

RASHAD SHABAKA-BURNS
Trial Court Administrator

JANIE RODRIGUEZ, ESQ.
Ombudsman

www.njcourts.com

phone: 973 656-3969 • fax: 973 656-3949

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

Oct. 17, 2014

For additional information contact: Janie Rodriguez, Ombudsman, at 973-656-3969

Morris/Sussex Vicinage Announces Special Needs Internship and Volunteer Program

The Morris/Sussex Vicinage has begun a new combined internship and volunteer program, the first of its kind in the Judiciary, in keeping with the court's commitment to diversity, inclusiveness, and equal access. The Special Needs Internship and Volunteer Program gives young adults on the autism spectrum the opportunity to learn about the courts, obtain hands-on work experience, and serve the community by performing tasks appropriate to their skills and abilities.

Under the leadership of Assignment Judge Thomas L. Weisenbeck and Trial Court Administrator Rashad Shabaka-Burns, the vicinage has joined several organizations that provide education and other services to people with developmental disabilities. Judge Maritza Berdote Byrne and attorney Paul Carvelli of McCusker, Anselmi, Rosen & Carvelli, PC, led the effort to create this program.

Judiciary and county participants in the program include Judge Rosemary Ramsay, civil division presiding judge; Susan Chait, human resources manager; Phyllis Hornstra, operations division manager; Janie Rodriguez, ombudsman; and Cathy Burd, assistant Morris County administrator. External partners include attorney Patrice LeTourneau, Rick Goryeb and Dr. Kathleen Selvaggi-Fadden of the Goryeb Children's Hospital, David Sidener and Allison Neaman of the Garden Academy, Thomas Beese of the Newmark School, Margaret Hefferly of the Child Development Center at Morristown Memorial Hospital, and Elizabeth Manley of the New Jersey Division of Children and Families.

New Jersey has one of the highest rates of autism in the nation, yet this segment of the population is often underserved. Students eligible for special education and related services receive them only to age 21. Beyond that age, vocational opportunities are scarce, and unemployment common. However, young adults on the autism spectrum have a range of skills and can excel in particular areas requiring punctuality, consistency, reliability, and attention to detail. Appropriately tailored internships can enhance their socialization skills and instill in them confidence and a sense of accomplishment, all in the context of a professional working environment.

In the program's pilot phase, interns were placed in the human resources, municipal, civil, criminal and probation division in the Morris County Courthouse. The tasks varied by division, including filing documents and organizing files, creating Excel spreadsheets for tracking statistics, assisting with report preparation, attending training sessions, and observing court proceedings. The program's goals of providing the increasing population of special needs young adults with valuable learning experiences and the opportunity to become productive members of the workforce are well under way.

At the invitation of the vicinage, the County of Morris has also agreed to participate in the program. Appropriate internship opportunities have been identified in the County Human Services and Employment Resources Departments. In the next phase, the program will be expanded to include opportunities for developmentally disabled adults who want to serve in a volunteer capacity.

"We are very excited with the success of the pilot and the launching of this amazing program, which provides educational opportunities and practical skill development and allows special needs young adults to discover their own pathways to success," said Trial Court Administrator Rashad Shabaka-Burns.

For additional information, contact Brenda Soto-Rivera at 973-656-3997.