



Jorge Zavala, 28, is an inventory specialist at Envision Xpress ServMart located on Lemoore Naval Air Base. Zavala is visually impaired and found the job through the Tulare County Office of Education's A Ticket to Success program.

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## **Program offers just the ticket**

### **Valley effort helps people with disabilities find employment.**

By Susie Pakoua Vang / The Fresno Bee

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LEMOORE — Jorge Zavala was in boot camp about three years ago and had dreams of joining the Marine Corps.

But he was discharged a month later when a genetic abnormality was detected in his eyes during a routine checkup.

The 28-year-old became fully blind on the right side a year after he left boot camp. He can see through his left eye and uses visual aids.

"It was the worst thing," Zavala said of the first several months after he lost most of his vision.

He enrolled in several music classes at California State University, Fresno, and Fresno City College.

Then he received a phone call from a representative of a program called A Ticket to Success. The representative talked about a job opening for a legally blind or low-vision person at Lemoore Naval Air Station.

Zavala worked on his résumé with employment helpers. He received tips about interviews.

"You actually hire people who are blind," Zavala remembered asking himself. "That's crazy!"

A Ticket to Success regional coordinator Karen Davidson said 70% of disabled individuals are unemployed.

She said the program is designed to help people with disabilities find work or, in some cases, return to work.

"They may have a disability, but that doesn't mean they can't work," she said. "Some of them have overcome their disabilities or have learned to live with their disabilities."

A Ticket to Success is an extension of the national Ticket to Work program. A Ticket to Success was implemented at the Tulare County Office of Education in November 2003.

The program recently received a \$100,000 grant from the Community Technology Foundation of California, which provides underserved communities access to technology.

The money will help the program continue to expand services to people with disabilities who live in Tulare, Fresno, Madera, Kern and Kings counties.



Jorge Zavala uses a magnifying lens to read an inventory list on his job as an inventory specialist at Envision Xpress ServMart on the Lemoore Naval Air Base. Zavala was in Marine boot camp three years ago when a genetic defect was found in his eyes.

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There are 238 participants throughout the Central Valley in the program, of whom 86 were placed with jobs.

Robin Libbee, 54, joined the work program a year ago and was able to start her own business, called Sensitively Speaking.

The Visalia woman, who is visually impaired, offers disability training to local businesses and organizations.

"The entire staff is really genuine," Libbee said. "They

really care about the individuals and that's so important."

On Friday, Zavala balanced a box filled with folders on his right shoulder as he walked across an office supply store located at the naval air base.

Zavala, who moved to Lemoore, took out the supplies and placed them on shelves at Envision Xpress ServMart, a store where naval leaders buy notepads, folders and pens, among other items.

Zavala's quick pace across the store and fast fingers were slowed only when he picked up a package to read the label.

He struggled to make out the words until he pulled out a large, white magnifying glass from his work apron.

Zavala said he enjoys his job. He stocks supplies, keeps the store clean and makes labels for products.

He began work in August and store manager Denise Harris said she's impressed with his enthusiasm.

"He doesn't lack in initiative," Harris said. "He always looks at things to do and ways to improve."

There's an irony in the location of his workplace, Zavala said: "I got discharged from the Marine Corps because of my eyes. Now I'm back on the military base because of my eyes."

Zavala said it would have been easy for him to give up, but he has other work projects to pursue.

With or without a disability, success is not impossible to achieve.

All that are needed, he said, are plenty of resources and even bigger dreams.

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