

The BEST Interns

There is a reason why most colleges have their students complete an internship before graduating--to make them more competitive in the job market. Not only do they gain real work experience and knowledge of their industry, but employers have the opportunity to see their skills and maybe even hire them at the conclusion of the internship.

For people with disabilities, internships are even more important. [Kessler Foundation](#) and the [National Organization on Disability \(NOD\)](#) conducted [surveys in 2010](#) that analyzed employment and gaps in main areas of their lives. Results showed that only 2 to 3 percent of the workforce is made up of people with disabilities. In comparison to the fact that 20 percent of the population has a disability, the 3 percent is not a fair representation of the landscape of society. Results also found that only 21 percent of people with disabilities are employed as opposed to 59 percent of those without disabilities. Levels of education, however, are nearly equal.

An internship is a valuable tool to allow employers to learn how it would be to work with the individual and the interns can determine if the chosen career path is right for them. But even finding an internship is competitive.



The [Building Economic Strength Together \(BEST\) Program](#) works to combat this problem by providing internships for qualified people with disabilities. Developed by a collaborative effort from the [National Disability Institute](#), [Allies Inc.](#), and the [National Federation of Community Development Credit Unions](#), [BEST](#) provides work experience opportunity at a local credit union.

[Kessler Foundation](#) awarded [BEST](#) with a [Signature Employment Grant](#) of \$497,897 over two years. The

[Foundation's Program Center](#) awards [signature grants](#), ranging from \$100,000 to \$250,000 for up to two years, to pilot programs that focus on long-term solutions to the staggering unemployment rate for people with disabilities. This exciting new program connects them with employers and raises their awareness of financial responsibility.

To achieve its goals, the program uses a three-prong approach to:

- provide training to credit union staff on understanding diversity and access, serving customers with disabilities, and individuals with disabilities as a market segment

- provide an eight week internship consisting of two weeks of job training and six week internships throughout New Jersey credit unions for individuals with disabilities
- promote partner relationships between the disability community and the credit union industry

[BEST](#) supports the intern as well as the credit union in an effort to maximize its success. Representatives from [Allies Inc.](#) meet with the job-seekers to determine what internship is best and to discuss their needs. They could assist with obtaining transportation, assistive technology, specialized job training, and individual supervision. The representative also looks at the accessibility and needs of the participating credit unions in an effort to match the right candidate with the right internship.

The intern then receives two weeks of training in computer skills, job tasks, and, if needed, interpersonal relations so they learn the best ways to communicate with fellow employees. Then the real work begins—six weeks working with a credit union. This approach helps them develop their skills, increase community participation, and enhance their self-esteem and independence.



Thanks to [Kessler Foundation](#), the interns also receive prevailing market wages. With financial security and employee benefits, quality of life increases.

In the first two years, 52 people with disabilities were placed in internships with participating credit unions. Through these internships, they were able to gain real work experience in the finance industry and interact with other employees to gain confidence. While in the workforce, employers have the opportunity to see the

contributions and talent that people with disabilities bring to the workplace.

After they complete the program and satisfy program requirements, they receive a letter of recommendation for future employers. With the [BEST](#) program, individuals prove their skills and could potentially be referred by their supervisors to other companies, if there are no current job openings at the credit union. Referrals and word-of-mouth are, after all, the most common outlets for individuals with disabilities to find employment. The [BEST](#) program is changing their lives as well as our society.

Because individuals with disabilities are more than twice as likely to live in poverty, they are less likely to save money and use mainstream banking services, such as having a

checking account. By earning wages and educating them about finances, the goal is to increase their independence in society.

In this tough economic market where people, regardless of disability, are desperately trying to find work, 10 percent of the 52 interns found employment after the internship. The program is ongoing and is looking to expand to new communities. While [BEST](#) is considered extremely successful, people with disabilities still face immense challenges to obtaining employment. While it is a start, more work needs to be done. [Kessler Foundation](#) will be at the forefront of that work.

Help us continue to expand employment opportunities for people with disabilities so we can write a new story!

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