

**Senate Health, Education, Labor and Pensions (HELP) Committee**  
**Hearing on Lessons Learned from COVID-19: Highlighting Innovations, Maximizing Inclusive Practices and Overcoming Barriers to Employment for People with Disabilities**

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During my professional career of over 20 years, I have worked in direct care with persons who experience an intellectual disability, through county-funded mental health case management, as a self-sufficiency coordinator in local housing services; and since 2013 in education, training, and employment services through the state of Iowa's implementation of the Workforce Innovation and Opportunity Act (WIOA). Regardless of the organization, there has been one common theme to my career, service to those who experience a disability. I am the child of an educator who dedicated her to life to working in special education and Headstart, my father was a construction worker who experienced first-hand the impact of trauma on our Veterans. As a result of growing up in this environment and seeing how hard both my parents worked; I knew there were two things I never wanted to be as an adult, one was a teacher and the other was a construction worker. However, when I am asked what it is that I do now, I say I "help build people".

At the end of the day what our country and what any country should be is a collection of people who are trying their best to build each other up. Unfortunately, despite what we may see as our best-efforts persons who experience a disability are often left behind. A report from the Bureau of Labor Statistics (2020) shows that less than 20% of persons with a disability are working at any level, while almost 62% of persons without a disability were employed. Over 25% of all persons with disability live in poverty, while the poverty rate for those without a disability is just over 11% (ACS, 2020). Finally, when looking at life expectancy, a Congressional Research Study (2014) found that when comparing high income to poverty life expectancy, women of high income live over a decade longer than women in poverty and high-income men live almost 15 years longer than low-income men. When you factor in COVID's impact on the poor and those with significant health concerns, it is not overstating that the full inclusion and advancement of persons with disability in the workforce literally saves lives.

Employment is how we participate and make change in this country, it not only provides income to support ourselves and our families, but it is also how the majority of Americans access healthcare, it creates the foundation of our social networks, gives us a purpose to begin and end our day pursuing and for so many of us it is the base for our very identity. Afterall, how many times do we begin a conversation with a new person by asking "where do you work"? Our K-12 education system is anchored on either preparing us to enter the world of work, or continuing our educational journey; in order to ultimately enter the world of work. In America, employment is the building block of being a fully realized and contributing citizen.

Therefore, if employment opens the door to the American Dream, the inability to obtain and maintain employment is the first step to living the American Nightmare. For far too many of our neighbors this nightmare is a growing reality, especially for those who experience a disability. For myself, the impact of disability on employment hit home in December of 2015, when I acquired a spinal cord injury which requires me to use a wheelchair. Ladies and gentlemen, I can tell you that after my injury the emotions I

felt weren't mourning over my difficulty with walking, it was terror over possibly losing my job. Attending medical appointments to understand what was happening to me physically was a distant 2<sup>nd</sup> or 3<sup>rd</sup> place concern to showing up at my desk everyday to provide for my family and to maintain my sense of self-worth.

Fortunately, I worked for an employer that afforded me an income that allowed me to have money in savings, I had paid time off for medical appointments, testing and the surgery that was required to maintain my remaining mobility. I had private insurance which covered the cost of the majority of my medical expenses, as well as benefits such as an FSA and short-term disability which helped cover the rest. But most importantly I had an employer, colleagues, and supervisors, who valued the fact that I could contribute far more than the manner in which I made those contributions.

Beyond my own experience, come the lessons learned for helping others overcome the barriers to employment for people with disabilities. During my time in various roles assisting individuals who are at the heart of these hearings is the need to create and maintain a support network and vocational system that understands and is responsive to the needs of this population. Much of what I have learned was during my work on the local and state level as part of the Disability Employment Initiative or DEI project. The state of Iowa was fortunate to host two rounds of the DEI project and serve hundreds of Iowans with disabilities over six and a half years. DEI was a jointly funded initiative by ODEP (the Office of Disability Policy) and the Department of Labor which aims to improve education, training and employment opportunities and outcomes for youth and adults with disabilities who are unemployed, underemployed and/or receiving Social Security disability benefits.

During the state of Iowa's first round under DEI, the focus was on providing benefits planning to persons who receive SSDI and/or SSI benefits from the Social Security Administration. SSA currently provides benefits to over 12 million individuals through its Title II (SSDI) and Title XVI (SSI) programs (SSA, 2021). A person understanding how their cash and insurance benefits may be impacted by moving to employment is understandably, for many, the first and most integral part of returning or initially entering the workforce. During DEI, the state of Iowa strategically placed staff trained in benefits planning in multiple American Job Centers across the state. As a result of this initial round of the DEI, the state of Iowa currently has 26 staff across Title I and Title III of WIOA who are trained or are in training related to benefits planning; as well as Iowa Workforce Development and Iowa Vocational Rehabilitation Services (IVRS) support a combined Benefits Planning Network to make benefits planning a readily available resource to any job seeker, family member and/or paid support who needs this assistance. The expanded use of benefits planners in all AJC locations nationally from the earliest stages of work readiness will create and sustain the value-add of workforce services to persons with a disability and our collateral partners.

The subsequent round of the DEI project was focused on credential attainment and career pathway development. Again, hundreds of individuals were served by specially trained staff placed strategically across the state of Iowa, all with the goals of attaining an industry-recognized credential and moving to employment which would afford them to wage level to reduce and quite possibly reduce their reliance on public benefits (SSDI, SSI, SNAP, FIP, Public Housing, etc.) While not all individuals were successful, the data was not only extremely encouraging, but also demonstrated an undeniable concept; if you build a better system, individuals will access it.

Following the conclusion of Iowa's participation in the DEI project; IWD and its partners under WIOA continued the momentum of the Disability Employment Initiative through the various Disability Access Committees (DACs) across the state and each of the Iowa's local workforce development areas. Understanding that per the WIOA, the American Job Centers (AJCs) are expected to meet the needs of their customers by ensuring universal access to their programs and activities for all eligible individuals, much discussion has occurred at all levels regarding innovation and best practices to both job seekers and employers.

Much of the discussion has revolved around ensuring that those services are accessible not only physically, but programmatically and sensitive to various needs and cultures within the disability community. A great deal of this work needs to occur at a high level, to ensure and mandate its inclusion and efficiency, such as establishing a core level of assistive technology (AT) that would be available at every One-stop Center, especially for those who communicate differently such as the Blind and Deaf and Hard of Hearing communities. This includes the provision of training related to the creation of accessible materials to ensure that all persons have access to the information under the WIOA umbrella. The hiring of Career Planners who are fluent in American Sign Language (ASL), should be seen as the same imperative as is having Career Planners who are fluent in any other spoken language. Further this should include the integration of evidence-based practices such as Discovery assessments and the use of the Integrated Resource Team (IRT) model of service coordination.

The COVID-19 pandemic has not only provided great challenges to our country but has also created space for great opportunities. More and more the job market allows for increased creativity regarding how and where work can be performed. The use of technology allows an increasing number of workers to work from home and through telework. This use of technology can be used as a means to increase the number of persons with a disability which are part of any work environment. However, innovation does not come without a cost, and the availability of and familiarity with technology related to computer skills proficiency, Wi-Fi availability and continued transportation needs must be addressed. Virtual services are effective if applied pre-employment as well through virtual job fairs and the use of the Reverse Job Fair model. In the new normal which COVID has introduced to our world, we must shift our employment focus to being more creative and less critical if we are to work together to effectively "help build people".

## References

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