

# INTERACTION

Alternative Community Training

*"An inclusive community where everyone belongs, participates, and is valued."*

**NATIONAL  
DISABILITY  
EMPLOYMENT  
AWARENESS  
MONTH**

**#NDEAM**



“There is no greater disability in society, than the inability to see a person as more.”  
- Robert M. Hensel

**STEP Into Action with  
Career Services**

**Inside Day Service's  
Sensory Room**

**ACT Announces  
Youth Services**

**Five Program Managers  
Join Community Living**

# DEAR ACT ADVOCATES,

October is here, which means it's "National Disability Employment Awareness Month (NDEAM)."

Every October, we recognize people with disabilities and their valued contributions to America's workforce and economy. A time when we commemorate their efforts in building a secure and inclusive employment opportunity for all people with disabilities.

This year's NDEAM theme, "America's Recovery: Powered by Inclusion," resonates with me deeply.

Inclusion has always been the heart of ACT's mission, vision, and values: a driving force propelling the agency forward and shaping its inner core. We at ACT are firm believers in inclusivity and what that means for those we continue to support daily through our services.

ACT's programs and staff have done a fantastic job of being resilient and unwavering through these difficult times. But as part of National Disability Employment Awareness Month, I want to give special recognition to ACT's Career Services Program.

A year ago, the pandemic disrupted the country's employment. As a result, local businesses laid off about half of the individuals we supported when COVID-19 became a worldwide threat. But within six months, nearly all of them returned to work, thanks to our superb Career Services team.

We not only praise the program's dedication to helping ACT individuals work during COVID-19's first phase but assisting them in going back to work!

Additionally, 46 new individuals have been hired since the pandemic started—on top of those who resumed employment! A considerable achievement despite the challenges at hand. A massive thank-you to Career Services' outstanding commitment to aiding people in securing a job in the community.

Last year, COVID-19 greatly impacted our Summer Work Experience Program, resulting in the program's closure for the summer. A valuable loss for ACT and supported youth individuals.

Yet, once again, Career Services came through and found two summer work experiences for summer 2021, where ten youth received paid work experience. (You can read more about this story on page 3.) Another accomplishment by the program and its staff!

Another honorable mention is the STEP Program. ACT's partnership with STEP continues to thrive among the pandemic struggles.

In 2020, COVID-19 transitioned the program away from its primary location, the Boone Hospital Center. However, Rusty Strodman and the Columbia Mall stepped up last year. They offered a space for the STEP Program, as they wanted to see its continued success. Thank you to Rusty and the Columbia Mall for your aid and support!

Amid all the employment and financial disruptions brought on by COVID-19, there's one silver lining. As America works toward economic recovery, the pandemic has taught businesses the value of the disabled community. It's not only a question of morality, but persons with disabilities deserve equal respect and fair treatment as abled persons do.

## DEAR ACT ADVOCATES

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They have proved themselves dependable and hard-working and yet, remain a tremendous un-tapped workforce.

The U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics reported today that in 2020, 17.9 percent of persons with a disability were employed, down from 19.3 percent in 2019. For persons without a disability, 61.8 percent were employed in 2020, down from 66.3 percent in the prior year.

Currently, I don't know our official local labor statistics for individuals with disabilities. But I firmly believe that during the pandemic, the inclusive efforts of our local businesses have resulted in a much higher local percentage of employment for persons with a disability.

However, although our local workforce has made significant progress in creating an inclusive workforce for people with disabilities, there's still work to be done. So join in our advocacy efforts and help those who need us have equal employment opportunities because the first step towards success begins with inclusion.

**Best wishes and  
happy reading,**




**Don Lafferty**  
Executive Director

**Thank you to the following businesses for  
providing employment opportunities to  
people with disabilities:**

**A Galaxy of Stars Childcare  
Academy Sports and Outdoors  
America's Best Contacts & Eyeglasses  
Atkins**

**Boone Hospital Center  
Big Way Auto Repair Shop  
Columbia Country Club  
Country Club of Missouri  
Columbia Public Schools (CPS)**

**Aladdin Dining Services**

**Cracker Barrel**

**Crushed Red**

**Dollar General**

**Dollar Tree**

**EDU Staffing**

**Gerbes**

**Going Bonkers**

**Goodwill**

**Heritage Hall - Skilled Nursing by Americare**

**Hy-Vee**

**Instacart**

**JJ's Café**

**Lenoir Woods**

**MBS Textbook Exchange**

**McAlister's Deli**

**McDonald's**

**Millard Mall Services**

**Missouri Auto Auction**

**Missouri Cotton Exchange**

**OATS Transit**

**Panera Bread**

**Papa Murphy's Take-N-Bake Pizza**

**Pizza Hut**

**Prenger Foods**

**Salvation Army**

**Schnucks**

**Solstice Senior Living**

**Stephens College**

**The Bluffs**

**Tiger Hotel**

**Tiger Place**

**Walgreens**

## CAREER SERVICES COMMITMENT TO WORKED-BASED LEARNING FOR STUDENTS

As some students prepared for summer of freedom with planned fun and excursions, others pursued employment opportunities with ACT's assistance.

This summer, ACT participated in Vocational Rehabilitation's Summer Work Experience Program at Tigers Tots and Centralia Parks & Recreation. This opportunity allowed the ten students with disabilities to work and earn money while building critical work skills.

The Summer Work Experience Program equips young individuals with an understanding of what it's like to be employed, helping prepare them for future employment. ACT's Career Services remains committed to the success of its serviced youths; they firmly believe worked-based learning is crucial before high school graduation.

Work-based learning is "a supervised program sponsored by either an education or training organization to link knowledge gained at the worksite with a planned program of study." One source states, "worked-based learning experiences prove to be one of the strongest predictors of adult employment success for students and youth with disabilities."

There are equally exceptional benefits for the individual and the community through work-based learning. And both have long-term positive effects.



# Tiger Tots



# #NDEAM



## BEHIND THE DESK WITH EMILY THOMECEK



Behind ACT's front desk in the main office, you'll find the new Administrative Coordinator, Emily Thomeczek, multi-tasking between assorted administrative tasks.

Yet, whether it's answering phone calls, assisting visitors, or handling mail, Emily's can-do attitude never wavers.

She enjoys the day-to-day tasks the position brings. So keeping busy is not a problem for her.

Thomeczek was born and raised in Hannibal, Missouri. However, she has also called Jefferson City and Fulton home. Before joining the ACT family, Emily was a Business Communication major at Westminster College in Fulton. After graduation, she relocated to Columbia—her home for five months now.

She says building friendships and communications are her favorite part of her job. "I love the interaction I have with



the wonderful people who pass by the front desk daily," she says.

"I have already made some amazing connections here. I love working with such passionate, hard-working people!"

### Five Fun Facts about Emily



1. Her best friend is a three-year-old chocolate Lab named, JoJo. He loves car rides, face licks, the Dog Park, chicken, and affection.
2. She loves arts & crafts—cross-stitch is her current jam!
3. She is number five of *six* sisters.
4. She is a thrift shopping enthusiast, specifically when it deals with collecting and repurposing antiques. Right now, she is turning old glassware into unique candles.
5. She recently learned that the number in a movie theater's name is how many screens are in that theater.

## DAY SERVICES **SERVES** UP THE SUMMER

*This challenge is on.*

Day Services brought the heat this summer with a healthy dose of competition with their summer Survivor Games, and The Price is Right.

First up, they held the Survivor Games during a week-long event from June 28th through July 2nd. The program's colored teams (purple, blue, green, and yellow) created a team flag to represent them.

Next, the teams went head-to-head, competing in assorted tasks—with no shortage of challenge and fun. Their challenges included the act of balance (balancing a ball atop a cup and plate through an obstacle course, pool noodle duels, and a voice-directed blindfold excursion through the obstacle course.)

They also competed in balloon hockey and a community scavenger hunt. In addition, teams worked together to find clues and problem-solved how to obtain an envelope without using one's hands. But only with provided items.

Once they retrieved the envelope, the group used teamwork to assemble the puzzle pieces. They then inflated word balloons and put them in the correct order to spell out a phrase.

At the end of the week, the program recognized the winning team, celebrating team strengths and notable moments captured during the week's games.



## WITH A SIDE OF **COOL** COMPETITION

*Come on down!*

On August 6th, the program recreated a live version of “The Price is Right.”

Lucky contestants selected for Contestant’s Row placed bids on varying items, including canned goods and a remote-controlled drone.

Like the game show, individuals turned to the audience for assistance. “Higher, bid higher!” a display of thumbs down, or “No, lower.... it’s lower!” helped guide their bids.

Winners on Contestant Row participated in the show’s top-rated games: Plinko, Punch-a-Bunch, Tic-Tac-Toe, and Cliffhanger. The contestants then moved on to the Winner’s Wheel with a chance to spin and win big!

The game’s fun and excitement were so addicting that everyone wanted to come back and play it again the next day!

Stay tuned to see what games Day Services serves up next!



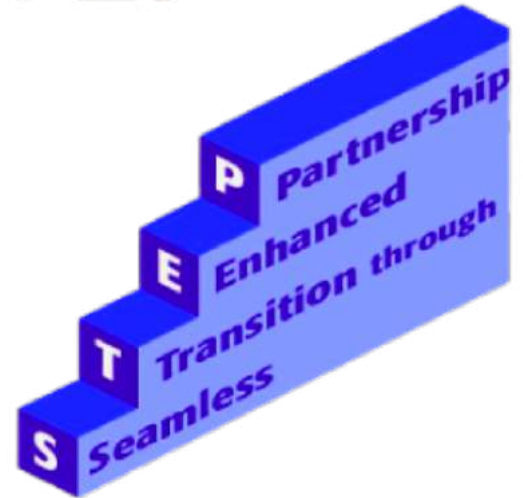


## STEP CELEBRATES ITS 10TH YEAR!

The Seamless Transition through Employment Partnerships (STEP) program celebrates its 10th year. STEP is an internship program designed to teach students with disabilities job-related skills and helped them transition from high school to employees.

STEP's partnership with ACT has aided in the success of many students over the years. Six interns recently began worked-based learning at six different businesses: Columbia Public Schools, Old Navy, Tropical Smoothie Café, Millard Mall Services, Level-Up Entertainment, and McDonald's.

# STEP



## IT RECOGNITION

We live in the digital age where staying connected has never been more crucial to our livelihood. It keeps the world running like clockwork—the earth spinning on its axis.

IT professionals have been instrumental in maintaining company functionality through remote and hybrid formats and platforms.

We are thankful for our IT Superhero, **Pat**. He has gone above and beyond to keep the agency connected and safe during the pandemic. Thank you for your selfless efforts and dedication to ACT and those we support!

## COMMUNITY LIVING WELCOMES NEW PROGRAM MANAGERS

ACT welcomes five new Program Managers for Community Living: **Cynthia Blake-Robson, John Kobel, Kadeem Thompson, Austa Ihenacho, and Lindsey Shumate!**

Each one brings valuable experience, knowledge, and skills to the program.

We look forward to seeing all your significant accomplishments in helping individuals live and thrive independently.

Welcome to the ACT family!



## ACT ANNOUNCES **YOUTH SERVICES** AND PROGRAM LEADERSHIP

ACT is proud to announce its fifth and newly-added service, Youth Services. The decision came as part of the agency's internal restructuring plan.

Youth Services will house the After-School Youth Program and ACT ONE Club, formerly under the Community & Family Services umbrella.

These youth-centered services provide support to middle and high school students with disabilities. LaTroya Cowans, a former After-School Youth Program Supervisor, will oversee Youth Services as its new Program Manager.

Likewise, Kathryn Gunn, a former Community & Family Services Program Supervisor, accepted the Program Manager position for Community & Family Services.

The program will continue to provide individualized, goal-based services and supports to adults with disabilities. Its services include In-Home Respite, Community Integration, and Personal Assistance.

As new leadership announcements continue, Fontella Jackmon-Jones of Career Services has accepted the Assistant Program Director position under Career Services. Fontella will help lead and grow the program in its services.

Career Services "assists job seekers with achieving their employment goals while helping local employers with their recruitment and employee retention."

***Congratulations, LaTroya,  
Kathryn, and Fontella!***



## DIRECT SUPPORT PROFESSIONAL (DSP)



When DSPs showed up for work on September 13th, a yard sign with the message “Thank You DSPs!” was waiting to greet them. But that was only one of their surprises!

After a challenging year (and over a year and a half of social absence—due to COVID-19), we wanted to make DSP Week 2021 a memorable celebration for our DSPs.

All week long (September 13th – 17th), The Social Committee assembled and passed out colorful DSP gift bags. Inside, DSPs received a brand new ACT shirt to commemorate DSP Week, a tumbler, food gift card, and a special thank-you magnet with a message from the Executive Director, including management signatures.

Fantastic raffle prizes were also up for grabs! In addition, DSPs could earn extra raffle tickets through the Management Games, where Directors, Program Managers, and Supervisors competed in various, potentially messy, or embarrassing games to show their support for DSPs. Not to mention, provide them with amusing entertainment! The games included a pie-eating contest, egg toss, trivia, cup runs over, and a feel & guess activity.



## RECOGNITION WEEK 2021



To make DSP Week more interactive and engaging, the Social Committee introduced the Cash Cube. One by one, randomly selected DSPs entered the inflatable game and worked hard (and fast!) to catch swirling ACT money in one minute. With over 35 participants, we awarded nearly **\$3000** total in cash prizes!

As a sweetener, the Executive Director, Don Lafferty, had an extra surprise in store for everyone on Friday. He selected Emily Thomeczek to try her luck inside the Cash Cube. However much she collected in a minute, all staff would receive that amount on their paychecks! Her efforts paid off as she earned everyone a **\$113** bonus.



We are thankful for our DSPs and their ongoing dedication to the individuals they support. We celebrate them not only the one week but each and every day. Thank you for being difference-makers in the lives of those who need you the most!



## HELP US REACH OUR \$20,000 GOAL!



The countdown is on for the CoMoGives 2021 campaign. This year, the annual online fundraiser will begin a day early, starting on #GivingTuesday, November 30th. (So be sure to mark your calendars!)

We are excited for our 7th year as a participant in CoMoGives. Every December, over 100 local nonprofits campaign to raise money for their organization and cause. Last year, we reached AND exceeded our \$15,000 goal—the first time in many years!

The CoMoGives 2021 online portal opens at 12:01 AM on November 30th.

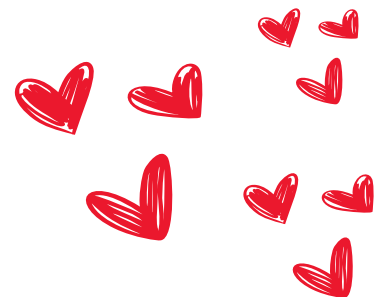
To donate to ACT through CoMoGives, please visit **[www.comogives.com](http://www.comogives.com)**.

You can follow our progress on social media:

Facebook - **[www.facebook.com/ACTofCoMo](https://www.facebook.com/ACTofCoMo)**

Twitter - **@ACTofCoMo**

Instagram - **@ACTofCoMo**



Again, we're thankful for our community's kindness and support during a challenging year. The power of togetherness can bring hope!

Thank you for your continued support of ACT, the individuals, and our mission.

## DAY SERVICES REVEALS ITS NEWEST FEATURE, **THE SENSORY ROOM**



Day Services' Sensory Room opens its doors to individuals after two years of in-depth research, strategy, financial support, and devoted time by the Program's Director, Carrie Griffith. Since joining Day Services in September 2019, Carrie has led the project from start to finish.

"Initially, I had done a lot of research on sensory rooms," she says. "They're proven to aid individuals with ADHD, Anxiety, Autism Spectrum, Sensory Processing Disorders, OCD, Dementia, Alzheimer's, and anger issues."

When designing the room, Carrie considered two components: activities to 1) soothe and relax and 2) explore and stimulate. Many of the individuals in ACT's services have various sensory input needs, so strong attention to elements was crucial to its development.

Carrie's son, Jake, lent a hand with the Sensory Room as part of his Eagle Scout Project. Together, they designed and assembled all the interactive wall panels. Additionally, he brought in extra scouts to help paint, build, and hang the panels. Talk about teamwork!

The room holds an array of sensory interactions ready for the individuals to explore. Pops of vibrant blues, greens, and purples facilitate calming moods. At the same time, the activity and touch segments stimulate the senses and encourage curiosity and learning. Particular thought went into the color selections and assorted fidgets—all items are sturdy and shatterproof.

Individuals can engage with fun, yet comforting activities throughout the room, including fiber optic lights, the Bubble Tube, liquid floor tiles, kinetic

## DAY SERVICES REVEALS ITS NEWEST FEATURE, "THE SENSORY ROOM"

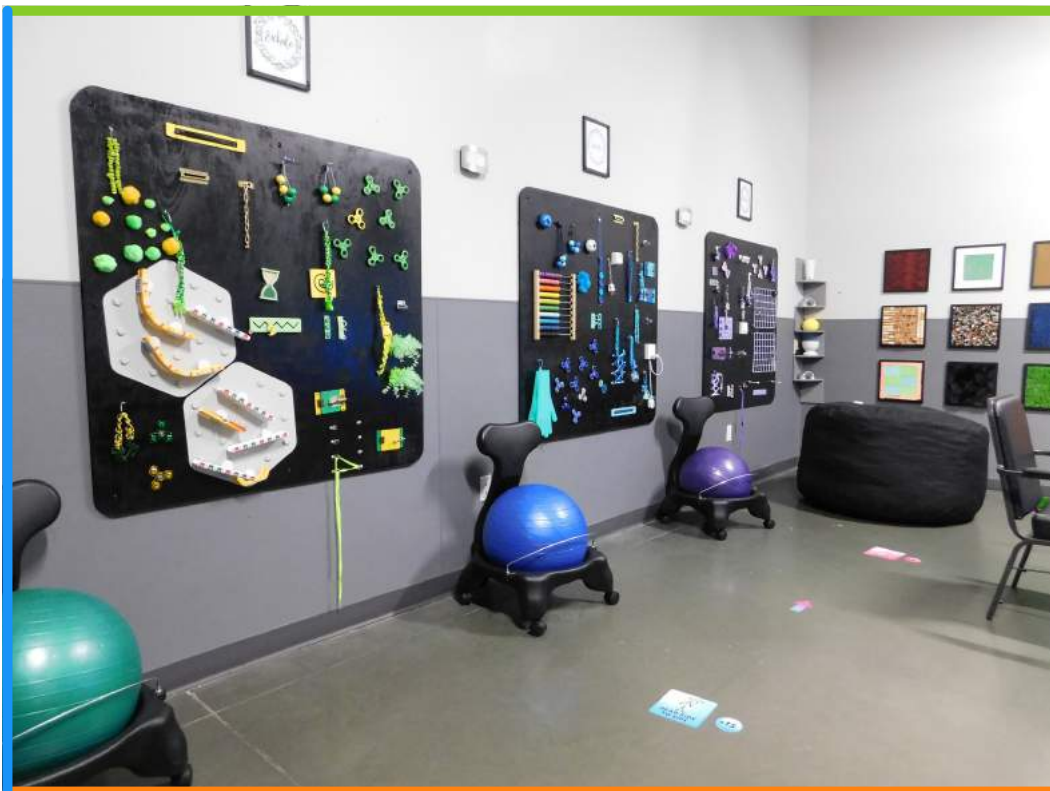
*Continued*

sand, water beads, activity books, calm-down bottles, and a weighted blanket. They can also venture on activity path circles through the room. And when they need to rest, there's plenty of alternative seating available (bouncy balls, bean bags, and swivel chairs).

Another distinct feature is the "Too Much Tent" space. Suppose an individual gets too much sensory input and feels overwhelmed. In that case, they can retreat to this area and sit with noise-canceling headphones and take five minutes until they feel better.

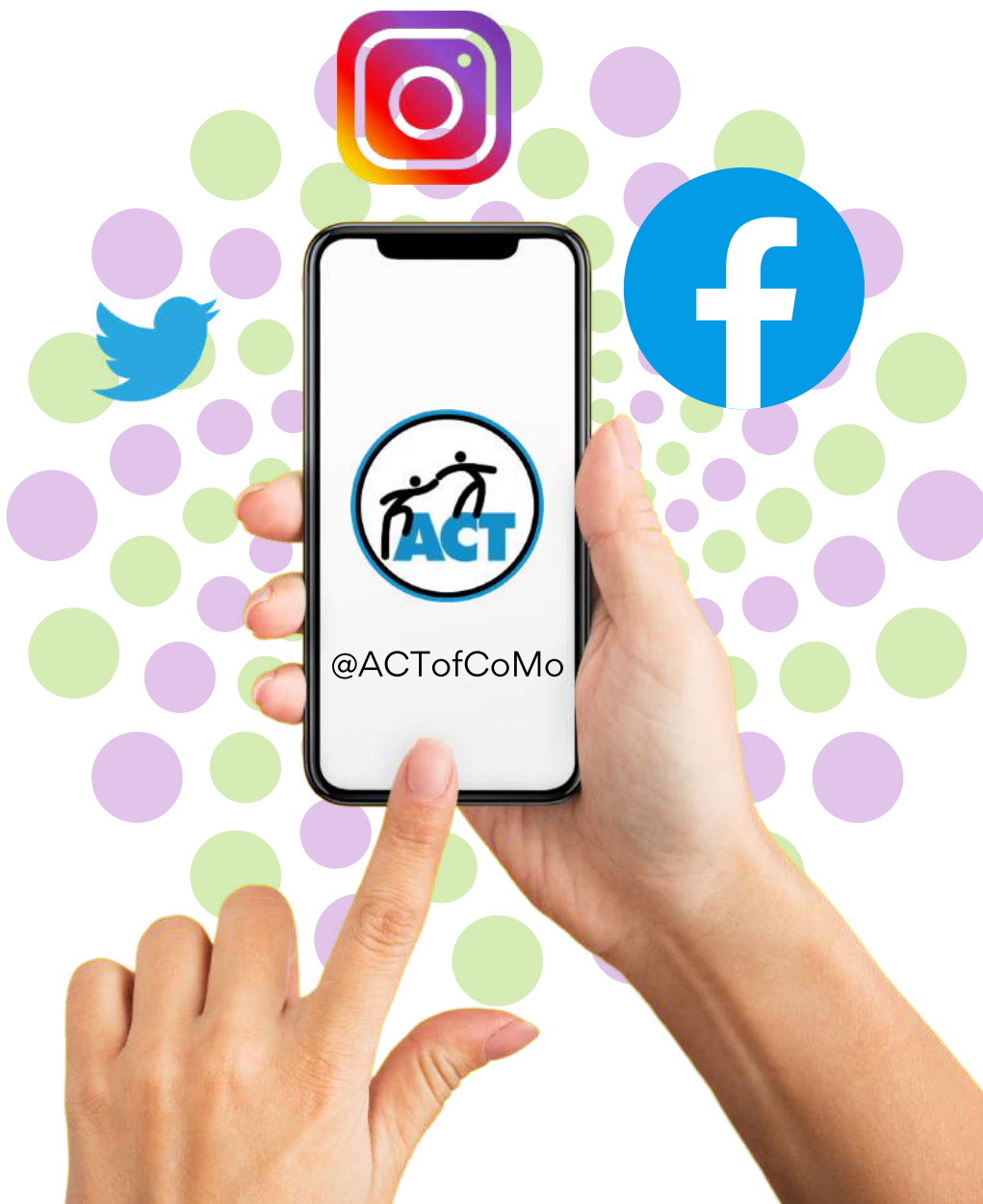
Carrie notes that "No other nearby Day Service provider has a dedicated Sensory Room to this level." With so many other disability providers to choose from, it becomes what separates another from the rest and what services are readily available.

"We hope that [the sensory room] will draw in referrals with increased sensory needs as well as serve our existing individuals," she adds.





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