

**NEWS from the North Dakota Department of Human Services
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Programs help woman regain independence after severe brain injury

BISMARCK, N.D. – Thousands of North Dakotans suffer brain injuries each year. While the impact on their lives and their recovery stories are each unique, they all experience personal losses and often are admired for their resilience.

Bismarck-area resident Kjerstine Hauge is regaining her independence with the help of specialized community support services funded by the North Dakota Department of Human Services.

Four years ago, the mother of two was on her way to work as a licensed practical nurse when a car roll-over forever turned her life upside down. The short trip to work became a long journey of recovery when she suffered a severe brain injury that initially left her in a coma and near death.

“It has been a heck of a ride,” Hauge said recounting her hospitalization, followed by a rehabilitation stay at a nursing home, and a transfer to a specialized residential program in Mandan, N.D., for people who have experienced a brain injury. As she has worked to relearn the most basic tasks, her injury forced her to rely on others.

Staff members from Community Options are currently helping Hauge reach her employment goals.

In mid-December, Hauge was completing Community Options’ Skill Smart program, a pre-vocational program for people with brain injuries that was first funded by lawmakers in the department’s 2009 budget.

The department contracts with Community Options to help participants, like Hauge, assess their abilities, relearn social skills, regain confidence and communication skills, and build up their stamina. Participants also relearn daily living tasks, time management, and other organizational skills, while they ease into a work environment through volunteer work and job shadowing experiences.

Community Options employees also coach clients on soft skills such as dependability, following instructions, being friendly and helpful to customers, dressing appropriately, managing stress, and working well with others. They help clients with brain injuries manage individual challenges too, such as memory issues.

Last biennium, the Skill Smart pre-vocational program served 73 individuals. Many were between the ages of 21 and 32.

“Once clients are doing well in their volunteer work and job shadowing, they can transition into the Work Start program to continue their progress,” said Tamara Cannon, the Community Options employment specialist who is working with Hauge to reach that next level of independence.

Funded by lawmakers in 2015, the Work Start program helps clients create a resume, apply for jobs, and prepare for interviews, while also teaching skills such as navigating public transportation. Once clients find work, staff may continue to provide job coaching, accommodation recommendations, and other support based on individual needs.

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The goal is for Work Start clients to find part-time work in a career area that interests them and offers flexible hours. This is important because fatigue is common as people recover from a brain injury, and when individuals become tired, it can aggravate other challenges.

Trina Gress, Vice President of Operations at Community Options, explained how the Work Start program fills a gap between the Skill Smart pre-vocational program and the state's Vocational Rehabilitation Program.

"Work Smart clients are referred to the state Vocational Rehabilitation Program when they have built up their stamina and can meet that program's requirements," she said.

One of Hauge's employment goals is to work as a front-desk clerk in a hotel, while she pursues her long-term goal of returning to work in the nursing field. She has applied for a number of different jobs since successfully completing a job shadowing experience as a front desk clerk.

"I remember things from a long time ago," Hauge said. "I'm used to the hotel business. I did that for quite a few years while I was going to nursing school. Plus, I can do that while I study."

Hauge described the benefits of working with Cannon, her Community Options employment specialist.

"Tamara has been amazing to work with because she is always positive. She makes me stop and think things through. I have great support from Tamara and my parents. They keep me motivated," said Hauge.

"I want to live independently with my children, and that will take time and money," she said.

As Hauge described her future plans, Cannon smiled and said, "I'm proud of her for being so strong and determined. She has to do this all over again. Going to college and getting a degree while having children was hard the first time. Now imagine having a brain injury, knowing you were once a nurse, and having to start over in the motel business, get an apartment, relearn things, take the nursing refresher course, and get a driver's license. Kjerstine is starting over."

The Department of Human Services' recent allotment plan sustains these important services for Hauge and other individuals with traumatic brain injuries, but does include some budget changes.

The Skill Smart program slots and service hours were increased during the 2015 legislative session, and the program is already nearing capacity. Because of the general fund allotment, the 26 Skill Smart slots added during the legislative session will not be refilled when they become available during the remainder of the 2015-2017 biennium.

Funding for the return-to-work Work Smart program was originally estimated to provide resources for 50 new slots. The allotment changed the contract for services to \$257,812 for the biennium. This means Community Options will delay full implementation and will serve fewer people during the biennium.

For more information about the Skill Smart and Work Start programs for people with traumatic brain injuries, contact Community Options at 701-223-2417, Relay ND TTY 711.