

MAKER CITY KC

Good work: KC's Southeast Enterprises gives adults with disabilities jobs and purpose

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For nearly 40 years, Southeast Enterprises has provided light manufacturing jobs for adults with disabilities. The sheltered workshop at 6701 Booth St. in Kansas City currently employs around 170 people. JUDY REVENAUGH

On a recent Tuesday morning, [Southeast Enterprises](#) was bustling with activity.

At one end of the workshop at 6701 Booth St. in Kansas City, workers inspected and assembled telescopic extension poles for paint rollers and light bulb changers. Others carefully wrapped paper labels around shakers of barbecue rub.

Few were more focused than Nathaniel, AKA “Nano.” His fast-moving fingers glinted with glitter as he quickly wrapped metallic blue tassels around Hallmark birthday cards, then arranged the cards in a neat row in a cardboard box. Nano’s record for most cards in one day: 2,050.

“We gotta make sure it’s just right,” he said with pride in his voice.

For more than 40 years, Southeast Enterprises has provided jobs for Jackson County adults with developmental disabilities. It’s one of around 90 such sheltered workshops in Missouri.



Many of the jobs that Southeast Enterprises accepts involve repetitive tasks that can't be done by a machine. Judy Revenaugh



Southeast Enterprises employees assemble and inspect telescopic extension poles for Mr. LongArm, a Missouri company that makes poles for painting, staining and cleaning. Judy Revenaugh

Southeast Enterprises currently employs 154 people in its workshop. The employees are trained to package and assemble a variety of products, from medical supplies to skincare treatments and wooden coaster sets.

Employees earn a fair wage in a safe work environment, says Southeast Enterprises CEO Lauren Hall. They also get on-the-job training and therapeutic support from a specially trained staff of 15. Two full-time Southeast Enterprises employees help workers with life skills such as nutrition and caring for aging parents.

But Hall says one of the most important things employees get from working at Southeast Enterprises is a sense of purpose: “We’re really providing dignity every day.”

David Melton, a sales account executive at Southeast Enterprises, first toured the workshop a few years ago. At the time, he was looking for an alternative to adult daycare for his daughter Laura, who is developmentally disabled.

Melton says he didn’t want his daughter sitting in front of TV all day — he knew she was capable of more. When he toured Southeast Enterprises, he liked what he saw.

“People looked like they were having fun,” Melton says. Both he and his daughter now work for Southeast Enterprises. Laura spends her weekdays in the workshop, and David secures contracts with new clients.

Southeast Enterprises and other workshops are funded in part by the state of Missouri and Jackson County. The county owns the workshop’s building and charges minimal rent — as in, \$1 per year.

But Southeast Enterprises and other local sheltered workshops, including [Ability KC](#) and [Blue Valley Industries](#), operate as businesses, with proposals, contracts and deadlines.

One of Southeast Enterprises’ longest contracts is with [Mama Socorro’s](#), an Overland Park company known for its Mexican salsa and spice blends. Mama Socorro’s has outsourced its spice blending and packaging to Southeast Enterprises for the past 20 years.



Mama Socorro’s, an Overland Park-based company known for Mexican salsa and spice mixes, has been outsourcing packaging to Southeast Enterprises for more than 20 years. Judy Revenaugh

“It’s a win-win,” says Mama Socorro’s CEO Don Johnson.

Johnson says he likes that the sheltered workshop provides jobs to people who might otherwise have a hard time finding employment. Also, he adds, “we receive the best quality of work.”

Southeast Enterprises employees work from 7:45 a.m. to 2:15 p.m. Monday through Friday. They get half hour lunch breaks in the workshop cafeteria. Many ride the bus to and from work. Some live in group homes; others live on their own.

Pay is determined by the prevailing wage set by the U.S. Department of Labor (currently \$11.58 an hour) and the amount of time it takes each worker to complete a set number of tasks.

The workers are managed by a team of staffers that are trained to work with adults with disabilities. Two full-time staffers with backgrounds in occupational therapy work with employees on life skills such as nutrition and caring for aging parents.

Some workers stay at Southeast Enterprises for decades — the employee with the longest tenure has been there for 42 years — while others move on to other jobs. Recently a man who has worked at Southeast Enterprises for four years left because he got a job as a custodian at another business.



Medical caps that block radiation from x-ray procedures are one of several medical products manufactured at Southeast Enterprises. Judy Revenaugh

Hall says that helping employees achieve more independence — even if it means they move on to other jobs — is part of Southeast Enterprises' mission.

Melton says that in order for Southeast Enterprises to be sustainable moving into the future, the business needs to attract new clients. He's focusing his efforts on entrepreneurs who are just moving out of their basement or garage and want to outsource manufacturing or packaging.

One idea is to partner with local startups that need dedicated manufacturing space. Southeast Enterprises has available warehouse space with a loading dock, compactor and exterior door. Melton says he's looking for a small business to rent the space and possibly utilize the Southeast Enterprises workforce. Consider it a co-working space for packaging or manufacturing.

Maintaining contracts with established companies such as Hallmark and [Mr. LongArm](#) is also vitally important to the future sustainability of Southeast Enterprises, which currently handles up to 25,000 cards a day for Hallmark, the nation's top greeting cards brand.



Hallmark Cards outsources some of its assembly work to Southeast Enterprises. Judy Revenaugh

Although Hallmark has its own manufacturing facilities in Lawrence and Leavenworth, the company outsources work that can't be done by machines such high-speed presses, says Donnell Williams, Hallmark's global procurement category manager. Hallmark also sends work to [Cottonwood Industries](#), a sheltered workshop in Lawrence.

Williams says that from a business perspective, it makes sense for Hallmark to partner with Southeast Enterprises because the workshop's prices are competitive. But he adds that doing business with Southeast Enterprises is about more than money — it's about helping people in the Kansas City community live happy, productive lives.

Williams and other Hallmark representatives toured Southeast Enterprises a couple of years ago and were impressed with what they saw, from the cleanliness of the space to the smiles on the employees' faces.

"We got a chance to see the quality of their products," Williams says, "and the pride and joy they took in doing this work."