Linking Employment, Abilities, and Potential (LEAP) Launches 22\textsuperscript{nd} Annual School to Work Transition Program for High School Students with Disabilities

\textbf{(June 16, 2016) Cleveland, OH-} Nearly 100 local high school students with disabilities are being prepared to participate in an award-winning “School to Work Transition” summer employment program offered through Linking Employment, Abilities and Potential (LEAP), a Northeast Ohio disability services organization. This is the 22\textsuperscript{nd} consecutive summer for the School to Work Transition program, which provides career exploration, employment preparation, local job placement and daily on-the-job coaching to help teens and young adults with disabilities master skills needed for success in adulthood and the workplace. The Cleveland program has been modeled on other successful national youth employment models and has also been recognized by the National Youth Employment Coalition.

First implemented in 1994 by current LEAP Executive Director Melanie Hogan, LEAP’s School to Work Transition program is a proven, consumer-focused initiative designed to help teens with disabilities explore careers and develop skills during the school year, then gain valuable work experience during placement in a meaningful summer job. The School to Work Transition program also has the added benefit of allowing employers to explore the untapped potential of prospective employees with disabilities, often leading to a different perspective about what it means to hire workers with disabilities.

Student referrals for LEAP’s summer job program come directly from Transition Coordinators in area high schools such as James Ford Rhodes and Glenville, both within the Cleveland Metropolitan School District. Student placement at approved job sites is preceded by an intense, 4-day orientation for candidates, covering basic interview scenarios, tips on personal appearance and effective communication, and how to improve important interpersonal skills that are needed to be successful in the workplace. After placement with area employers, students are mentored and assisted daily by more than 20 LEAP-trained employment coaches, in an effort to ensure that both students and companies have a positive experience.

Northeast Ohio worksites receiving LEAP student candidates have included Mitchel’s Ice Cream, Pat Catan’s craft stores, University Hospitals, and Campbell’s Popcorn. Post-placement evaluations from both
students and employers reveal how positively the School to Work program can impact participants. “The employers really become mentors to the students” observes Sherry Green, Youth Transition Team Leader and Employment Specialist for LEAP. “They are amazed at the progress and personal growth of students with disabilities when they are provided with meaningful work opportunities. Many also express pride at having provided employment to a student with a disability and watching them achieve greater independence while opening new doors for themselves. We have seen many of our summer placements lead to full-time jobs after graduation.”

LeRoy Woods is a graduate of Max S. Hayes High School and former successful participant in LEAP’s School to Work transition program. “I am hearing impaired and learned about opportunities with LEAP from my teachers” said Leroy. “I joined the program in 9th grade and eventually had the chance to work at the (Cleveland) VA hospital in an assortment of roles including housekeeping, food service, and eventually helping to make casts for injured veterans. The experience really helped me to mature and made me realize I could do anything!” Proficient in sign language, Leroy was recruited back by LEAP soon after his graduation from Hayes to serve as a peer coach for other students with hearing loss. He currently serves with LEAP as a Peer Coach and Recreation Assistant for Quantum LEAP, a unique recreation program for adults with disabilities. When asked what motivates him, Woods is quick to respond, saying “being a support to others and giving back, just helping to make a difference” in the life of someone who is dealing with the challenges of living with a disability.

To learn more about LEAP’s summer “School to Work Transition” youth employment program or be a receiving worksite for youth with disabilities, contact Sherry Green at 216.696.2716 or visit LEAP online: www.leapinfo.org.

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About LEAP

Linking Employment, Abilities and Potential (LEAP) is an agent of positive change, working to advance participation and equality in society for people with disabilities in Northeast Ohio. Founded more than 30 years ago by people with disabilities, LEAP serves over 1,700 individuals annually, and works to promote social change to enhance the quality of life for people with disabilities. The majority of staff and board members at LEAP are people with disabilities themselves. Through its comprehensive services, LEAP assists people with disabilities in living independently in their own homes, participating in community life, and finding and maintaining employment.