**“Banking” on a Better Future- DaMario**

In January of 2016, AHEDD’s Area Manager (Lidia) began working with a man named DaMario. Lidia reported, “From my first interaction with DaMario, I found his optimism and employment-focused drive for returning to work inspiring. He was pleasant, engaging and obviously determined to return to work. While protecting DaMario’s identity and privacy, I have shared DaMario’s story with nearly every person that has inquired about AHEDD services in the last year and a half. His story is simple, yet the message it conveys is a powerful one that can motivate and encourage others to succeed.”

DaMario’s challenges began in 2014 when a catastrophic illness caused him intermittent headaches and problems with balance and slurred speech. Initially, DaMario said his symptoms were incapacitating and rendered him unable to continue his job as a tractor trailer truck driver; a job he had for nine (9) years. Eventually the severity of his condition led him to apply for Social Security Disability Income (SSDI), which he began to receive in January 2015.

With medications DaMario was finally able to manage his symptoms and began to plan his return to work. He stated that he was interested in saving enough money to buy a car. DaMario added that he also needed to earn $1,000 to re-take the state’s Driver Evaluation test: a necessary step to return to driving tractor trailer trucks.

His journey back to employment began with DaMario visiting AHEDD’s website and completing a brief application for participation in the Ticket to Work (TTW) program funded by the Social Security Administration (SSA). Since 2001, AHEDD has been an approved Employment Network (EN) under this program and has enrolled over 600 beneficiaries interested in long term employment under TTW.

Despite DaMario’s initial goal to return to truck driving, he eventually shared that he would prefer to obtain employment within an office or customer service type position. As part of DeMario’s Individualized Work Plan (IWP) development, AHEDD provided career guidance by exploring a variety of positions that would match his interest areas. DaMario also expressed a need for a full-time job with health benefits. As for his preferences on a work schedule and industry setting, DaMario was open-minded. His flexibility allowed AHEDD to expand the search for possible jobs that could be a good fit for him. DaMario’s only request was to have Sunday's off due to his active involvement with his community church.

Given DaMario’s work history and diverse skill sets, AHEDD was quickly able to assist him with updating and customizing his resume. Initially AHEDD identified three job opportunities (a Pharmacy Tech and two Assistant Administration positions) that were a good fit for him. Staff even gave him details about applying/testing for jobs within the Commonwealth and federal government.

Within the next few weeks, AHEDD sent several job opportunities to DaMario and he applied to all with enthusiasm. Being engaged and quickly responding to job leads really paid off for DaMario. On February 1, 2016, AHEDD sent him a link regarding a bank teller job. DaMario called AHEDD on February 2nd to say he had a scheduled interview for that teller position at First National Bank (F.N.B.) in Harrisburg. His diverse retail management experience handling cash was the focal point of the initial interview.

Eight days later, DaMario was offered the part-time Teller 1 position of 25 hours per week! In less than 30 days from AHEDD’s initial meeting with DaMario, his employment began with off-site training on February 16th and his first day at the Harrisburg branch was February 23, 2016. Once at the branch, DaMario sent an email stating, “Just wanted to let you know everything is going great. Yesterday was my first official day at my branch. And it was awesome!"

In mid-March, AHEDD connected with DaMario to review his responsibilities for reporting his earnings to SSA and continuing with support under TTW funding. At least monthly, he provided AHEDD with copies of his paystubs (keeping copies for himself) and mailed the originals to SSA. AHEDD also gave DaMario a letter template to use when sending his monthly paystubs to SSA.

By May 2nd, DaMario’s hours increased and he had achieved his goal for a full-time position with benefits. With the increase in earnings, DaMario was now consistently achieving Substantial Gainful Activity (SGA), SSA’s earnings threshold that is used to calculate changes in benefits.

Next, DaMario was referred to a Community Work Incentive Counselor (CWIC). A CWIC is someone certified to review DaMario’s case in detail and explain how and when his SSDI benefits would be impacted by his earnings. After his meeting with the CWIC on May 23rd, DaMario told AHEDD his SSDI payments would likely end in January 2017. DaMario stated he had already been "preparing to stop depending on SSDI and pay bills only with work income." Through this service DaMario also learned that when his cash benefits ceased in January (following the Trial Work Period), he would have an Extended Period of Eligibility (EPE) for another 36 consecutive months. This EPE means if DaMario’s monthly countable earnings drop below SGA during any of the 36 months, he would be eligible to receive his SSDI check again. The EPE is such a great incentive for SSDI beneficiaries: it takes some of the fear out of attempting a return to work.

DaMario celebrated his one-year work anniversary in February of 2017! When asked about the status of the goals he set one year ago, DaMario said he only just started to save for a car. In addition, he shared that he’s no longer planning to return to truck driving because he is the Youth Minister at his church. DaMario reported he "would be disappointed to have to tell the youth I'm going to be leaving."

According to Laurie Kyler, DaMario’s manager, “We could not ask to have a more reliable and enjoyable employee on our team than DaMario. It is an honor to be part of his story and success.”