



INDEPENDENCE THROUGH OPPORTUNITY

History on Challenge Unlimited, Inc. and Affiliate Companies

Challenge Unlimited, Inc., formerly known as Specialized Services, Inc., was established in 1959 as an Illinois nonprofit corporation. The organization was created by a group of parents of adult children with disabilities who were interested in receiving services after high school. The original purpose was to establish, maintain, and operate vocational training programs and a sheltered workshop for individuals with mental, emotional, or physical disabilities.

The parent group hired a staff person to conduct a needs assessment of the Madison County area. A plan was developed and administered for the sheltered workshop vocational training program. Services at the workshop included personal adjustment training, work adjustment training, work activities consisting of subcontracts secured from local businesses, and social activities.

In August of 1960, Specialized Services opened its doors to six developmentally disabled men and women. The agency became certified by the Department of Labor to pay individuals with disabilities for work performed according to each person's abilities under a Special Minimum Wage Certificate.

Specialized Services was initially funded through generous contributions from parents, friends, and local businesses. The organization was quickly approved by the Division of Vocational Rehabilitation to receive state grants and funding for vocational training services. Soon after, the Department of Mental Health approved Specialized Services to receive a grant and the agency was able to expand services to individuals with mental, emotional, and physical disabilities.

The agency grew rapidly to 50 participants and quickly needed a larger building. When a larger building was secured, Specialized Services was able to increase services and increase the number of individuals served.

As the sheltered workshop continued to grow, Tom Moehn, president and CEO, explored his conviction that individuals with disabilities could and should be a productive workforce in the mainstream business community.

In 1978 the organization landed its first outside service contract cleaning the Madison County Courthouse. Supervised crews of individuals with disabilities provided quality custodial services. Word had spread about the quality of work provided, and soon the organization landed other outside contracts with National Steel, Co., Illinois and Missouri Departments of Transportation, General Services Administration in Springfield, Illinois and St. Louis, Missouri.

To keep things moving in the direction of community-integration, Specialized Services initiated a partnership with the National Institute for the Severely Handicapped (NISH). NISH is a national, nonprofit agency that provides employment opportunities for people with severe disabilities through federal contracts for products and services. Employment opportunities offered by NISH provide



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individuals with disabilities federal mandated prevailing wages and competitive benefits. While working with NISH, Challenge was awarded its first government services contract at Scott Air Force Base in the 1980's.

Building on its initial success, Challenge Unlimited has turned one NISH contract into a mutually successful relationship. The organization now provides contract management and service labor to ten NISH contracts in Illinois, Missouri, and Wisconsin.

Since the late 1980s, the first contract at Scott Air Force Base has now become custodial, food service, grounds maintenance, recycling, and shelf stocking and custodial at the Commissary. Challenge Unlimited has also obtained NISH contracts outside of Scott Air Force Base providing custodial services at the General Services Administration (GSA) Building in Springfield, IL., the GSA Building in Alton IL., the GSA Page Building in St. Louis, MO., and Ft. McCoy in Tomah, WI. The organization also provides warehouse management to the U.S. Department of Agriculture in Granite City, IL.

In addition to NISH contracts, Challenge Unlimited has continued to secure several state and business contracts throughout the years to provide employment and vocational training to individuals with disabilities.

The state of Illinois took notice of Specialized Services' success in the late 1980s and requested that the organization close a large residential center in a nearby town and develop other living options for individuals with disabilities. Consistent with President Tom Moehn's vision for community-integration, Specialized Services accepted the request and developed an affiliated company, Residential Services of Madison County, with a single group home in 1989.

Now known as Residential Options, Inc., the company consists of 12 community-integrated residential homes throughout the Illinois Metro East and provides housing for nearly 140 individuals with disabilities. Each setting emphasizes a genuine home environment that promotes independence and recovery with staff supervision. Residents engage in all privileges and responsibilities of a typical home including cooking, laundry, cleaning, gardening, pet care, and are encouraged to become active members of their communities.

Specialized Services was in for another year of great progression. In 1995 the organization changed its name to Challenge Unlimited, Inc. to compliment the philosophy of providing community integrated programs, services, and vocational opportunities to individuals with disabilities. Challenge also officially closed its Sheltered Workshop and integrated all of the program's individuals into community job sites.

Within the same year, Alpha Industries was developed as the second affiliate company of Challenge Unlimited. The new company was created to offer Affirmative Enterprise Opportunities to individuals with disabilities as well as individuals with disadvantages. The emphasis of an Affirmative Enterprise is to offer a mix between individuals with and without disabilities and/or disadvantages and offer role model mentoring in a production service or service work setting. Employees and clients work or



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participate in vocational training at businesses, state sites, and federal sites within the community.

Today, Challenge Unlimited, Inc. and its affiliate companies, Residential Options, Inc., and Alpha Industries have grown to approximately 1,000 people; nearly half are employees and half are clients. The companies are known throughout the country as leaders in offering community rehabilitation services, vocational training, developmental training, educational opportunities, community-integrated housing, and employment to individuals with disabilities or those with disadvantages.