

### DIVERSITY, EQUITY & INCLUSION

## *This program can help businesses hire more people with disabilities*

Last month, on a perfect night for baseball, Kennedy Krieger Institute's community gathered at Ripken Stadium in Aberdeen to watch and cheer on a young man as he accomplished something rare and exciting.

Robby, a twenty-something with autism, landed a job with the Aberdeen IronBirds minor league baseball team this spring. He works as a fan host, rotating between serving as a ticket taker, operating the area known as the fan zone and working as an usher. If you take in a game this summer, you might see him greeting ticket holders and showing them to their seats.

Robby is conscientious and loyal, so this milestone is not a surprise to the people who know him. But it is quite the accomplishment when you consider that more than 80% of people with disabilities are not part of the workforce. Eighty percent – that's a number that needs to change, and can change, within the Baltimore business community through innovative solutions.

With the unemployment rate in Maryland hovering around 4% and many jobs going unfilled for months, there's a disconnect between those with disabilities being without work and companies who are eager to fill their ranks. One program that seeks to bridge that gap is Project SEARCH.



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There are 600 Project SEARCH programs around the world and 14 in the state of Maryland, including our program at Kennedy Krieger. Project SEARCH is a 10-month transition-to-work program that provides hands-on job training for individuals ages 18 to 24 who have disabilities. They learn through integrated worksite rotation internships, career exploration, innovative adaptation and mentoring from experienced staff. With Kennedy Krieger's nearly 100-year history of providing health care and later education for individuals with disabilities, becoming a Project SEARCH site was a natural fit.

Project SEARCH is just one part of our larger Neurodiversity at Work strategy, an initiative that's been successful and growing as we continue to work with individuals who are neurodiverse and help them find meaningful employment. Robby, for example was one of 10 interns who comprised our fourth and largest Project SEARCH cohort, all of whom graduated on June 7.

While the pandemic limited some job opportunities, it provided our interns with other unique experiences – Robby was one of several interns who served as Covid-19 health screeners for patients, staff and visitors arriving at Kennedy Krieger campuses. This service was invaluable to us.

