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## They focus on ability, not disability

**CAREGIVERS:** Help with transition

**OPTIONS:** Job shadowing, sampling

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Imagine graduating from high school without any career opportunities.

Every year, 275 students with disabilities graduate from the Toms River Regional School District without having a career to enter, according to Eileen Coyne, director of the Caregivers of New Jersey, Division of the Family Resource Network.

Coyne was speaking to a crowd of more than 60 Thursday at a breakfast lecture on "Bringing People Opportunities for Employment," which stems from a partnership with a number of government agencies and social-service organizations.

The Elks Lodge recently won a \$9,800 Community Impact Grant from the Elks National Foundation, and is working to assist students with disabilities transition into an adult life with job opportunities after graduating from high school.

"We want to facilitate a better transition for our students leaving school and entering the work force," said Coyne, wife of George Coyne, member of the Elks Lodge and chairman of the Elks National Foundation Committee.

She discussed different options with members of local businesses, including job shadowing, which is a hands-off, no-pay system of having a student follow a competent employee and get a sense of the job; job sampling, which is a hands-on experience of working on a complete project for a specific amount of time; and regular employment.

Steve Fusco, past exalted ruler for Lodge 1875, said that the Elks are instrumental in helping Boy and Girl scouts, youth and school programs, and have a commitment to special-needs children.

"(The purpose of the program is so that) employees can learn more about hiring students with disabilities and make more employment opportunities available for them," he said. "It will ultimately strengthen our community."

Toms River Mayor Thomas F. Kelaher said that he was proud of the lodge, one of 25 Elks Lodges in the country to win the grant out of 2,100 total Elks organizations nationwide.

"There are a lot of folks who suffer from various handicaps who should not be pushed to the side," Kelaher said. "The public should be aware that these folks are capable of handling a wide variety of things."

He added that the township "practices what we preach" and employs people with developmental disabilities.

Brian Fitzgibbons, assistant director for programs and planning at the state Division of Vocational Rehabilitation Services, explained how school is an entitlement program, but his organization works with "eligibility programs," or adult services.

"What do you do when the bus stops coming? We want to make sure the students get as much opportunity as they can to job sample and job shadow," Fitzgibbons said. "It's smart for (business owners) to invest in a person with a disability. We don't focus on the disability, we focus on the ability."