



Granite United Way's Working Bridges Program Thrives; Expansion Anticipated

By Suzanne Stofflet, Senior Director of Regional Impact, Granite United Way

If only we could, we would outfit Pru Pease with her own personal helicopter and Segway. Alas, she has to make do with her 2002 Hyundai and her sneakers.

Pru is Granite United Way's first Working Bridges Resource Coordinator, and it looks as if she won't be the last. Her job: to swoop in and out of six Upper Valley companies to help employees tackle their non-work-related problems—issues that can lead to absenteeism, diminished job performance, and even job loss.

About two years ago, it came to the attention of our Community Impact Committee that low income wage earners and their families were by far the most "left behind" group of people in the Upper Valley. After learning about a highly successful program from the Chittenden (VT) United Way that addressed that deficit, the CIC decided to set aside enough money to implement a Working Bridges trial here in the Upper Valley. The business community rallied around the idea as well.

The first six companies enrolled in Working Bridges (WB) here are: Alice Peck Day Memorial Hospital, Dartmouth-Hitchcock Medical Center, Hypertherm, Kendal at Hanover, King Arthur Flour, and Simon Pearce. These have been the guinea pigs for the program, and we refer to them as the Champs—a well-deserved title, considering their commitment to creating a remarkable community asset.

Praise is also due to our three local banks: Ledyard National Bank, Mascoma Bank, and Lake Sunapee Bank, who collaborated to offer a loan/savings benefit as an optional part of the WB program. They are now Champs, too.

In less than a year, Pru has helped more than three hundred different employees find the resources to navigate through challenges such as housing, domestic violence, child care, elder care, and financial difficulties.

On average, Pru spends at least three hours a week on site at each location. At other times, she zooms in and out, here and there, when employees need her good counsel in an emergency. (Hence the need for the helicopter.) Most of her companies have more than one work site. At King Arthur Flour, for example, she travels between six different buildings. (Hence the need for a Segway.)

A Working Bridges Resource Coordinator must be: part information referral expert, part consumer advocate, and part troubleshooter. He or she must also be versed in the Bridges Out of Poverty strategic philosophy, which teaches that to help people make positive change, you must meet them where they are and without judgement. And the unwritten criterion for a good WB Resource Coordinator is that he or she must have a depth of life experience—think—Velveteen Rabbit.

My favorite thing about Working Bridges is that we are helping real people in real time. My second favorite thing is that from the start, Working Bridges has been governed and guided by people in the community—first, by our volunteer Community Impact Committee, and later joined by the Champs. Their continuing wisdom in shepherding this project has been amazing and essential.

Feedback from the companies and employees has been overwhelmingly enthusiastic. Going forward, participating companies have agreed to fund the program through a fee for service arrangement to make Working Bridges a self-sustaining community asset.

In addition, thanks to some seed money from the Jack and Dorothy Byrne Foundation, plans are underway to test the waters for hiring a second Resource Coordinator and recruit the next Champ companies. Stay tuned—or contact me if you would like to know more about how Working Bridges might fit into your HR department's benefit offerings.