

# Post-Tribune

NORTHWEST INDIANA'S LEADING NEWSPAPER

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Thursday, October 7, 1999

## TradeWinds must work hard to restore faith in its service

• **Our opinion:** Return of federal money means agency must renew efforts to meet obligations to disabled.

**T**radeWinds Rehabilitation Center has convinced the federal government its books are in order and it is again capable of using federal transportation money responsibly. Now it has to convince its customers — people with disabilities.

It was discontent in the disabled community over poor transportation service by TradeWinds that awakened government agencies to problems at the not-for-profit agency.

About a year ago, the Federal Transit Administration pulled its funding to TradeWinds when records it requested weren't provided. That was followed by a loss of state money, which is contingent on federal money being approved. This awakened members of TradeWinds' board of directors, who fired the executive director, pleaded ignorance and went to work cleaning up the mess.

The feds say the agency now is eligible to seek more than \$1 million in federal and state money again.

That should mean improved transportation for people with disabilities, which would be a welcome outcome. But TradeWinds must clearly recognize the obligation that goes along with receiving federal transportation money is providing reliable service to the public, not just to clients of its various services.

TradeWinds is one of the few agencies

in Northwest Indiana that has a government contract to provide transportation for the disabled population in general. So many people depend on it to get them places on time. In some cases that means to work or to college classes; unreliable transport can cost them the chance to live productively.

Passengers pay for the rides to help defray the cost of the service. They also understand the need for advance reservations for the service; the area has little fixed-route public transportation, so people have to depend on by-appointment pickup.

Passengers, however, expect — and justifiably so — to receive dependable, safe and courteous service and to have complaints addressed fully. Providing transportation for people with disabilities requires employees be trained to accommodate riders' needs. That comes with the territory when an agency bills itself as serving people with disabilities.

Concern about such issues is what led to a class-action lawsuit against TradeWinds and other agencies connected to public transportation that's pending in federal court. That also woke up those who are supposed to oversee how government money is spent.

If the Northwestern Indiana Regional Planning Commission, which divvies up transportation money for the region, decides to continue to contract with TradeWinds, it must provide better oversight. So should the FTA and INDOT since tax money is involved.

And so should TradeWinds' board members, who must be held accountable by the center's funding sources and the public.

## State services to TradeWinds

Following is a list of some of the services for which the state's Division of Disability, Aging and Rehabilitative Services reimburses TradeWinds Rehabilitation Center Inc. Not all sheltered workshop employees receive all services; amounts are from TradeWinds' fiscal 1999 contract.

<b>Service</b>	<b>Unit</b>	<b>Rate</b>
Facility-based sheltered employment	1 hour	\$2.75
Transportation	1 round trip	\$8.91
Group speech therapy	1/4 hour	\$4.24
Individual speech therapy	1/4 hour	\$16.97
Individual occupational therapy	1/4 hour	\$20.13
Individual physical therapy	1/4 hour	\$23.49



# Sunday Post-Tribune

NORTHWEST INDIANA'S LEADING NEWSPAPER

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\$1

0-25 cents  
an hour

**12**

26-50 cents  
an hour

**25**

51-75 cents  
an hour

**29**

76cents-\$1  
an hour

**24**

Nearly 100 TradeWinds workers earn less than \$1 an hour.

It doesn't break federal laws, but it's still a crime to some.



JEN FRIEDBERG/POST-TRIBUNE

TradeWinds Affirmative Industries client Cindy Bohling sews pockets in Gary. She works about 40 hours a week and clears about \$130 in a two-week pay period. She says she enjoys working at the center, but others want sheltered workshops abolished.

## Rehab center promises change in wage structure

BY AMY LAVALLEY  
Staff Writer

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# Rehab center promises change in wage structure

BY AMY LAVALLEY  
Staff Writer

For about six months, James O'Neal assembled window latches at TradeWinds Rehabilitation Center Inc. in Gary.

He worked in a sheltered workshop, which provides employment for people with disabilities.

O'Neal, who has multiple sclerosis, quit the job a few years ago.

Although he worked 40 hours a week, he made less than a dollar an hour. And by the time taxes and other expenses came out of his paycheck, he made little more than \$20 a week.

"If they'd paid me minimum wage. I'd have been happy, but they wouldn't pay me that," said O'Neal, 37, who lives with his family on Merrillville's north side.

"The reason I quit was because I believe I was being overworked and wasn't getting paid for it."

A Post Tribune examination of the average hourly earnings for employees at TradeWinds' two sheltered workshops, obtained through the U.S. Department of Labor, shows O'Neal's wages were anything but unique.

Yet under federal law, sheltered workshops can pay people with disabilities less than the \$5.15 minimum wage.



JEN FRIEDBERG/POST TRIBUNE

Yance Jones, another TradeWinds Affirmative Industries client, sews part of a hooded uniform.

TradeWinds officials say they revamped TradeWinds Affirmative Industries, which receives millions of dollars in Defense Department contracts to make clothing, to improve efficiency and, therefore, salaries.

Officials plan similar changes for the agency's other workshop.

"It's frightening how low (the salaries) are," interim director Andrew Brennan said.

## Job skills or cheap labor?

Critics of sheltered workshops say the programs do not teach clients the skills they need to get jobs in the community, as they should, and instead provide the employer cheap labor.

TASH, formerly known as The Association for Persons with Severe Handicaps, advises against sheltered

A complete breakdown of hourly wages for TradeWinds workers.

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If they'd paid me minimum wage, I'd have been happy.  
But they wouldn't pay me that."

James O'Neal, 37,  
former worker for TradeWinds

# TradeWinds

## People with disabilities earn little in workshops

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workshops because employees don't earn a living wage.

"These sheltered workshops are a way of holding people back from regular society," said Nancy Weiss, TASH's executive director.

Labor Department officials said sheltered workshop salaries are based on local prevailing wages and time trials held by workshop staff.

If, after a time trial, a person with disabilities puts together half as many window latches as someone without a disability, that person can be paid half as much money. Prevailing wages in the region are used to determine salaries, which, depending on the job, also may depend on how many pieces a person with disabilities assembles.

"We get almost no complaints on sheltered workshops," said Don Laurent, a Labor Department official in South Bend. His region includes North-west Indiana.

Every five years or so, the department evaluates sheltered workshops. Laurent said his office evaluated TradeWinds a few years ago and "they have a good system in place."

Because jobs there require more skill, salaries at TradeWinds Affirmative Industries at 2110 E. 15th Ave. are higher than those at TradeWinds' workshop at 5901 W. Seventh Ave.

physical therapy, at a rate of \$23.49 per quarter-hour.

An employee who gets a ride to work and remains at the sheltered workshop for eight hours nets TradeWinds \$30.91 — far more than some of the employees are making.

"Who's getting helped here?" Torres said.

### System 'not perfect'

Joe Pepe, TradeWinds' board president, said many employees receive government assistance in addition to what they earn at the workshop.

"The intent here is to provide an environment for handicapped folks to learn a skill and move them into society," Pepe said.

"There's a number of people we know will never make it. What is the alternative for them, other than a sheltered workshop? The alternative for them is to sit at home and collect a bigger welfare check."

The system is not perfect, Pepe said, but it's better than nothing.

"It's amazing how happy those people are that they've earned something," he said.

TradeWinds started the workshops in the early 1970s. The agency has had Defense Department sewing contracts for 13 years and opened TradeWinds Affirmative Industries in December 1997.

The Seventh Avenue shop handles private industry contracts, putting together holiday popcorn tins for Target, for example, through a contract with Hunt and Wesson.

Brennan, TradeWinds' interim director, said the sheltered workshops provide more than 200 secure jobs in the community. Though some board members have suggested shutting down the programs, Brennan said that would leave those workers without jobs.

Unfortunately, Brennan said, a lot of people with disabilities who need work don't get it in the private sec-

## What do they earn?

Salaries paid to workers at the two local TradeWinds shelter workshops.

### TradeWinds Rehabilitation Center, Inc.

Hourly wage (in dollars)	Number of employees in that range
0 0.25	12
0.26- 0.50	25
0.51 - 0.75	26
0.76- 1.00	23
1.01 - 1.25	22
1.26- 1.50	24
1.51 - 1.75	10
1.76- 2.00	5
2.01 - 2.25	8
2.26 2.50	5
2.51 - 2.75	6
2.76 3.00	5
3.01 3.25	1
3.26 3.50	6
3.51 3.75	2
3.76 4.00	1
4.01 4.25	10
4.26 4 50	4
4.51 4.75	3
4.76 5.00	4
5.01 5.25	21

Total employees 223

Lowest salary 0.11 (one person)

Highest salary 5.15 (21 people)

Source: Information provided to the U.S. Department of Labor, Wage and Hour Division, by TradeWinds Rehabilitative Center, Inc.

### TradeWinds Affirmative Industries

Hourly wage (in dollars)	Number of employees in that range
0-0.25	
0.26-0.50	
0.51 0.75	
0.76- 1.00	
1.01 - 1.25	
1.26- 1.50	
1.51 - 1.75	
1.76 2.00	
2.01 2.25	
2.26 2.50	
2.51 2.75	
2.76 3.00	
3.01 3.25	
3.26 3.50	
3.51 3.75	
3.76 4.00	
4.01 4.25	
4.26 4.50	
4.51 4.75	
4.76 5.00	
5.01 5.25	
5.26 5.50	
5.51 -5.75	
5.76- 6.00	
6.01 - 6.25	
6.26- 6.50	
6.51 - 6.75	
6.76- 7.00	
7.01 - 7.25	
7.26- 7.50	
7.51 - 7.75	
Total 58	
Lowest salary 0.63 (two people)	
Highest salary 7.59 (one person)	

POST-TRIBUNE GRAPHIC



Brennan

learn how to better manage the workshop on Seventh Avenue.

out disabilities.

"When people know and under-

Thirty-seven employees at the Seventh Avenue location make 50 cents or less an hour. One employee averages 11 cents an hour.

"That's not an indication that it's a bad rate. You're probably just dealing with someone with an extreme disability," Laurent said. "Total earnings won't tell you anything. It could be the job they were put on."

The low wages did not surprise officials from Everybody Counts Center for Independent Living in Merrillville, a federally funded advocacy organization for people with disabilities.

"I have seen individual checks and knew what they were making," executive director Teresa Torres said. "We suspected it was not isolated."

Further aggravating Torres is how much TradeWinds is reimbursed by the state for the services it provides.

For example, the state's Division of Disability, Aging and Rehabilitative Services, or DDARS, pays TradeWinds \$8.91 to take one client to and from its sheltered workshops. The center also receives \$2.75 an hour, per person, for sheltered workshop employment.

The center is further reimbursed for services, including individual

of people with disabilities who need work don't get it in the private sector.

"I'm not running a slave organization," he said. "I'm trying to do better — I'd admit that."

The key to doing better, he and other TradeWinds officials say, is continuing to revamp the sheltered workshop programs to cut waste and improve efficiency.

Rep. Peter Visclosky, D-Merrillville, secured a \$3.3 million Defense Department appropriation so the agency could open TradeWinds Affirmative Industries.

Visclosky, who is on TradeWinds' board, said Brennan asked him to contact the Defense Department for assistance to up productivity.

"There were clearly problems with the production side — how do you run this program properly and efficiently?" Visclosky said, adding he knows nothing about salaries at the plant.

Brennan and Tony Soeka, the operations manager hired for TradeWinds Affirmative Industries, visited a workshop in Maine over the summer that also handles Defense Department contracts to get ideas about how to improve operations here.

TradeWinds officials also are visiting workshops in tin-region to

learn how to better manage the workshop on Seventh Avenue.

## Workshop numbers

Cindy Bohling started a sewing job at TradeWinds Affirmative Industries in 1994. She works 40 hours a week, clearing about \$130 each two-week pay period.

She sews white fabric booties, part of chemical protective suits made for one of the Defense Department contracts. Her quota is sewing 135 booties an hour; she has sewn as many as 325 in an hour.

"I try to improve every day," said Bohling, 32, who lives in Highland. "I have a little contest with myself."

She likes working at TradeWinds, she said, because she gets to meet new people.

Before she started at TradeWinds Affirmative Industries, Bohling worked at the Seventh Avenue workshop and then, for a year or two, held jobs in the community, as a dishwasher and then in a mail room.

"I couldn't handle the outside jobs. It was too much pressure, and I've been here ever since," she said.

In fact, the number of people with disabilities employed at sheltered workshops is dropping because of changes in the law, said Rita Martin, deputy director for Vocational Rehabilitation Services, a division of DDARS. Her department also provides funding TradeWinds, for job training and placement services.

During fiscal year 1998, the latest year for which a breakdown is available, vocational rehab placed 4,141 people in jobs; 298 of them went to work at sheltered workshops.

"I would say that 10 years ago, we had over 1,000 placed in sheltered employment," Martin said.

Now, people with disabilities are more likely to be placed in community jobs where they can work full- or part-time and make minimum wage or more, just like people with-

out disabilities.

"When people know and understand all of the choices, very few choose sheltered employment," Martin said.

## Segregating the disabled?

Just as James O'Neal's low salary is not unique, neither is the job environment. Lucy Guinn, editor of Mouth, a national disability rights magazine, said communities across the country have sheltered workshops with low wages.

"I call it segregation. That's what it is," Guinn said. "It's everywhere. The only places it's not are places people made a mission out of undoing it."

One of those people is Pat Rogan, an associate professor of education at Indiana University-Purdue University Indianapolis.

In 1995, she co-authored a book, "Closing the Shop," about her experiences closing a sheltered workshop in Syracuse, N.Y. All the employees there got jobs in the community.

A job coach or on-the-job training, can ease the transition into competitive employment.

Though sheltered workshops may set the goal of moving their employees into community jobs, Rogan said the workshops typically do not provide the skills people with disabilities need to get jobs.

"It doesn't lend itself to individuality and long-term investment in building skills," she said.

Rogan said she has worked with many organizations that have found community jobs for all of their workshop employees, though the transition can be difficult. But once people with disabilities settle into their new jobs, they usually do not want to return to a workshop, she said.

"The issue is, who is failing," in the cases when employees return, Rogan said. "In a lot of cases, (workshop officials) haven't done their job in finding the right match."

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