

Transition Expo lends a helping hand

By Mary Ellen Godin, Record-Journal staff

MERIDEN - Students with disabilities don't always know what to do after high school.

Adults with disabilities don't always know that they can work without sacrificing Social Security benefits. And employers don't always know that many disabled people are ready and willing to work, if they are given some support. About 38 vendors and agencies offering programs for people with learning, developmental and physical disabilities came to the Transition Expo at the Four Points by Sheraton on Tuesday to let the public know help is available.

"There is something for everyone here," said Debbie Kohan, transition coordinator for the city's public schools. "It's important because students need to figure out what path to take after high school. Employers need to know the benefits of hiring people with disabilities. It's not so scary."

Resident Carmen Diaz came to the event to get information for her daughter, who is scheduled to graduate from Maloney High School this year.

"I wanted to know about learning programs, about the different things she can do, that I would like her to do within her limits" Diaz said. "When you love your kids, you keep pushing."

About 150 parents, employers and disabled individuals from 17 towns attended the Transition Expo, sponsored by the Aces Regional Transition Network the Meriden Board of Education and the State Education and Resource Center.

"People want to know what the college has to offer for services for students with disabilities," said Deborah Jeffers, director of the Meriden branch of Middlesex Community College. "There are some good questions. Whatever we are able to do, we do to accommodate the students."

Laura Micklus is the Regional Disability Program Navigator for CTWorks and the Workforce Alliance. The position was created through the state departments of Labor and Social Services in August to help people with disabilities enter and remain in the work force. Micklus helps educate employers about the high skill levels that many disabled people possess.

"There is a whole worker pool out there," said Micklus, who is physically disabled. "Employment equals freedom because it levels the playing field."

Maria Munoz of East Hartford came to the expo to find programs for her son, Miguel DeJesus, 20 who has a transition plan from the state Department of Developmental Services.

"It's still very important to get ideas," Munoz said through an interpreter. "There are a lot of services we're not aware of."

Representatives from Gateway, Mitchell, and Curry colleges were on hand to answer questions about services, equipment and programs for disabled students. Vendors included Job Corps, Project Genesis, the Meriden Business and Learning Center, United Cerebral Palsy and Kuhn Employment Opportunities.

Irene Graham came to the expo not only to learn about services for her children, but also for herself. Graham, who has learning disabilities, is interested in attending college. She and her husband, William, were interested in learning more about Middlesex Community College.

"For people who have learning problems, we're all equal in God's eyes," Graham said. "For my daughter, I want something after graduation, something to better herself."

mgodin@record-journal.com (203) 317-2255