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Secretary Newson Applauds Walker Forge as Exemplary Employer in Disability Employment Awareness Month, Congratulates Returning Employee

Collaborative effort helps young disabled adult gain new skills, return to work

MADISON – With October designated as Disability Employment Awareness Month, Department of Workforce Development (DWD) Secretary Reggie Newson today praised Walker Forge as an example to all employers, and he congratulated a recent hire, Jacob Dudzik, initially employed as a press operator and returning as a drafter for the Clintonville manufacturer after a suffering a spinal cord injury.

“What Jacob achieved and the role Walker Forge played in assisting him serve to inspire all of us,” Secretary Newson said. “When Jacob suffered a back injury in a diving accident, Walker Forge took the unusual if not unprecedented step of letting him know that if he learned to be a drafter, they had a job waiting for him. In fact, they gave him a part-time job while he was in technical college training. Walker Forge provided the opportunity, and with the help of family and friends, Jacob made it happen. This is a great example of what we can achieve working together to empower people.”

On Secretary Newson’s behalf, Executive Assistant Georgia Maxwell visited Walker Forge to pay tribute to Dudzik and present the company with a commendation. Joining her was Michael Greco, Administrator of the DWD Division of Vocational Rehabilitation, which provided Dudzik assistance, helping him develop a plan to get a degree in mechanical design technology at Fox Valley Technical College and return to Walker Forge.

“Walker Forge manufactures parts for the auto industry, oil companies and others,” Executive Assistant Maxwell said. “It’s a tough, competitive market, yet Walker Forge operates more like a family business in this small community. Although the injury was not work related, Walker Forge extended Jacob a helping hand early in his recovery by opening the door to a new employment opportunity.”

Rick Recktenwald, President of Manufacturing at Walker Forge, said that Jacob’s father, Brian, is a longtime Walker Forge employee and they discussed opportunities for Jacob’s return. Recktenwald said that as a press operator, the younger Dudzik did an exceptional job.

“As is almost always the case in personal achievement stories, a great many individuals have extended varying levels of assistance, but no one has assisted Jake more than Jake himself,” Recktenwald said “Jake’s current position is more a result of his personal motivation and success than anything else. If he wasn’t good he wouldn’t be here.”

Dudzik, 28, suffered an injury in July 2007 that left him paralyzed. He now uses a wheelchair. He returned to work as a drafter on March 1, 2012. He said he was grateful to Walker Forge, his family, friends and DVR counselor Nancy Prokash for their help with his recovery and return to work.

“My parents and friends were the biggest help when it came to transportation to and from school and work,” he said. “DVR was a great help. They directed me to the right programs, helped with funding for school, a computer. Co-workers helped by giving me tips. Finally, Walker Forge gave me the opportunity to return to work. I didn’t want to stay at home. I need to be out doing things and interacting with people.”

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On behalf of Governor Walker, Secretary Newson announced on Oct. 2 the Wisconsin proclamation declaring October as Wisconsin Disability Employment Awareness Month. Wisconsin's proclamation coincides with National Disability Employment Awareness Month. This year's theme is, "A Strong Workforce is an Inclusive Workforce: What Can You Do?"

Secretary Newson noted that DVR offers incentives to employers hiring people with disabilities. Employers who participate in its On-the-Job Training initiative are reimbursed for 50 percent of a trainee's salary and fringe benefits for up to 90 days. This year, more than 1,300 individuals have been placed in on-the-job training positions.

DVR provides employment services and counseling to people with disabilities who face substantial barriers to employment. Last year, DVR served 40,383 Wisconsin residents with disabilities and placed nearly 3,000 consumers in jobs. DVR's budget is 78.7 percent federally funded with a 21.3 percent state match for every federal dollar allocated. There are several indicators of the positive return on the state's investment:

- In the past 3 federal fiscal years, more than \$119 million in DVR purchase of employment plan services and products were invested in Wisconsin's economy, with an impact of over 1,500 jobs. Of these totals, nearly \$93 million were federal funds drawn down by state match with an economic impact of 1,240 jobs.
- Taxable earnings by DVR consumers who completed employment plans, when divided by the amount of federal and state funds invested in their DVR services, yielded a 211 percent return on investment in federal fiscal year 2012. When the state match is broken out, the ratio is \$8 in return for each \$1 in state revenue invested. One study suggested the return on investment for that \$1 grows to an \$18 yield in the third year.

For more information: <http://dwd.wisconsin.gov/dvr/>.