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How UPS hopes to lead the way with helping Louisville's disabled workers find jobs



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Louisville Courier Journal

Published 8:47 a.m. ET Feb. 14, 2023



WATCH: TLC program helps disabled with training, jobs at UPS

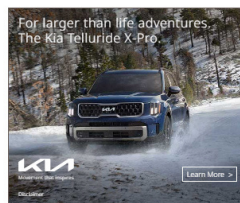
The center offers a two-week, pre-employment training program in a simulated work environment for people with physical or intellectual disabilities. Jeff Faughender, Louisville Courier Journal

In 2017, after graduating high school, Louisville native Darius Combs decided he wanted to work — but that dream came with challenges.

Combs is one of the [1.2 million adults across the Commonwealth](#) who has a disability. For people like him, finding potential employment can come with additional challenges, such as determining if he has the physical ability to complete the job, if the company has a way to alter the job to make it accessible and if resources can be provided by the employer to help navigate day-to-day challenges.

Eventually, Combs joined [UPS through its Transitional Learning Center](#), a collaborative program between UPS and [Options Unlimited](#), an agency focused on helping enhance the lives of people with disabilities, that prepares people with disabilities to become an employee at UPS.

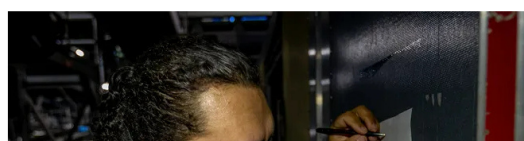
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"We are hiring individuals with intellectual and physical disabilities. We put them through a two-week pre-employment training to identify the best opportunities for them to be successful," said Todd Coffey, the UPS training manager over the TLC program.

The program started at UPS in 2012 and "pretty much paid for itself through local and state tax credits," said Coffey, who is also on the board of the [Coalition for Workforce Diversity](#) and the [Kentucky Commission on Employment First](#), two groups that work to provide more opportunities for people with disabilities in the workplace.

Since the program's inception, 574 individuals with disabilities have been trained to work at UPS. The company has hired and placed 88% of these individuals over the last decade.



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UPS employee Darius Combs organized shipping containers during a recent shift at the UPS Worldport facility in Louisville, Ky. Combs was hired on through the UPS Transitional Learning Center for people with physical or intellectual disabilities, is now a shift supervisor and says that the UPS program "changed my life." Feb. 7, 2023 Jeff Faughender/Courier Journal

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"The TLC program has impacted my life a lot really," Combs said. "I wasn't really sure how UPS handled people with disabilities and stuff, but they welcomed me into UPS with open arms and everything with all their love and care, they really do care."

Here's what to know about the TLC program at UPS.

What is the UPS Transitional Learning Program?



Katie King, left, and Preston Haggerman loaded packages onto a conveyor belt during a recent shift at the UPS Worldport facility in Louisville, Ky. King and Haggerman were hired on through the UPS Transitional Learning Center for people with physical or intellectual disabilities and are both working hard and earning their own money. Feb. 7, 2023 Jeff Faughender/Courier Journal

The TLC program, a collaborative program between UPS and Options Unlimited, begins with a two-week pre-employment training both in the classroom and the training center to teach perspective employees about safety, job opportunities and soft skills. Each training class has no more than six prospective employees.

The classroom education and work environment simulation work prepare potential employees for six core jobs at UPS, including aircraft unloading and loading, truck unloading and loading, and small package sorting for inbound and outbound.

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TLC program employees learn how to safely climb up and down ladders, how to lock out conveyor belts, how to properly lift packages to not strain their backs, how to navigate to and from their employment station, and more.



Preston Haggerman loaded packages onto a conveyor belt during a recent shift at the UPS Worldport facility in Louisville, Ky. Haggerman was hired on through the UPS Transitional Learning Center for people with physical or intellectual disabilities and is now working hard and earning his own money. Feb. 7, 2023 Jeff Faughender/Courier Journal

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Some of the soft skills the TLC program teaches are basic hygiene, how to take a break at work, how to take instruction and constructive feedback, and personal space.

"Those are the things we emphasize in the classroom," Coffey said.

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After prospective employees complete the two-week pre-employment training and if they are hired, they then spend at least another two weeks of training with a quality trainer.

"We don't train for speed but for methods," Coffey said.

Why is the UPS Transitional Learning Program good for individuals with disabilities?



UPS employee Darius Combs smiled while standing against a shipping container during a recent shift at the UPS Worldport facility in Louisville, Ky. Combs was hired on through the UPS Transitional Learning Center for people with physical or intellectual disabilities, is now a shift supervisor and says that the UPS program "Changed my life". Feb. 7, 2023 Jeff Faughten/Courier-Journal

A non-work-specific benefit provided to TLC program employees is the social aspect. For individuals with disabilities, it can sometimes be difficult to interact with others socially, but this program helps builds friendships and support.

"This right here is what they live for, they live to come to work, you know, and socialize and be with friends and ... things like that," said Michelle Ramsey, an Options Unlimited support employment job coach.

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Options Unlimited employees interact with and support the TLC program employees daily. Outside of at-work support, Options Unlimited provides at-home support, mental wellness support, and assistance with utilizing government programs to support individuals in the program.

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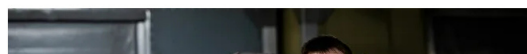
Are people paid while participating in the UPS Transitional Learning Program?

During the training period, while the individuals are technically not UPS employees, they receive a \$200 stipend from [Options Unlimited](#).

Once hired, UPS pays its employees from the TLC program about \$21 per hour and provides full benefits, including health insurance and retirement options.

Coffey notes that some individuals in the program have been able to come off government assistance if they wanted to and be able to sufficiently support themselves after securing employment at UPS through the program.

How does the UPS Transitional Learning Program impact Louisville?



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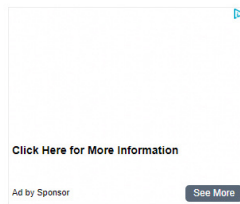


Preston Haggerman adjusts his glasses while waiting on the conveyor belt to start moving during a recent shift at the UPS Worldport facility in Louisville, Ky. Haggerman was hired on through the UPS Transitional Learning Center for people with physical or intellectual disabilities and is now working hard and earning his own money. Feb. 7, 2023 Jeff Faughender/Courier Journal

As the largest employer in Louisville, with over [25,000 employees across the metro area](#), UPS sees everything they do as an act of leadership.

"We're in a leadership role in the community. We should have a leadership role in all aspects of the community we serve," Coffey said.

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Libby Gootee, a program coordinator for the TLC program, believes "it could open the door for other businesses" across the city to take note of the success of the UPS program and begin to implement their own programs.

Combs agrees. "The TLC program is probably one of the best programs I've ever been through," Combs said. "I hope more (companies) will follow UPS's lead ... people that have disabilities and special needs, they should be given the chance, too."

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How does the program help workers with disabilities?

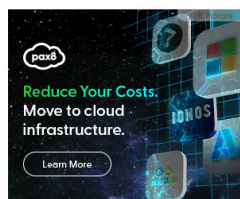


Katie King loaded packages onto a conveyor belt during a recent shift at the UPS Worldport facility in Louisville, Ky. King was hired on through the UPS Transitional Learning Center for people with physical or intellectual disabilities and is now working hard and earning her own money. Feb. 7, 2023 Jeff Faughender/Courier Journal

Katie King, an employee who landed a job at UPS after completing the program, feels it has had an impact on her and her parent's life. King has found friends at UPS, she sees herself helping others daily, and she is making her parents proud.

"I love having this job. It's so amazing," King, who works in package unloading, told the Courier Journal.

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Gootee, program coordinator for the TLC program, said it has allowed families with members with disabilities to see a future and a career pathway for their loved ones.

"We want to get them working here because we want them to get out in the job force like everybody else," she said.

Combs has been grateful for this program because it helped him find a career where he could grow. While he started his journey at UPS as a package handler right out of high school, he has since been promoted to a supervisor role, a "big shift," he said.

This new opportunity to watch out for others and be a role model for those under his supervision showed him that the company sees him as a leader, he said.

While the TLC program initially started as a staffing solutions project for UPS, it has morphed into a way to provide opportunities for people who are "usually forgotten," Coffey said.

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"It's not about moving packages anymore. It's about the connection with the individual and the place," Coffey said. "It's not just a staffing solution anymore. It's moved to something else."

Contact reporter Olivia Evans at oevans@courier-journal.com or on Twitter at [@oliviambevans_](https://twitter.com/oliviambevans_)



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