

Disability Employment & Being Person-Centered in the New Normal

National Disability Employment Awareness Month - October 2021

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Every October the Disability Community and our Allies celebrate **National Disability Employment Awareness Month**. This is a time to celebrate the gifts, talents, and contributions that people with disabilities bring to America’s workforce. As I often like to say, diversity is great for business and can lead to a better bottom-line. This year’s theme for Disability Employment Awareness month is “America’s Recovery:



Powered by Inclusion.” The goal of this theme is to reflect on the critical need for people with disabilities to have **full access to employment and community inclusion opportunities as we recover from this dreadful pandemic.**

Competitive integrated employment, often known as “Real Jobs for Real Pay,” is at the heart of person-centered systems and practices for people with developmental and other disabilities. Right now, many allies and advocates are advocating at the state and federal level for the passage of laws that would repeal section 14(c) of the Fair Labor Standards Act (FLSA) of 1938 which allows employers to pay people with disabilities subminimum wage based on their productivity rate. An example of this is when I was in high school, I attended a special vocational program for students who were not able to complete a regular

high school curriculum. As part of that program, I had job training that included mini jobs paid at subminimum wage. The first job I did was delivering mail via a carrier route around the school. Another job was collecting attendance sheets for all vocational-technical education programs where I got paid \$2.00 an hour. After that I moved on to working in a preschool for \$3.00 an hour. Eventually when I turned 16, I got my first “real” job at the local ice rink in Randolph, Vermont. That is how I discovered what subminimum wage was because I got paid \$6.25 which was minimum wage at the time.

As of 2021, 11 states have passed laws ending the practice of paying workers with disabilities subminimum wage—including my very own state of Maryland, the second state in the country to outlaw 14(c) subminimum wage.

There is no better time than the present to eliminate the outdated practice of paying workers subminimum wages. **Subminimum wage does not support self-sufficiency, independence, or self-determination.**

One of the ways to accomplish this goal is for Congress and all states to pass laws outlawing 14(c) subminimum wage. One example of this is the H.R. 2373 – Transformation to Competitive Integrated Employment Act that would phase out 14(c) over 5-6 years and give states the needed infrastructure to make it happen.

All people can live and work in the community. No one is too Disabled to Live and Work in the community.

Approaches to Work

Over the past 17 months the COVID-19 pandemic has drastically transformed our world by moving work, schooling, doctor appointments, and events to online formats. COVID-19 has shown us that many jobs can be done from home—not everything needs to be face-to-face 100% of the time. **Having flexible work arrangements greatly benefits people with disabilities** because many of us face transportation barriers and many of us are unable to tolerate long commutes or

crowds due to the nature of our disabilities. Remote work is something that the disability community has been asking for years and has often been denied this accommodation. Remote options lessen our anxiety around the fear of catching viruses, especially given that many of us have chronic health issues that put us at high risk of poor outcomes if we catch viruses like the flu, COVID-19 and so forth.



Remote work can also reduce the stress caused by traveling to work. Many of the people with disabilities I talk with say they love being able to work from home and attend to other business appointments without leaving the house. In the era of climate change, working from home can also help save the environment by reducing our carbon footprint.

Benefits and Livable Wages

In addition, this pandemic has exposed how many people work in jobs that have been deemed essential and have hazardous work conditions during public health emergencies. During the early days of the pandemic, many essential workers got “Hazard Pay” for being in these high-risk jobs. But COVID also exposed that many of the jobs classified as essential offer the lowest wages and minimal benefits.

One example of this is Direct Support Professionals who are essential to the health, safety, and success of people with disabilities in the community, at home and in the workforce. Due to the low wages paid to DSPs, our nation has a direct care workforce crisis that has been made worse by this pandemic. It is my hope that going forward that essential workers will be paid livable wages and robust benefits as a result of this pandemic.

Person-Centered Transition Planning

One thing disability providers and states are doing now under the Workforce Innovation and Opportunity Act is Pre-Employment Transition Services.

Pre-Employment Transition Services must be person-centered. During the transition years it is important that people with disabilities get exposure to a wide

variety of career options—not just “food, filth, flowers and filing.” This is especially important given the impact of automation on the world of work. Many of the typical jobs that people with disabilities did 20 years ago are being automated. And the COVID-19 pandemic has only accelerated automation—including automated checkouts, which replace people in cashiering and bagging jobs. In high school, I had a job bagging groceries in a grocery store, and this has often been a job done by people with disabilities in the past. Nowadays, stores no longer hire people just for bagging and carts. They now expect workers to be able to run a register, bag groceries, and get carts. The more kinds of work and hobbies we can expose youth to, the more likely they will be to achieve person-centered employment outcomes.

We must also offer maximum opportunity to take college classes, certificate programs, and other trade school programs that support people with disabilities



to discover their gifts and talents and prepare for the successful transition from school to work. Professionals can support this goal by having high expectations and thinking outside the box as they support us to successfully move from school to work and adult life. We must do everything we can to ensure money is not a barrier to

taking part in this. Another thing we should encourage as we look at the future of work for the disability community is investing in programs that can support people with disabilities to start their own businesses—given that the gig economy has grown during this pandemic, which is also playing a role in the worker and wage shortage crisis.

Supporting Independence

Lastly, with the help of private and public partnerships with tech companies, we must strive to increase access to high-speed internet and tech devices like

laptops, desktop computers, iPads, and iPhones for people with disabilities who often lack the financial resources to purchase such devices. Money should never be a barrier to access. By doing this we can support people with disabilities to achieve the goal of maximum independence in the community and workforce. As a society we must enact progressive reform of the Social Security Disability Insurance (SSDI) and the Supplemental Security Income (SSI) programs so that people with disabilities are able to earn and save as much as they want without worrying about losing benefits, which often results in us being worse off financially. This is called a Benefits Cliff. It is when you make enough money to go off public benefits but not enough to be self-supporting. Benefits cliffs and earnings limits are the major barriers for people with disabilities in achieving truly person-centered employment outcomes. In the past 10 years we have passed laws allowing anyone who gets their disability before age 26 to save \$15,000 a year in an ABL Account. However, we still have a way to go in ensuring people with disabilities can lead dignified lives by moving out of poverty and into the middle class economically.

Supporting Flexibility—and Recovery

As disability providers, one the best things you can do to support person-centered employment outcomes is to encourage your agency and other disability rights or social justice organizations to hire people with disabilities. One way to do this is to advocate for peer mentoring to be a billable service under Medicaid that can allow people with disabilities to get support from paid peer mentors who have skills others may not have. An example of this could be teaching people how to take the bus, use an iPad, budget money, offer peer support counseling to deal with the mental health fallout of the COVID pandemic, and much more. There is no better time than the present to think outside the box and use the lessons learned from this nightmarish pandemic to build back better so that people with disabilities can be truly included in today's workforce. A Disability-friendly work environment is key to a successful recovery from the COVID-19 pandemic, given

that COVID has led to more people becoming disabled because of Long COVID. The large numbers of COVID long-haulers will force America's businesses to get serious about disability issues. One thing they can do is offer more job-sharing, flexible work schedules, instead of say 40 hours a week for one job, maybe we have two people doing one job for 20 hours a week each.

THE END.

EXPECT, EMPLOY, EMPOWER.

An Interview with Matt Shapiro

Nicole: Tell me a little about yourself Matt, how did you start your LLC?

Matt: I'm 30 years old and I live in Richman, VA. I am a wheelchair user due to Cerebral Palsy. I always knew I wanted to work in the disability space. In 2014, after a lot of interviews, I decided to start my own consulting business – called 6 Wheels



Consulting because there are 6 wheels on my wheelchair. It was super easy. I filled out all the paperwork online and I was able to print the certificate out. It was very simple for me.

I got started through an inheritance. I took some of that funding to create a logo, website, etc. I did get some money through DARS and had a small-business/entrepreneurial support person. They helped me develop a business plan, budget, and targets. They also helped me put together the documents and did a pitch for business supplies.

Matt Shapiro, Founder and CEO of 6 Wheels Consulting

Nicole: What is the best thing about being a lobbyist?

Matt: So many good things. I am a political nerd at heart. Anytime I can be part of the process of getting legislation to help people with disabilities get employment. I'm a member of an APSE Chapter. I'm an entrepreneur at heart. I wanted to start a social impact business; trying to change the way people talk about and approach disability. I want to challenge the status quo about disabilities. I have a big architecture project to rebuild the Supreme Court to be fully accessible. I get to dabble in so many cool areas every day. It's really cool to have that fresh variety every day – fun and rewarding.

We need to swing for bigger things. The challenges that were here in the '90s are still here. How do we get to the next generation of challenges? That's what drives and motivates my work. We still have a long way to go. I'm tired of taking baby steps.

Nicole: What kind of support is out there for people with disabilities who want to start their own LLC or business doing professional advocacy work?

Matt: I'd love to talk to you and be a resource. Maybe your rehab offices could help although there aren't a lot of resources out there. We don't talk about starting businesses as an employment outcome. Why aren't we encouraging people to do that? I don't know about many resources. If you want to start your own business come talk to me. It's not disability-specific.

Nicole: What barriers if any did you face and how did you overcome them?

Matt: I still have to constantly overcome barriers. They have to see the value of my services. Inclusion above compliance. It might meet ADA but still not be fully inclusive. If you can draw more people with disabilities and their families, they will spend money and help that organization's bottom line. I've started to build a reputation. I'm forever grateful for that. It's still a learning process. I don't have all the answers. I'm on track to have my best year to date. Working remotely has been more accessible with way more flexibility. Encouraging businesses to keep some of this COVID era accessibility and to do things virtually. I'm hoping we don't backslide. It has worked great for me. I'm busier now than before COVID.

Starting a business is a lot of trial and error. I had one plan of what I thought I was going to do but there has been a shift. It has been cool to watch the evolution of

what I thought I would be doing versus what I'm doing now. My next big goal—how do I level up. Ideally, I don't want to have to keep my benefits all the time. I want to make a living. That's my long-term goal.

Nicole: What advice do you have for families who may be worried about benefits and safety if their son or daughter gets a job for real pay in the community?

Matt: First open an ABLE account. If you are working, you can put it in your ABLE account. Don't let the benefit drive the decision making. There are ways to work through it. Find out what works better for you.

Nicole: As we move towards a NEW NORMAL what lessons learned from the COVID-19 pandemic do you hope we adopt long term?

Matt: All of what we've done should be long-term. All of the technology. Some things are hard through telehealth. We need to advocate for virtual components for all meetings and conferences. I will give somebody an option to continue to meet virtually. Think about people with disabilities. Our employees can have a better work/life balance when working from home. It's amazing how quickly we adapted and not have to go into the office. Everyone is going to be happier for that. A lot that has come out of this. Society as a whole and people with disability.

Nicole: How can employment support professionals best support people with disabilities in getting professional work-from-home or hybrid jobs?

Matt: Having those types of people open up their minds. I have so many other talents that I can offer in the workplace. People can work from home and you've got a shortage of jobs. Tapping into creative problem-solvers. Utilize them and bring them to the workforce. Vocational Rehabilitation (VR) counselors should view it as a legitimate option. Sometimes folks are in the rut of what the system says they can or cannot do. Systemically, VR is set in their ways and they don't always think outside the box. I don't need to know how to balance a checkbook – I can hire someone to do that. I have someone manage my accounts, social media, blog posts, etc. If I can't do something, I find someone who can, and I bring them onto my team. Just another roadblock that society puts up.

That's what entrepreneurship is. I met someone at a conference who liked music and they figured out a way to build a business around teaching music. You can't

tell me that we don't have enough creative minds to make this happen more often.

Nicole: If you had a magic wand and could reform the public benefit system, what would you do?

Matt: I would make it easier for people to get the services they need. Why are there so many loopholes and red tape? I'm so tired of having to prove that I'm disabled. Some of the stuff we have to go through to get what we need. I would make it a lot less complex – easier and quicker. Get people what they need so they are not in crisis mode all the time.

We've made progress but we have so much more progress to make. I challenge the whole community to come together to make significant change to have another disability rights movement or move onto the next generation. In some cases, it is incremental progress and I'd like to see more substantial progress for more inclusion – for all people.

That is the pure definition of why we still have so much work to do. We've had some big wins and great moments. It is mind-boggling. The same issues are the ones we are dealing with today. My call to action: Take some larger swings at these problems that our community deals with day in and day out.

Matt Shapiro is Founder and CEO at 6wheelsconsulting.com. Connect with him for consulting, public speaking, and lobbying services—and follow him on Twitter, Facebook and Instagram!

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