

Arc of Somerset prepares for Democratic Convention

Grace Segers, @Grace_Segers 3:32 p.m. EDT July 7, 2016

Arc of Somerset County partnering with Host Committee for the Democratic National Convention to offer employment opportunities



(Photo: -Courtesy of Laura Ziegler)

With the Democratic National Convention in Philadelphia a little less than three weeks away, there is still a lot of preparation to be completed. Individuals employed through the Arc of Somerset County's Branchburg Adult Training Center are among those working to make the event a success.

The Arc of Somerset County is partnering with the Host Committee for the Democratic National Convention to offer a part-time employment opportunity for individuals with developmental and intellectual disabilities. The workers are fulfilling a contract by AT&T, a sponsor of the convention, to fill 10,000 gift bags for the guests who will be staying in Philadelphia from June 25 to 28.

The job kicked off in the Branchburg Adult Training Center facility on Thursday, July 7, with workers beginning the task of packing each unit with 24 components. The gift bags are being assembled with pieces such as flyers, water bottles and Philadelphia-specific souvenirs and coupons. According to Gary Kummer, the director of employment services at the Arc of Somerset County, the employees filling the bags are subminimum-wage contract workers, and will be paid for each completed piece.

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The Branchburg facility was bustling on Thursday, filled with dozens of workers sitting at plastic tables and packing the gift bags through an assembly line process. The employees seemed intent upon their work, each one performing a different aspect of the job. Lauren Frary, the executive director of the Arc of Somerset, said that the workers would be filling bags for several days, given the large number of units to be assembled.

"Almost everyone can participate," Frary said about the contract. She added that this particular job gives disabled people the opportunity to develop important employment skills, fulfilling the purpose of the Branchburg facility.

According to Frary, this center is one of four supported by the Arc of Somerset County. The Arc also provides group housing and numerous individual services for people with intellectual and developmental disabilities. Some of the profits earned from the contract with AT&T will go to the organization to help support its various programs.

"It goes to the workers, and it also goes to us," Kummer said of the revenue yielded from the contract. He and Frary were at the Branchburg facility on July 7, in order to oversee the progress made by workers filling the gift bags.

Tim McKeown, the president of the Arc of Somerset County's Board of Directors, was also in attendance on Thursday. McKeown said that the Arc is an important part of the local community because it provides disabled individuals with openings for part-time work.

"They want to be here," McKeown said of the workers employed through the Arc's programs. "They want to work."

Trina Trent, an employee at the Arc of Somerset County, added that the opportunities offered through the Branchburg Adult Training Center help to improve lives.

"To see these guys on Friday, getting paychecks — it's everything," Trent said as she watched the numerous people working.

Adam, a worker who was at the Branchburg facility filling the gift bags, said he and his colleagues like working with the Arc of Somerset County.

"We enjoy it," he said, adding that he's been working with the Arc for years. "I've been here a long time."

In addition to Arc employees, Host Committee Executive Director Kevin Washo visited the Branchburg facility to oversee the first day of the job.



From left: Lauren Frary, Tim McKeown, Kevin Washo, Trina Trent and Gary Kummer in front of some of the gift bags being filled at the Branchburg facility. (Photo: ~Courtesy of Laura Ziegler)

Washo, the former executive director of the Pennsylvania Democratic Party, seemed confident about the convention, although he admitted that preparation for the event was "a lot of work." He and the Host Committee have been readying for the convention in Philadelphia for years. Washo also said that he was grateful for the help of the Arc of Somerset County and its workers.

"We want to be great hosts," Washo said. "Arc is helping us be the hosts we want to be."

Kummer said that the gift bags need to be completed by July 19, so that the delegates and guests at the convention can receive their expertly assembled goodies on time. The work that began on July 7 is important not only to the Democratic National Convention in Philadelphia but for the local New Jersey community. Whether it's filling gift bags or working on another contract, the Branchburg Adult Training Center and the Arc of Somerset County provide opportunities for the benefit of all.

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