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United Way of Allegheny County receives \$378,000 grant from Kessler Foundation
Funds to support growth of 21 and Able's Career Transition Project

Pittsburgh, Pa. (Jan. 20, 2015) – United Way of Allegheny County has been awarded a grant of \$378,300 by the Kessler Foundation to support the expansion of United Way's 21 and Able Career Transition Project. The Career Transition Project, launched as a pilot program in September 2013 by United Way in partnership with Allegheny County, Giant Eagle, Inc. and Blind & Vision Rehabilitation Services of Pittsburgh, is an innovative employment and training initiative that helps young people with disabilities secure work experience and paying jobs as they transition out of high school. The grant will support the expansion of the pilot project to additional companies over the next two years, providing more opportunities for young people with disabilities across Allegheny County.

The Kessler Foundation grant will be used to identify, recruit, and engage three to five large-scale Pittsburgh employers to participate in the project; identify, hire, and support embedded employment professionals at these employers; and establish new employment for 84 youth with disabilities. The embedded professionals will work with school districts and corporations to match qualified students with open positions, and provide support to the job candidates, their families, schools, and prospective employers.

"We are extremely proud that the idea for this program came from a staff member here in Allegheny County and that her idea, through a pilot program, has been proven to be a boost to persons with disabilities who are seeking employment," said Allegheny County Executive Rich Fitzgerald. "We know that our region is doing well economically, but that there are also segments of our population who have not been able to share in that success. With the Kessler Foundation grant, we will be able to offer that assistance to youth with disabilities, and ensure that they have opportunities available to them for employment upon graduation."

Currently, there are approximately 1,000 young adults with disabilities ages 14 to 21 in Allegheny County. Forty percent of young adults ages 20 to 24 with disabilities in Allegheny County are neither in school nor working.

"With the expansion of this project, we intend to not only increase employment opportunities for people with disabilities, but drive systemic change toward inclusion of people with disabilities in the workplace, and build a bridge to lifelong employment through early work experience," said Heather Sedlacko, director, programs for seniors and people with disabilities at United Way of Allegheny County.

The Career Transition pilot program was launched in September 2013 at Giant Eagle. The original goal

of the pilot was to employ 24 students during the two-year pilot. During the preceding 15 months alone, 27 youths have been employed by Giant Eagle. Barbara Graham, a vocational rehabilitation counselor with Blind & Vision Rehabilitation Services of Pittsburgh, was hired into the Giant Eagle team as the first embedded employment professional.

“We are very proud to be a part of this program that not only changes the lives of teenagers with disabilities by building confidence and fostering independence through employment but also strengthening our community by including all in the workforce,” said Erika Arbogast, president of Blind & Vision Rehabilitation Services.

Since 2013, Graham has worked with nearly 200 students in this role.

“The key component to the success of this project is having the employment professional embedded within our organization, which is a vastly different approach than the job coach model,” said Giant Eagle’s Jeremy Shapira, senior director and HR business partner for the Market District and GetGo store formats. “She is a member of the Giant Eagle team, which promotes a deeper understanding of both our corporate culture and operational practices. This knowledge, combined with her vocational rehabilitation background and community connections, helps her to best identify the opportunities that will serve the most young people.”

Initial work to begin expansion of the project will begin this month.

About Kessler Foundation – Kessler Foundation, a major nonprofit organization in the field of disability, is a global leader in rehabilitation research that seeks to improve cognition, mobility and long-term outcomes, including employment, for people with neurological disabilities caused by diseases and injuries of the brain and spinal cord. Kessler Foundation leads the nation in funding innovative programs that expand opportunities for employment for people with disabilities. For more information, visit KesslerFoundation.org.

About United Way of Allegheny County – United Way of Allegheny County is a change agent and efficient community fundraiser that improves lives by addressing critical community needs. By convening diverse partners and investing in programs and people to advance solutions, United Way creates long-lasting change and helps children and youth succeed, strengthens and supports families by promoting financial stability, ensures the safety and well-being of vulnerable seniors and people with disabilities, and provides county-wide access to information and referral sources meeting basic needs.

About 21 and Able - 21 and Able, an initiative of United Way of Allegheny County, is working to create a roadmap for youth with disabilities who are transitioning out of the education and supportive services system to continue their education, work, live independently, and participate actively in their communities. 21 and Able is working toward this goal via three strategies: the development of a public policy agenda and coordination of advocacy efforts; the creation of a public awareness campaign to draw attention to the urgency of issues related to youth transitioning to adulthood; and the design and launch of pilot projects that address the transition needs of youth with disabilities and their families.

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