



Texas Beacons of Excellence

Jan, Feb, & Mar 2026

Partnership Led by:



Texas Beacons of Excellence In The Community

Welcome to the latest edition of our newsletter!

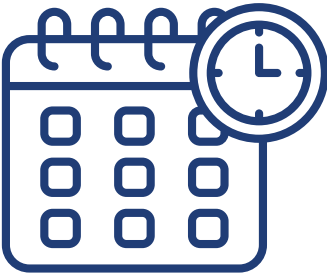
Here's a glimpse at what we've been working on—and an exciting look at what's next!

Upcoming Conferences

2026 National APSE Conference
June 9-11, 2026
Dallas, TX
[Register Here](#)

American Association on IDD (AAIDD) Annual Conference
June 22-24, 2026
Chicago, IL
[Register Here](#)

2026 Disability:IN Global Conference
July 27-30, 2026
Dallas, TX
[Register Here](#)



VCU Best Practices in Supported Employment Training March 2026

Virginia Commonwealth University (VCU) hosted some of Texas Beacons of Excellence's newest hires to train them on Best Practices for Supported Employment Services. Employment Specialists and Goodwill team members; Davisha Hardmon, Kandise Britt, Alexis Martin, Ashley Johnson, & Scott Saucier, and Advo Companies Team Members, Makenzie Jones & Angel Campollo participated in this training.

Training Participants learned about the history of how Vocational Rehabilitation came about and legislation that directly impacts Individuals with disabilities. The VCU Rehabilitation Research and Training Center team provided training participants with defining Customized and Supported Employment services and evidence-based practices of Supported Employment services. The VCU team guided training participants on how to engage Consumer and Support Circles on the pathway to competitive integrated employment.

Training participants toured Virginia Commonwealth University's robust Project Search program with Saint Mary's Hospital in Richmond, Virginia. The VCU's Rehabilitation Research and Training Center team has been able to support 60+ individuals with disabilities in obtaining competitive integrated employment.



VCU

VIRGINIA COMMONWEALTH UNIVERSITY

Resources

Job Accommodation Network
askjan.org

disabilityinnovation.unt.edu

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Celebrating Employment Successes

March 2026 | Lubbock State Supported Living Center

The Lubbock SSLC is celebrating two successful community employment placements in March. The Community Rehabilitation Provider (CRP) is working closely with the SSLC Vocational Team to provide on-the-job training and follow-along supports to ensure each individual's successful transition.

- Gavn Smith began employment as a Food Service Worker with Aramark through Lubbock ISD, with his first day on March 27.
- Laura Miller began employment on March 25 as a Dishwasher at Fuddruckers.

Together, Gavn and Laura bring a combined 15 years of experience in sheltered work. Their transition into integrated community employment represents a meaningful shift toward greater independence and an improved quality of life.



On-Campus Work Programs

San Antonio State Supported Living Center

The San Antonio State Supported Living Center (SSLC) continues to expand meaningful vocational opportunities through two on-campus work programs: a car wash and a greenhouse.

The car wash program, operating on Mondays and Wednesdays, provides residents with hands-on experience in vehicle washing, teamwork, and basic job-readiness skills. Currently, the program services state vehicles on campus, with ongoing discussions about opening services to the public. Expanding access would allow residents to gain experience washing different-sized vehicles and build real-life customer service skills through interaction with community members.



The greenhouse program offers residents a unique opportunity to develop agricultural and pre-vocational skills. Participants are learning to work with different types of soil and plants, understand basic plant care, and take part in the process of growing their own food. This program promotes responsibility, routine, and environmental awareness while reinforcing skills such as following instructions, nurturing living systems, and understanding the connection between work and tangible outcomes.

Together, these programs provide structured, hands-on learning environments that support skill development, confidence-building, and preparation for future community employment opportunities.

Training & Education Highlights

The UNT WISE team was honored to present at the 2026 ARRPE Conference in San Antonio, sharing our work through the session Innovative Practices for Community Integration and Employment: The UNTWISE Model.



Our leadership team—Lucy Gafford, Director; Ryan Cole, Program Director of the Texas Beacons of Excellence project; Peggy Schmidt, Program Associate Director of our Community Rehabilitation Program; Ryan Appleton, Program Associate Director of our Transition Programs; and Kellie Nix, Program Associate Director of our ENGAGE program—highlighted innovative strategies that support community integration and meaningful employment for individuals with disabilities.



Their presentation showcased the collaborative work of UNT WISE and our commitment to advancing inclusive opportunities through research, training, and community partnerships. We are proud of our team for sharing their expertise and helping raise awareness of the impact of our work.

And in February, the Texas Transition Conference was held with a presentation from TBE on *Preparing for Competitive Integrated Employment (CIE)*.

A huge thank you to LeDre Williams and his family for attending and participating on the panel. LeDre shared his personal experience working with the TBE team and spoke about how CIE has positively enhanced his life. His story was both inspiring and impactful for all in attendance.

Watch LeDre's testimonial here: <https://youtu.be/DySSUXQeLlC>



Strategic Planning & Collaboration Updates

March 2026 | Lubbock State Supported Living Center

In March, the TBE project team continued its strategic planning efforts through two productive working sessions with our partners at State Supported Living Centers (SSLCs). A session with the Lubbock SSLC took place on March 3, followed by a working session with the San Antonio SSLC on March 24.

Each session brought together SSLC leadership, vocational staff, and representatives from the Texas Workforce Commission (TWC) Vocational Rehabilitation (VR) team. These large-group discussions created space for all stakeholders to share updates on the current stage of the project, highlight successes, and identify areas for continued growth. A central focus of these conversations was exploring alternative and innovative ways to engage individuals who are interested in pursuing community employment.



Tempe Mays

Amazing Outcomes

Tempe Mays, the owner of Amazing Outcomes, has been supporting Individuals with disabilities to obtain employment for 25+ years. She is currently working with Fort Worth ISD students and families who are participating in the Texas Beacons of Excellence Project. Additionally, Tempe continues to work with the Texas Workforce Commission and private-pay Consumers.

Tempe’s pathway into working with Individual’s with disabilities began when she became a nanny for a girl with down syndrome while in college. From there, Tempe’s love of working with people with disabilities began. Tempe’s relationship building, sense of urgency, and dependability lead her to the Supported Employment Services field.

Tempe is a North Texas native. She graduated from Texas Wesleyan University with a B.S. in Sociology. Tempe has been certified with Virginia Commonwealth University and University of North Texas to be a Texas Workforce Commission Vocational Rehabilitation vendor. She previously worked for Easterseals as the Director of Employment Services for 15 years. From 2014 to 2022, Tempe worked with Creative Achievement in their Ticket to Work program. In 2022, Tempe took the leap and started her own Employment Services Agency, Amazing Outcomes.

Tempe notes that her favorite part of the job is seeing how much a job changes a person. She talks about how once employment is found, she sees her Consumer’s quality of life drastically change for the better.

You can reach Tempe at AmazingOutcomesTX@gmail.com & (817) 319-7078.

Tempe serves Individuals with Disabilities all across the DFW metroplex and North Texas area.



Employee Spotlights



Danny Wvalle

Goodwill Industries

Danny Wvalle is a dedicated Employment Specialist with Goodwill Industries, where he supports individuals with disabilities and others facing barriers to employment in achieving meaningful, competitive work.

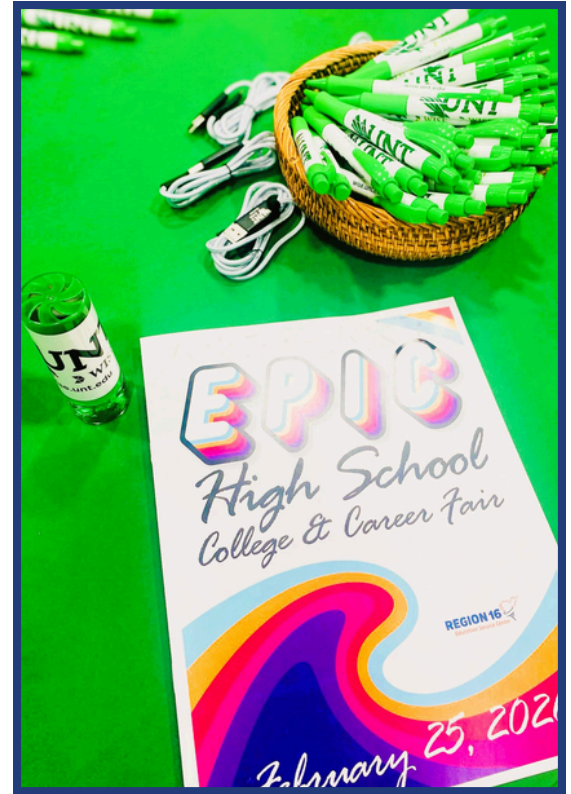
In his role, Danny provides job coaching, skills training, and individualized support to help participants successfully obtain and maintain employment. He works closely with both job seekers and employers—conducting job analyses, facilitating workplace accommodations, and fostering inclusive, supportive work environments.

Known for his hands-on approach and strong commitment to person-centered services, Danny is passionate about empowering individuals to build independence, confidence, and long-term career success. His work plays a vital role in helping individuals reach their full potential while contributing meaningfully to their community.

Growing Opportunities Across Texas

Over the past quarter, our CRPs in Amarillo and Houston have maintained strong momentum, supporting individuals in securing placements in both volunteer opportunities and competitive integrated employment. Our teams continued to strengthen existing relationships and cultivate new community partnerships, expanding access to meaningful work experiences and sustainable employment pathways.

In Amarillo, ESC Region 16 hosted the Epic High School College and Career Fair in collaboration with Amarillo ISD. Texas Beacons of Excellence (TBE) proudly participated with a dedicated booth, engaging transitioning students and providing valuable insight into career opportunities and the diverse pathways available through UNT WISE. These interactions fostered meaningful conversations with students, educators, and community partners about post-secondary options and successful transitions into competitive integrated employment. ★



Additionally, in the Houston area, TBE participated in the Klein ISD EmpowerAbility Fair and Dyslexia Expo 2026, hosted at the Klein ISD Multipurpose Center. This dynamic event featured student showcases, community resource booths, informational sessions, and family-friendly activities designed to support employability and individuals with learning differences. Adult learners played an active role by assisting at concession stands and information booths, while also showcasing their talents. TBE staff connected with transitioning juniors and seniors, sharing information on career pathways and workforce readiness opportunities.

Overall, this quarter reflects our continued commitment to empowering individuals, strengthening community partnerships, and creating inclusive pathways to employment.

Community Partnership Appreciation

A big thank you to Amarillo VR for their continued time and dedication in supporting our ADVO participants.

TWC-VR has established a regular cadence of visits to onboard our **60 ADVO participants**, ensuring they receive the support and resources needed to move forward on their employment journey.

We truly appreciate your hard work, collaboration, and commitment to serving our community.



Thank you to everyone who continues to bring passion, knowledge, and heart to our shared mission. Your efforts make a lasting impact on the individuals we serve and the communities we're building together.

Here's to continued growth, learning, and collaboration in the months ahead. Stay connected and keep up the great work!

Sincerely,

The Texas Beacons of Excellence Team



Building Momentum Through Partnership

March 2026 | Lubbock State Supported Living Center

One immediate positive outcome of the Lubbock strategic planning session was increased awareness of existing community-based career exploration opportunities. Through collaboration with our Vocational Rehabilitation (VR) partners, we learned about a Job Shadow Day hosted by Education Service Center (ESC) Region 17, in partnership with TWC-VR. The event, which took place on March 12, provided transition-aged youth the opportunity to visit pre-selected job sites aligned with their interests and participate in mock interviews, offering valuable real-world exposure.

To better understand the logistics and explore potential replication, TBE Project Coordinator Karina Saucedo and SSLC Job Coach Monica Rangel attended the event and associated activities. During the event, one group visited the South Plains Wildlife Rehabilitation Center, where attendees learned about the daily responsibilities involved in caring for and rehabilitating injured wildlife.

Although the event was designed primarily for transition-aged youth, participation offered important insight into how similar career exploration and job-shadowing opportunities could be adapted on a smaller scale for SSLC residents. These hands-on experiences are particularly meaningful for individuals who benefit from exposure to different career pathways and structured work environments.



One of the most encouraging outcomes was the positive rapport established with the ESC Region 17 Transition Coordinator, who expressed strong interest in collaborating to develop a customized version of this experience specifically for SSLC residents. Opportunities like these—often introduced during high school transition programming—can play a critical role in helping residents build confidence, explore personal interests, and develop foundational work-readiness skills that support greater independence and long-term employment success.