

# Disabled get working life from Easter Seals in Millville

Joseph P. Smith, @jpsmith\_dj 6:31 a.m. EDT October 1, 2015



(Photo: Joseph P. Smith/Staff photographer)

MILLVILLE The city airport is a cluster of diverse industries, but none in the same manufacturing niche as the operation that's inside 120 Bogden Boulevard.

The warehouse and assembly facility here is one of only two that Easter Seals New Jersey operates in the state. Both places opened their doors on Wednesday to what the nonprofit hoped is a business world interested in what disabled workers can offer.

People who have passed through Easter Seal New Jersey facilities here, and in [New Brunswick](#), are at work in factories, stores, restaurants, and around here even in agricultural nurseries. Meanwhile, inside the Easter Seals sites, several hundred disabled residents work daily as sub-contracted employees. The jobs might call for packaging, assembling, or shipping anything from glassware to party kits to plastic water bottles.

"I wake up every morning and I love to come to work," said Shirley Battistini, who started here four years ago and is assistant plant manager. "It's rewarding every day to have the consumers come in and build their skills for employment and be able to help them reach their goals to work out in the community."

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Chris McMahon, director of business services for Easter Seals New Jersey, stands next to a nursery that opened at the Millville facility about 10 years ago. Nursery products are marketed "word of mouth" many times, and local churches and schools are buyers as is the city of Millville. (Photo: Joseph P. Smith/Staff photographer)

The nonprofit organization decided to take part for the first time in National Manufacturing Day as a host site for 2015, although Friday is the actual annual celebration.

"We're not a manufacturing company per se, but we produce a product," said Jackie Craig, in charge of business development for the nonprofit corporation. "We provide crucial services to manufacturing companies who are our clients. So we thought we would hold an open house so our community could see how Easter Seals and our clients, working at all different levels of abilities, are providing these crucial services to our manufacturing environment here in South Jersey."

At Bogden Boulevard, about 160 men and women train in different skills and work in several teams on multiple contracts. Almost all are from [Cumberland County](#), as are the businesses that send projects to Easter Seals.

"We're always looking for opportunities to work with any new companies," Battistini said. "We are talking about possibly going second shift."

Glass factories, for four decades, have been among the first and most dependable users of Easter Seals labor. E-commerce startups are a relatively new and growing sector for Easter Seals.

"They don't want to go through an Amazon," Craig said. "We do have a website ... and a lot of people come through that are from e-commerce businesses who are local and around the state of New Jersey.

"What makes us different too is the number of people that we can employ to do the packaging work," she added. "We're able to meet a production rate and time deadline for these companies we work for. A lot of times Shirley will get a rush job from someone and they'll say, 'Can you do 18 pallets in two days?' And we get the job done."

About 10 years ago, a nursery was built next to the warehouse and a second grant five years ago from the [Kessler Foundation](#) in West Orange enabled an expansion to year-round plant production. Some of the product ends up lining streets in [Millville](#), including High Street, where Easter Seals workers also maintain them.

"It gives the clients an opportunity to do something besides just packaging and assembly work that they're used to doing in the facility," said Chris McMahon, director of business services. "

McMahon said the nursery turns out hanging baskets for [Mother's Day](#), Easter lilies and, at the moment, is nurturing a crop of poinsettias for Christmas.

Michael Liss evaluates incoming disabled clients, figuring out what kind of work they can do and what allowances are needed for their disabilities. He also talks to businesses, at their sites, about training clients there.

Among area businesses hiring Easter Seals workers are Larry's II restaurant, [Walmart](#), Hobby Lobby, Hopewell Sub & Pizza, Burger King, Arby's, Boscov's, and, just a few doors away on Bogden Boulevard, Intex Millwork Solutions.

"Most of the people that don't make it, it's usually because they are too young," Liss said. "If I get somebody who's 18, I always try to stress staying in school until you are 21. Because at that point, it's more basic skills and vocational training at school. So whenever I get somebody who's 18, they're usually too immature for work."

Jackie Hinton, as community specialist, finds jobs for clients ready to move out of the Easter Seals facility into what the nonprofit refers to as a "competitive workplace."

"They're very excited about getting into the community and working," Hinton said. "Here's some challenges they face in regards to maybe technology and depending on their disability, whether it is mild, moderate or severe, does present challenges."

Clients range from age 20 into their 50s. Some are born with disabilities, mental and physical. Others have been injured. The nonprofit even works with people dealing with attention disorders or depression.

"But we have a lot of people who want to help," Hinton said. "This is a very helping community and we're trying to get them out in the community where they want to be. Where they deserve to be."

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