that fulfillment,” he said.

An additional exciting moment came as Susan told the crowd, she would be closing on her first home that afternoon. Susan had once angrily searched for answers from doctors, wanting to know why this had happened to her. “Today, when I look at my kids, and my quality of life, I can’t help but smile,” she says. She no longer needs those answers they were unable to give. “I’m grateful for VR and the entire staff at Challenge Enterprises. Thank you.”

Florida’s Vocational Rehabilitation program is committed to helping people with disabilities become part of America’s workforce. Our employer-focused website, **FLJobConnections.com**, allows businesses to search at no charge for employees who are ready to go to work, as well as to post available jobs. VR has 111 offices across Florida, and last year helped 5,018 Floridians with significant disabilities find or keep a job. For more information about VR and its services, call (800) 451-4327 or visit **Rehabworks.org**.

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REMINDER FOR MEDIA--When reporting on stories about people with disabilities, remember to use language that puts the person first, rather than the disability. For example, use phrases such as "people with disabilities" (instead of "the disabled") and "person who uses a wheelchair" (rather than "wheelchair bound"); and “people with a mental illness” (rather than “the mentally ill”).