

Job training center is a sign of depth of community spirit

Our view

Every now and then, something comes along that renews one's faith in human nature and the strength of the community.

The Job Paths program at the former Tripp School in Fairhaven is just such a thing. One is scarcely through the front door of the former school before the realization sinks in: Something exciting is happening here.

"Job Paths" might sound like any one of dozens of government-backed social programs, but this one is very different. It is getting off the ground with an outpouring of materials, money, and toil from people throughout Greater New Bedford. They've chipped in a total of \$400,000 worth of goods and services to transform the Tripp School into a training center for the developmentally disabled.

The sight of the building's bright, airy, just renovated central auditorium is stunning—and it's just a sample of what's being done in the rest of the building. With volunteer help from local unions, vocational schools and businesses, once empty classrooms are being transformed into spaces where disabled people over age 21 can learn skills that will allow them to hold down productive jobs in the community, and become more independent.

The state officials who presided over the ribbon-cutting ceremony yesterday really had something to celebrate. Here is a community project that would fill a huge gap in the support that is available to developmentally disabled people in Massachusetts.

Before Job Paths was born in the minds of a group of local people including Fairhaven banker George Graves and State Sen. William Q. MacLean, D-Fairhaven, disabled people who reached the

age of 21 were left utterly without state educational assistance of any kind. The lucky ones lived with their families, and maybe managed to get a job based on what training they could acquire by the time they reached that age. Some made it into training programs run by non-profit groups. Others not in institutions – well, they did the best they could, which sometimes was very poorly. But the cutoff point was form: At age 22, such a person was no longer eligible for state-funded training.

Job Paths, the first effort of its kind in Massachusetts, hopes to give up to 35 disabled persons at a time the chance to learn a useful job skill – such as building maintenance, woodworking or even food service. The Job Paths center will have a completely equipped cafeteria and commercial kitchen, entirely accessible by wheelchair.

The \$125,000 state investment to conduct the program itself is a drop in the bucket compared to what it costs to care for a disabled person in an institution. And it cannot be stressed too strongly that the Job Paths program is not intended to keep the disabled on "hold," it is designed to bring them together with the rest of the community. In that spirit, the center even has an art gallery as a way of saying to the public, "Come and visit us; you'll be inspired by what you'll see here."

Yesterday was the V.I.P.'s turn, but next Sunday, Feb. 17, from 1 to 3 p.m., the center will conduct its first open house for the general public, two days before the program itself is scheduled to begin. Go. See what your neighbors are doing for the disabled. It will lift your spirits.