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Valley Associates for Independent Living (VAIL)

Placement Description

Support services to persons with disabilities

Intern or Field Placement Responsibilities/Opportunities

- Office work
- Activities (bowling, park, movies, etc.)
- Help the tutor with classes – teaching math and reading, etc.
- Help people maintain their homes
- Teach meal preparation and grocery shopping

Contact Information

- Contact Person: Gayl Brunk and/or Andrea King
- Address: 205-B South Liberty Street Harrisonburg, VA 22801
- Telephone: 540/433-6513
- Fax: 540/433-6313
- E-Mail: vail@govail.org
- Website: www.govail.org

Read about students' experiences at this site below:



Fall 2020 – Emma Anderson

Valley Associates for Independent Living is a non-profit organization in Harrisonburg, VA that helps people with disabilities live independently. Their mission is to promote self-direction among people with disabilities and remove barriers to independence in society. VAIL provides independent living skills training within the seven main areas of need including information and referral, peer support, housing, equipment, aids, and transportation, personal assistance, accessible transport, and accessible environment. Staff will work directly with consumers to help them define their goals and create a plan to meet them. They visit with consumers once at least every three months to gather any updates and see how progress towards goals are going. Staff can also refer individuals to outside resources for services VAIL is unable to provide, like home modifications, or provide consumers with assistive technology devices.

During my first few months at VAIL, I shadowed staff on Zoom and Facetime visits, gathered the surveys consumers submitted, combined the online and in-person results, created a page for the annual report on said results, and scanned consumer's papers into the server as VAIL is currently transferring all paperwork online. Later on in the semester, I would contact local companies and businesses to see if they would be interested in donating prizes to the annual Arctic Dip fundraiser VAIL puts on as a way to earn funding to continue providing services. I also began working directly with various consumers to help with their home modification needs. I performed a few intakes, contacted remodeling places to get estimates on different home modifications, and continually contacted my consumers to see where they stood with regards to their needs. I attended the monthly staff meetings, as well as some additional meetings as necessary. This semester VAIL put on "lunch and learns" every Tuesday and Thursday, which were presentations by both VAIL staff and outside presenters on various topics such as budgeting, Medicaid, financial assistance, and making healthy choices. Those were a great way to stay connected to VAIL on the days I was not there and learn about topics I was less familiar with.

I think VAIL is a great organization that can help give individuals more options in life and can connect them to resources they may not know about, as well as higher-up organizations like the government. People interested in using VAIL's services do not have to pay for anything VAIL offers, which is helpful, as people with disabilities often do not have reliable sources of income. Overall, I was glad to be able to have my field placement there. Some sites decided not to take interns once COVID hit, so I was grateful to even get a chance to complete my hours for the semester. I liked being able to see the behind-the-scenes type of work that goes into working with people with disabilities. I had never worked with individuals with disabilities through a company before, and it taught me about how a business is run and kept successful.

When I was interviewing at sites for this semester, the work I had thought I would be doing at VAIL changed pretty drastically from the work I actually did. Health and safety guidelines meant that a lot of visits staff had with consumers were moved to be virtual, so the direct work my



supervisor could offer me was very limited. Because the work I did was different than expected, I learned more about what I want in a career. I affirmed for myself that I enjoy, and almost need, variety in my daily routine. Adapting to new situations is a useful skill, as we all know now how quickly things can change - for the worse or the better.

Fall 2016 – Michelle Hayes

Valley Associates for Independent Living (VAIL) is a nonprofit organization that works with people who have a wide range of disabilities to help them live as independently as possible. VAIL is “promoting self-direction among people with disabilities and removing barriers to independence in the community.” The staff at VAIL accomplish this through advocacy, information and referral, independent living skills training, transition services, waiver assistance, case management, and service facilitation.

During my time at VAIL, I was able to experience a wide variety of services the staff are trained in providing. I sat in on service facilitation and case management meetings, learned about Medicaid waivers and their differences, developed and implemented transition activities for high school seniors, worked on independent living skills with two consumers, and led an independent living skills training class. Shadowing staff to their case management and service facilitation meetings allowed me to learn more about their positions while seeing the actual structure of these meetings with current consumers of services. Additionally, I was able to learn about the different Medicaid waivers at these meetings and understand how unique the services provided are to each individual who receives them. I was also able to participate in developing transition activities for high school seniors. Put simply, these are activities meant to help students who are about to graduate from high school transition into post-high school life through learning skills like budgeting, bill payment, credit maintenance, emotional management, and how to search for the right careers. Therefore, I was able to put together activities and implement them in Harrisonburg High School to help the students prepare for life after graduation. Another area of services that a large portion of my time was devoted to was independent living skills training. I was able to work with two consumers who have two very different disabilities and also lead an independent living skills class held at VAIL on Monday nights. Working with the two consumers gave me experience engaging with individuals one-on-one and developing rapport in order to work as well together as we possibly could. This also exposed me to the different types of services that people need and abilities people can possess depending on what their disabilities are. Overall, I was able to spend my time learning about the many services VAIL provides while trying my hand at them.

My contribution project for PSYC 495 also played a role in the experiences and opportunities I was able to learn from at VAIL. For my project, I assisted in developing an internship program at VAIL for people with disabilities in the surrounding community. It will take place over a two week timespan during the summer. In developing this program, I created



different office positions that interns could apply for; however, since each intern and their abilities will be unique, there will be a great amount of leeway in positions so that each participant is able to work on skills that they want to develop.

All of the skills and lessons I learned were made possible due to the welcoming, friendly, and supportive staff who work at Valley Associates for Independent Living. Since VAIL is inherently an organization that seeks to help individuals succeed according to their abilities, the staff are very friendly and understanding of the learning process. I was very encouraged during my field placement there by the patience and guidance each staff member had for me. Another advantage of being placed at VAIL is that each staff member has a certain position, but each staff member does a little bit of everything making them extremely knowledgeable about their field because of their diverse skill sets. While there are different positions needed in a Center for Independent Living, the center itself works so cohesively and collaborates on many, if not most, projects. In my opinion, this makes for a very cooperative unit that can accomplish more because of their team work. While I enjoyed and appreciated my entire experience, it think it would have been easier to catch on if I was able to spend more time at the site like most of their other interns do. VAIL usually has interns in the office, but most are social work majors who are in the office full time throughout the semester. Therefore, they are able to catch on quicker and begin working on more complicated tasks and activities sooner. However, I still found my experience to be very valuable by working for about twelve hours a week. I think I was able to adapt to this type of work in a timely manner because I was able to be in the office on different days and during different times of the day. This way, I was able to experience more throughout each week. For students interested in this site, I would advise following a similar schedule in order to gain the most experience out of this opportunity.

While I learned many different skills and lessons at VAIL, I think one of the most valuable for me personally was developing rapport and maintaining professional relationships with consumers. Before VAIL, I hadn't had much experience with consumer-staff relationships or building rapport in order to work as a cohesive unit while developing the consumer's skills. Fortunately, I was able to work and improve on these skills during my semester at VAIL. When I started out, I was incredibly nervous about my ability to provide consumers with the services and knowledge they desired to learn about. However, I came to discover that I could help consumers while working on improving these skills at the same time. I found this to be valuable for working with consumers of services through Centers for Independent Living, and I also found it to be valuable for the workplace in general. I plan to use these skills of working one-on-one with individuals in order to best serve people with my future career goals. Therefore, I saw learning how to develop and maintain professional relationships as an important skill for any field of work.

Overall, I am incredibly thankful for the opportunity I had to work at VAIL and learn from everyone who is a part of the organization. I learned different skills from each staff member and was able to see their unique perspectives on the work that they do. Additionally, this field



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placement helped me understand what the work environment looks like and the passion that goes into running a nonprofit organization. Valley Associates for Independent Living is an incredible organization with devoted staff members who are extremely supportive and welcoming to interns from JMU. I would highly recommend this site to anyone looking to learn more about the skills and knowledge mentioned above in a prosperous environment combined with the support of a class of students experiencing similar growth.

Spring 2012 – Emily Hines

The mission of VAIL is to “Promote self-direction among people with disabilities and to remove barriers to independence in the community.” I believe that I helped VAIL to move toward this goal with the work that I did there. The people at VAIL are very passionate about their work and were always very welcoming towards me. This warmth and passion drove my personal mission of trying to help this non-profit organization in achieving their goals and helping in any way that I could.

I had a wide variety of experiences at VAIL. This organization works with many different individuals, all with different disabilities and goals to be met. As an intern I was placed on different types of projects including research for a Veterans project where I gathered information about Veterans in the area so that VAIL could better assist them, I presented this information to all of VAIL’s staff, I organized for VAIL to be a part of the Harrisonburg Veterans Fair, I made phone calls and did office work for fundraising events and other projects, and I worked with individuals with disabilities to help remove some barriers in their life.

Out of all of these tasks, working with individuals with disabilities left me feeling the most fulfilled. One of my main assignments was mentoring a young woman with Aspergers. My main goal for this individual was to increase her social life and to be someone that she could talk to about her life and ideas and to then give her feedback. She and I built a rapport while hanging out in the park with my dogs, watching movies, and going shopping at the mall. I feel that she and I have a connection and I believe that I was able to make a positive difference in her life.

The one on one contact with people with disabilities I believe will be very advantageous for a career in Psychology or Social Work. As I mentioned before, the contact with the people was one of my favorite parts of my field placement and where I got the most fulfillment and enjoyment. Another advantage of VAIL was the energy of the organization. The people are all very welcoming, passionate, helpful, and gratuitous about their work and toward the interns. I always felt comfortable asking questions, giving input, and doing work at my own pace. I found that at this organization it is very important to have self-discipline. The responsibility of the projects and the interns schedule with people with disabilities is placed on the intern, which allows for freedom but lacks in daily direction from a supervisor. I enjoyed this freedom, but if someone is not prepared to discipline themselves and get the work done without daily direction then this may be a disadvantage. Overall I believe that VAIL is a wonderful organization to work for and to have field placement with. During my time there I saw that the people truly care about



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trying to help individuals with disabilities and place emphasis on being thoughtful and gratuitous towards the staff and interns.

My field placement with VAIL taught me many different things. One of the main lessons that I learned is to never judge a book by its cover. People with disabilities can be highly functioning and capable with the right help from passionate people. I learned to not give up on what I believe is right. My supervisor pushes for equal rights and for the funding of individuals with disabilities. Her passion and drive has been very inspirational to me and I hope to be just as driven in my career and future. I also learned to not be afraid to speak up and ask questions at a job. I believe that all of these lessons have given me more confidence in my abilities that I think will help me in my career. This experience has validated my decision to go into a field where I can have contact with people and hopefully make a difference in their lives.

Through this field placement I have gained a better understanding of the different processes for Medicaid, Medicare, and Veteran and military processes for getting funding. My experiences with some of the office work that I did also enhanced my professionalism with speaking on the phone and in person to different organizations and people with disabilities. My work with people with disabilities has improved my skills with building a professional and genuine rapport. I believe that this experience will help me with getting in to graduate school and with counseling individuals. I hope to improve upon my building of rapport with people as I get more experience with counseling and/or mentoring individuals. I believe that the more experience I gain the better I will be at understanding what someone's needs are and hopefully this will allow me to be a positive influence.