



# News Release

**FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE**  
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**For more information, contact**  
A.J. Hostetler, Communications Director  
[aj.hostetler@dars.virginia.gov](mailto:aj.hostetler@dars.virginia.gov)  
804-662-7372

## **PROJECT SEARCH PARTICIPANTS CELEBRATE COMPLETION OF CAREER PROGRAM**

*Sec. Hazel to speak at celebration ceremony in Mechanicsville*

**(RICHMOND, Va.)** — About 130 high school students in Virginia with developmental and intellectual disabilities participated in internships this school year to gain valuable work experience and skills as part of the innovative Project SEARCH program.

The program, which is funded by the Virginia Department for Aging and Rehabilitative Services, began in Virginia during the 2009-2010 academic year. Since then, more than 600 students have participated in Project SEARCH, a national career program for high school students with disabilities that provides hands-on training during the senior year.

Virginia's Secretary of Health and Human Resources Dr. Bill Hazel will speak at a ceremony at 1 p.m., June 8, to congratulate Project SEARCH students at Bon Secours Memorial Regional Medical Center in Mechanicsville, one of 15 host sites across the Commonwealth partnering in Project SEARCH.

“The hands-on training and skills that Project SEARCH teaches high school seniors have helped several hundred participants find jobs and greater independence since Virginia joined the program,” said Hazel. “It’s a wonderful way to help individuals with disabilities find meaningful work, and I’m happy to see the program continue to strengthen and grow in Virginia.”

Project SEARCH students obtain invaluable experience through internships in a health care or business environment, with the goal of having a job by the end of the year. Some students are offered jobs before they finish the program. This year nearly 40 students have already begun employment.

Zach Suit, who has autism and is nonverbal, began employment last month in environmental services after participating in Project SEARCH at Novant Health Prince William Medical Center. “Project SEARCH was such an integral part of Zach’s life and created a whole

new world for him,” said his mother, Michelle Suit of Manassas. “He’s been able to interact with staff and he’s gotten a job at the hospital. It’s the most incredible blessing I could ever imagine.”

DARS, the Virginia Department of Education, local hospitals and public school systems coordinate the program. DARS provided more than \$700,000 in funding for job coaches to work with students throughout this academic year to ensure that they learn the responsibilities and duties of the workplace.

DARS counselors guide the clients through the program during the year, working with teachers from their local schools, job coaches from local employment service organizations and staff from the host business who serve as liaisons and mentors. These partners work each day to make the transition seamless from the initial interview for the program to its completion for the participating students.

Below is a list of this year’s host sites and the scheduled dates to celebrate the success of the participating students:

- Novant Health Prince William Medical Center, Manassas – June 2
- Chesapeake Regional Medical Center – June 2
- Augusta Health, Fishersville – June 3
- Sentara Norfolk General Hospital – June 7
- Sentara CarePlex Hospital, Hampton – June 7
- Bon Secours Maryview Medical Center, Portsmouth – June 7
- VCU Medical Center, Richmond – June 7
- Bon Secours Memorial Regional Medical Center, Mechanicsville – June 8
- Bon Secours St. Francis Medical Center, Midlothian – June 9
- Bon Secours St. Mary’s Hospital, Richmond – June 10
- Inova Alexandria Hospital – June 10
- Sentara Williamsburg Regional Medical Center – June 16

In addition, Project SEARCH completion ceremonies were held earlier this month at Carilion New River Valley Medical Center, Christiansburg; Clinch Valley Medical Center, Richlands; and Carilion Roanoke Memorial Hospital, Roanoke.

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The Virginia Department for Aging and Rehabilitative Services, in collaboration with community partners, provides and advocates for resources and services to improve the employment, quality of life, security, and independence of older Virginians, Virginians with disabilities, and their families. For more information, visit [www.vadars.org](http://www.vadars.org) or follow DARS on Facebook at [www.facebook.com/vadars](https://www.facebook.com/vadars) or Twitter at @vadars.