

## A Win-Win for Youth and Business

Kate, a First Jobs participant

Joe pins his Hannaford identification tag onto his baseball cap. He and his sister, Kate, don bright orange vests and dash out of Hannaford's Windham, Maine store to collect grocery carts from the parking lot. The store manager calls after them cheerfully, "Don't forget – no more than five at a time!"

Joe and Kate are part of an employment program targeted to youth in care called *First Jobs Maine*. The program was piloted in partnership with Employment Trust, Inc. (ETI) of Portland and the Hannaford Bros. Company. Funded by the Annie E. Casey Foundation, with technical support from Casey Family Services and the

# First Jobs

University of Southern Maine's Muskie School, *First Jobs* provides initial and transitional employment opportunities at Hannaford for youth ranging in age from 15-21.

"To know this program is to understand what 'win-win' is all about," said Mark Millar, director of Casey Family Services' Maine Division. Millar explains that in the dual customer model, employers like Hannaford fulfill the demand for added employees during high tourist season, and youth in the program receive customized job placement, training, coaching and retention support. *First Jobs* combines the expertise of mentors, employers, social ser-



vice agencies and career coaches to work with youth in a supportive, positive environment.

While serving on the advisory committee for the School-to-Career Program, now administered by the Jim Casey Youth Opportunities Initiative, Rob Franciose, president and founder of ETI, developed the rationale for *First Jobs*. The program is targeted to youth who have experienced abuse and neglect, have never held a job and many of whom have learning and other disabilities. "Employment is a functional way to address some of the issues these kids face. It's all about equal access – equal rights, breaking down the barriers to employment for these kids."

Breaking down barriers to employment has been the cornerstone of Franciose's work. With ETI's 12-year experience as a specialty workforce development agency for people with barriers to employment, *First Jobs* is predicated on staffing and coaching. ETI submitted a grant proposal to the Annie E. Casey Foundation for the project in October, 2003, targeting 25 total jobs, 18 of which were intended for a "summer jobs" component and seven as part of a "transition-to-hire" component. By December, the program was funded and within six months, *First Jobs* was up and running.

The summer jobs component targets high school students for a 10-week work period.

## FIRST JOBS: A WIN-WIN FOR YOUTH AND BUSINESS

# FIRST

The second component, transition-to-hire, targets youth for job placements in regular year-round jobs at Hannaford stores. Participating youth are on ETI's payroll until they complete a one- to three-month training program, at which point they are "transitioned" to Hannaford's payroll with full benefits.

"Transition-to-hire is a critical part of the program because it is designed to prevent failure on the job," says Kevin O'Sullivan, ETI vice-president. According to O'Sullivan, the 15 summer hires in Hannaford's Windham, Standish and Wells stores did so well in the 10-week program, that 12 were offered an opportunity for part-time work during the school year, including Kate, who is re-employed at the Windham store a couple of evenings a week and on Saturdays. "So, the summer jobs program turned into 'summer-to-hire,'" beamed Kevin.

In fact, every aspect of *First Jobs* is designed to make the job experience a successful one for youth who have serious challenges in gaining and maintaining employment. "We want to break the chain of getting a job and losing a job," said Rob Franciose. "If they're on our payroll, we can support them through the learning stages so they don't give up," he said, referring to the training period for which the youth are paid.

*First Jobs* is structured around several other elements that have helped to ensure its success:

**1) JOB COACHES** who have been trained in the tasks performed by the First Jobs associates, are on site at all times, providing support and assistance when needed. Job



*Joe (right) enjoys working in the Seafood Department at Hannaford's Windham, Maine store during his first summer with the Jobs First program.*

coaches are supervised by the vocational coordinator, a role fulfilled by another ETI team member, Anthony Taliento. "For many of these kids, their life experience has emphasized their not belonging, feeling like outsiders. This sometimes results in behavior problems that contribute to the cycle of failure in the workforce. We need to bridge the gaps by hanging in with these kids and never judging them," he adds. "At the same time, we need to make sure that the employer gets what they need. So, bridge-building is a critical part of the process."

**2) THE EMPLOYABILITY DEVELOPMENT CURRICULUM** provides 10 weeks of interactive sessions in which youth are able to knit together their own individual workplace experiences with structured learning about employment. These sessions provide a forum for consistent interaction with trained facilitators from the Portland Career Center's Training Resource Center as well as guest faculty from Hannaford, banks and other businesses.

**3) THE HANNAFORD PARTNERSHIP** has been critical to the integrity of the program. Hannaford's culture of hiring many young people, investing in its employees and focusing on retention makes the grocery chain a perfect corporate partner. Hannaford's associate relationship managers, responsible for day-to-day human resources issues, have met regularly with ETI and were another on-site resource for the *First Jobs* associates. At the end of the summer, Hannaford placed many of the associates on "educational leave" status, rather than terminating them, so the youth have the option to return next summer if they choose.

**4) THE COLLABORATION AND PARTNERSHIP** with Casey Family Services and the Muskie School has proved invaluable to recruitment efforts and to facilitating communication with Maine's Department of Health and Human Services. Casey and the Muskie School also have partnered to create an in-service training program for Hannaford management and supervisory staff, focusing on the issues of youth in care and on providing insights, tools and techniques relating to effective and sensitive workplace communication with the young employees.

**5) INDIVIDUALIZED JOB PLACEMENT** has ensured that each *First Jobs* associate was placed in a job that best fit his/her skills, interests and Hannaford's business needs.

**6) CUSTOMIZED SUPPORT** has helped overcome barriers to job success. ETI was the watchdog on any issues that might impede the chances for a youth's success on the job. The ETI team met with the *First Jobs* associates over time to learn of any relevant

# JOBBS

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*Joe helps his sister Kate round up grocery carts in front of Hannaford's in Windham, Maine. Both are part of Maine's First Jobs program.*

challenges, health problems, or conditions that could affect their work performance. An open door policy on the part of ETI and Hannaford management encouraged youth at any time to discuss concerns or questions as they came up.

“Helping each associate through the learning and experience curves, giving them the same ‘life experience’ as many other youth, are the keys to ensuring lasting success in employment,” explains O’Sullivan. His colleague, Josh Verville from the Muskie

School adds, “Work should be part of foster kids’ exposure. Learning job skills, hanging in at a job is something they need to do to prepare for life.”

With all these elements in place, no one is resting on the laurels of the first year’s success. Currently, ETI, Casey Family Services’ Mark Millar, Hannaford and other employers in Maine are exploring with the Annie E. Casey Foundation an expanded program for 2005 so that more youth may be served.

Brian S. Lyght, senior associate in system and service reform for the Foundation, played a key role in funding the program. “We’re encouraged by the outcomes that *First Jobs* has achieved, particularly as we consider promising practices for connecting these young people to opportunities for

economic success. An evaluation of *First Jobs’* model and outcomes is being conducted through a partnership with the Enterprise Foundation,” he said.

As Kate and Joe hang up their orange vests at the end of the day, they share a smile. Like many foster siblings, they haven’t lived together since they were very young. But *First Jobs* brought them together in the workplace for a summer. Just like many kids their age, they worked, earned money, met new friends, learned new skills, and most importantly, discovered something about themselves. They learned that they can succeed at a job as well as anyone. For that summer, Kate and Joe had the chance to belong.