

# Promoting Partnerships and Employment for People with Disabilities

Virginia Board for People with Disabilities and Virginia Commonwealth University,  
Rehabilitation Research and Training Center on Workplace Supports and Job Retention

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## Success Stories

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### Eric Berthiaume

Eric Berthiaume is a Data Specialist at the Virginia Office of Protection and Advocacy (VOPA). His employment there is the latest achievement in a life focused on overcoming obstacles. Mr. Berthiaume is 28 years old and has cerebral palsy. He recognized early in his career that some employers make a decision based on appearances and never actually give him the opportunity to discuss, much less demonstrate, his abilities. He reports that he had no problem obtaining interviews based on his resume, training and education, but these in-person interviews rarely produced a job offer.

Three exceptions to this were his current and previous two positions, all business related, working with computers and accounting software, and providing customer service. Mr. Berthiaume obtained his first position without assistance and completed accounts receivable, billing and receptionist back-up duties. He found, however, that he was subject to a different set of expectations than his fellow employees. Then, with the assistance of the Department of Rehabilitation, he obtained a position with an accounting firm, where his duties included receptionist activities, bookkeeping on QuickBooks to balance bank statements, data entry, correspondence to state tax offices, and various related duties.

Working again with the Department of Rehabilitative Services, Mr. Berthiaume identified and applied for positions that would advance his career. He interviewed independently and advocated for himself regarding an Administrative Assistant position. While another candidate was chosen to fill that position, Mr. Berthiaume was called back for a full time, temporary Data Entry position, and was chosen as the strongest candidate. The position later became a full time, permanent Data Specialist position and Eric was again chosen as the strongest candidate. His duties include entering information from intakes and screenings into the current database.

Mr. Berthiaume cites his parents as his main support in these transitions, and identifies his appearance (use of a walker) as the single largest obstacle he needed to overcome. He now feels that he is in a place where he can stay, where his experiences can be used to help others, speak out and educate people about disability issues, and advocate for those who request assistance.

Sherry Confer, LCSW, is the Deputy Director of VOPA and is Mr. Berthiaume's direct supervisor. She described VOPA's aggressive advocacy and the fact that they hold themselves to a higher standard. They make a vigorous effort to recruit qualified candidates with disabilities in order that VOPA may lead by example. She mentioned that Mr. Berthiaume required no accommodations, but she has worked with the Department of Rehabilitative Services in the past to assess and provide appropriate accommodations. Ms. Confer indicates that Mr. Berthiaume is very forthright about what he can do and where he can improve, has a good attitude, is solution focused and part of the team, and has developed a reputation for doing the task right the first time. He came to the position prepared to make a significant contribution to this unique, consumer-focused, legal environment and has proven that he requires little supervision, coming to her for direction as needed. She is pleased that Mr. Berthiaume feels at home there and looks forward to his continued professional growth.



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