

## IT'S ALL ABOUT OPPORTUNITY AT FLYING STAR CAFÉ

“At the end of the day, we learn from them as much as they do from us,” says Jeremy Ruiz about the New Mexicans with disabilities he has hired at the [Flying Star Café](#) in Albuquerque.

After meeting with Program Manager Cara Benta of the New Mexico Division of Vocational Rehabilitation, Ruiz—general manager of the restaurant’s Rio Grande location—took on four participants through NMDVR’s On-the-Job Training (OJT) Program. Two were hired permanently: one in the kitchen and one in the dining room.

“It gives our (existing) employees an opportunity to meet new people and it gives them an opportunity to learn new skills by working in a restaurant,” says Ruiz, who was not previously familiar with OJT. “It’s a really good opportunity for us as a company, trying to help people out.”

In taking on the four candidates, Ruiz wasn’t necessarily looking for people who already had a lot of skills. In fact, it was the first job for most of them. “I was just trying to give people an opportunity see what they could do,” he says. “They’re normal people who want to work and be productive members of society, but it’s kind of tough for them sometimes.”



This was the first job opportunity for 19-year-old Steven Lorenzo. After just a few weeks, he was hired permanently as a prep cook at Flying Star. “I went into the kitchen right away. I enjoy the back of the house. I feel more comfortable there,” says Lorenzo, who has dwarfism. The restaurant brought in a special step stool made for commercial kitchens for Lorenzo to use—an easy accommodation, according to Ruiz.

The West Mesa High School graduate is not sure whether he wants to make the restaurant business his career, but he appreciates the environment and that he’s been given an opportunity “to complete tasks, get hands-on learning in the kitchen, and try different things.” Lorenzo adds, “I believe they’re getting to know me. I’m just like another person, just a different stature.”

Although the other two initial candidates didn’t work out in the fast-paced environment of a restaurant, Ruiz is looking forward to accepting more OJT candidates the next time he’s looking to fill an opening. He has also spoken with other managers of the six-location local chain about working with NMDVR to participate in the program.

OJT is a three-month process with no risk for the employer. Candidates are provided with a stipend from NMDVR during the 90 days. Both the business and the trainee have the opportunity to see if the job is a good fit, and there is no obligation to hire at the end. Trainees start by

practicing interpersonal skills and getting to know the operation. As they get more comfortable, their workload and responsibility can grow.

“It’s a partnership,” Ruiz says of working with NMDVR and its participants. “You’re looking for employers and we’re looking for good people to hire. Hopefully we can do more in the future.”

For information about participating in the On-the-Job Training Program as an employer, contact your nearest NMDVR office.

There are two dozen locations across the state:

[dvr.state.nm.us/locations/](https://dvr.state.nm.us/locations/).



*The New Mexico Division of Vocational Rehabilitation helps individuals with disabilities find suitable employment. To do so, NMDVR partners with employers seeking to enhance their workforce. Vocational rehabilitation is a voluntary program supporting people who want to work. With a long history of success and proven methodology for making the best fits, NMDVR is committed to helping participants thrive in their communities. For more information, visit [dvr.state.nm.us](https://dvr.state.nm.us) or call 505-954-8500.*

*The Vocational Rehabilitation program receives 78.7% of its funding through a grant from the U.S. Department of Education. For federal fiscal year 2025, the total awarded is \$24,099,900. The remaining 21.3% is funded by state appropriations and transfers from the Commission for the Blind and Commission for the Deaf and Hard of Hearing.*

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