



## Walsh: Jobs for mentally ill: lifeline in trouble

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**South Salt Lake** » John Albretsen doesn't really have time to chat. He's mopping, sweeping and vacuuming around Momo and Ruby and Greg. Then vacuuming, sweeping and mopping again.

The dirt and hair of the dogs at Camp Bow Wow doesn't wait.

Albretsen's job is 80 percent cleaning and 20 percent playing with the dogs. And he likes it that way.

Dogs are simple. For a 25-year-old struggling to live with mental illness, work is a lifeline.

Aside from the smell of dog, the place is spotless.

"It's a lot of work, but it's the most fun job I've ever had," he says. "It gives me something to do."

Albretsen knows he's lucky. He still has his job at Camp Bow Wow, part of Alliance House's transitional employment placement program. Too often such humanitarian programs are the first thing cut when times are tough.

But Camp Bow Wow owner Sharon Opfermann is doing everything she can to keep Albretsen on.

"He doesn't stop," she says.

After 35 years at Olympus Bank and Jones Waldo, Opfermann wanted to retire at a job where she could take her dogs, Nike and Jojo. So she sunk her life savings in the franchise and opened at the end of December. She has 67 "cabins" for dogs. Just about one-third are full two months later. She's had to cut Albretsen's hours.

Still, she's dedicated to Alliance House's work program. It's like the dogs she fosters for No More Homeless Pets

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and PAWS, she says, animals and people who both need a second chance.

Each worker receives counseling from an Alliance House coach. If the worker doesn't show up, an Alliance coach fills in, so businesses are never left in the lurch. And after nine months to a year, the workers move on to full-time jobs. Opfermann used Alliance members as runners at Jones Waldo. Now, one is a full-time Camp Bow Wow employee.

"Every employee I hired was reliable," Opfermann says. "They're just wonderful kids. And the dogs love them."

Opfermann's situation is unusual. Other Alliance House jobs in retail and government have been slashed to make ends meet. And Alliance House managers aren't sure the cutting has

stopped.  
"I still fear that down the road we may risk losing more positions," says Amber Weber, Alliance House transitional-employment coordinator.

Everyone is hurting. Bankers and construction workers and engineers are out of work. But Alliance House members are particularly fragile. It's difficult for them to find work. Transitional jobs are their best chance at rejoining society.

"The transitional employment placement program is essential to the recovery of our members," says Karen Wildfoerster, development director for Alliance House.

Alliance House managers are trying to replace lost retail jobs with office work. They hope once the economy picks up again, the transitional jobs will be reinstated.

Until then, they're holding their breath.

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