

Women In Government Podcast
Episode 3
Employer Perspectives for Improving Employment
Outcomes for People with Disabilities

Announcer: Welcome to the Women In Government Podcast. A way for people to come together and discuss important issues and policies of the day. To get the conversation started, here is Maryland Delegate Sheree Sample-Hughes.

SSH: Hi, I'm Maryland Delegate Sheree Sample-Hughes and did you know in 2016 less than 40% of Americans between the ages of 18-64 with disabilities had a job? The employment percentage was more than double for those without disabilities with more than 75% of people in the workforce. This employment gap highlights the work that needs to be done to help those living with disabilities find meaningful and rewarding employment. That has been the focus of our series and we continue the conversation today with "Employer Perspectives for Improving Employment Outcomes for People with Disabilities."

We have three guests joining the conversation:

She was on our first episode and I'd like to welcome back, Tennessee Senator, Becky Duncan Massey. The Senator served as a member of the CSG/NCSL National Task Force on Employment of People with Disabilities. Senator, it is a pleasure to have you here today and it was good seeing you a couple weeks ago.

BDM: Absolutely and it's good to be back. And it's a great topic and it is one near and dear to my heart.

SSH: We also have CVS Health Workforce Initiatives Manager, Kathy Burris. Welcome.

KB: Hi everyone. I am excited about the topic and I am very passionate as well. I lead the Disability and Abundance Program for CVS, so I'm very excited to be part of the podcast.

SSH: Thank you. And finally, Mark Seifarth, who is immediate past chair of the Ohio Developmental Disabilities Council and consultant, Ohio Values and Faith Alliance.

MS: Thank you so much. It is good to be with you to have this important discussion today.

SSH: Thank you all. I'd also like to thank everyone who is listening and remind you to like or share our conversation. You can also email us by visiting womeningovernment.org.

To get started, we've already learned in episodes one and two how law, policy, and public attitudes affecting those with disabilities have changed over the years. There's a new paradigm that says disability, similar to race and gender, is a natural and normal part of the human experience. We're now taking a long-view approach to include post-secondary education opportunities with career credentialing to help those with disabilities find work in different industry sectors.

So whether or not someone with a disability has a job, may be influenced by where they live and policy and practices in place to help them succeed.

So let's open the up the discussion to everyone. What are some effective employer policies and practices for hiring, recruiting, retaining, and advancing qualified individuals with disabilities? Senator Duncan Massey, we can begin with you.

BDM: I'm going to go to its very beginning to start, and that's an employer has to want to decide that they want to actively recruit and hire people with disabilities. I think next they need to do the research on available partnerships, toolkits, sample policy that they can use internally, tax credits and incentives. Then, they need to work to educate their current staff and get buying, help them know what's coming and how valuable it's been. They need to not set their expectations too low which is often a problem with employers hiring folks with disabilities. And also, just know that it isn't just a charitable action, but that they will be hiring valuable employees that will help their bottom line, increase their employee morale, and these employees will have high work ethics.

SSH: You have touched on many, many excellent points there. It is really about being open-minded and having that opportunity for all. Thank you so much. Kathy or Mark, would you like to weigh in?

KB: I think you need to be innovative. There's really no one-size-fits-all approach for retaining your employees. You really have to have a clear progression plan for advancement and opportunities. Our department

Workforce Initiative, we have done a really good job with partnering with state agencies, non-profits, educational institutions to not only provide employment opportunities, but to also attract a diverse talent pool. And I think when you develop programs, and we have many, we have tailored programs, we have variety of options, which I think is really important to do. We have career pathway programs with 320 active youth partnerships across the United States. We have apprenticeship programs with more than 1500 apprenticeships. And then, my favorite of course, which is our Abilities and Abundance Program, which is our disability signature workforce program, and they provide skill development, job training, and career placement opportunities for individuals with disabilities. So as you can see, we have a variety of options to really have an inclusive workforce environment.

MS: And I guess the only thing I would throw in, I was really glad that both of my colleagues here talked about some basic things you need to be thinking about as an employer or a business. Because as the American Disability Act says, who's the best person for the job with or without a disability? So, does the employer know what they really need, what are the essential functions of that job? And then if they are hiring the job and reaching out to people, then once we know that person has the basic skills to do the job, or can do it with the help of a job coach or other support, then we can discuss the kinds of accommodations needed. But the employer has to be a part of that partnership that knows what that business needs to succeed as well.

SSH: Kathy, the CVS Health Workforce Initiative team has helped thousands of people break the cycle of poverty and dependence through education, training, and healthy living that lead to opportunities and rewarding careers through CVS. So, my question is, how can employers ensure their current policies, practices, and procedures are effective and whether the company is making progress in improving employment opportunities for persons with disabilities? Do you have some examples of strategies and practices regarding accountability and continuous improvement mechanisms? I know you touched on a little bit, but if you could go just a little further for us that would be great.

KB: So CVS Health is always looking for new ways to improve our service to our customers, our colleagues, and of course our communities. And I think companies need to lead the way by creating an inclusive culture for all diverse groups, including those with disabilities. And to me what that means is identifying and championing policies and procedures, and benefits, that remove the barriers in the workplace and responding with creative solutions. So, some things could be flexible work schedules, job training schedules, work from home positions. And then really sharing and communicating those policies and procedures both internally and externally, which supports an environment that is engaging and it empowers all individuals with different abilities. And then of course, ensuring reasonable accommodations are in place and training your employees and informing them on the policies and procedures. I think that it is all about the right fit for any company, it's about the

ability not the disability, I think when companies focus on those steps, often times they'll see a lower turnover rate. They'll see a more engaged workforce and a higher profit, because, communities will support and invest in companies that invest in their communities. And that, truly I feel, is a recipe for success.

SSH: I couldn't agree more with you, especially when you touched on the communities and investment. In an effort to ensure state policies facilitate increased employment of people with disabilities, state intermediary organizations—one being Women In Government—have teamed up to create the State Exchange on Employment Disability (SEED).

According to Work Matters: A Framework for State Workforce Development for People with Disabilities Report, we need to lead by example and “walk the talk.” This includes requiring state contractors to proactively employ people with disabilities, financial incentives to businesses that hire persons with disabilities, among other things. Senator Duncan Massey, can you elaborate to what can be done on a state level?

BDM: Absolutely and it's been fun being a part of the Work Matters group to learn what other states are doing, but just in Tennessee alone we were an Employee First state that was done through the governor's executive order. These have been done in other states, or through legislation. We have developed memorandums of understanding by multiple government departments to coordinate efforts towards increasing employment outcomes for people with disabilities. And its ideas for these state agencies that would be resources to these businesses and people with disabilities, not to be working in

silos. Another thing that we've done has developed scholarships, which provided funding for young adults with disabilities to attend post-secondary programs, so we're training folks to be qualified and with the abilities to meet the needs of the businesses in their communities, including persons with disabilities as part of the state's Diversity Business Enterprise Program. You know help it promote the businesses there. You mentioned the tax credits and incentives and then also developing through our federal waivers the ability to fund job coaches and efforts to connect employers with these employees.

SSH: Mark Seifarth, the Ohio Disability Council believes in person-centered planning that includes individuals' likes and goals. Do you have some examples, Mark?

MS: One of the things we need to think about, first of all, is that we talk about people having choices, but it is more than just choices—it is informed choices. If you have only had one opportunity, or two opportunities, your whole life, how do you know what else you might want to try? One of the issues, if I may very briefly say, all of us as we go out into the workaday world living in our communities have the opportunity to succeed and fail. But sometimes in the disability community, we think of a person with a disability fails once, well you know that's it, they aren't going to get any more opportunities, whereas how many jobs have you and I gained and lost over our careers? So, we need to realize that we need to look at informed choices in the most integrated setting within the community so that they are actually living in the community if they are able to do that, and that they are interacting in the community.

Now there are those folks that need that 24-hour care, and need very specific medical needs and that they may still need some institutional care, or be in what is called an intermediate care facility. But in Ohio, for example, every year, we go back and revisit those folks, and say “look you’ve been here, would you like to try this in the community. We have the support that might be able to help. Would you like to try this for a certain amount of time?” So, part of the issue is, widening people’s sphere of understanding that they have choices both for the person with the disability and their parent or guardian and see if they need additional help there.

And finally, just as I finish with DD Council we have a couple of interesting grants that I’ll throw out real quick. We have a triple jeopardy grant where we work with women with disabilities of color. We had a grant working in the Amish community, which is fairly significant in Ohio. So, we try to reach out to those unserved and underserved populations and look at the diversity in the disability community as well.

SSH: I’m intrigued. The information is great because you know our community needs this. They need to know what other states are doing so we can work that in. According to the 2017 Employment Disability Statistics Annual Report, employment rates vary by type of disability. Employment percentages were highest for people with hearing and vision disabilities and lowest for independent and self-care disabilities. What are some roadblocks where employers need assistance to increase opportunities for people with all

types of disabilities? What are some strategies for overcoming these roadblocks? Kathy, we can start with you.

KB: I think it's a couple things. I think often times employers have the mindset that it is just too costly to train their employees or make accommodations. And they don't realize by partnering with a state vocational agency that they agencies can often train and make accommodations at low cost, or often times no cost, to an employer. So, I think that they just don't know that. And also, there are also several on the job training wage incentives that a lot of states offer, and that would offset costs of training and hiring individuals with disabilities. And then also, I think sometimes employers get caught up on the disability and not the ability of an individual.

With CVS, we have so many different types of jobs and we really look at a person's ability and the best fit. And I think a lot of employers are focusing just on "oh this person has a disability. What job do I have that fits that disability?" When the mindset should be, this person has skills and what is the best fit for this individual? So I think that partnering with the state vocational rehab agencies can provide a lot of training and resources to employers, really at no cost.

SSH: Very much so. That makes perfect sense and I love hearing you say often it's the ability versus the disability, and having that mindset and that mind shift really makes a difference. I know that recently the Senator has heard the same thing in meetings that were recently held. Senator, I'd like for you to

weigh in and then maybe we could hear from Mark as well on the same subject matter.

BDM: Well one of the other barriers to connect these folks is the transportation issue, and that typically is one of the number one problems in individuals getting to work and getting to work on time. And so in that there are states that are helping to develop the resource of public transportation and things like that I think some places are using taxis and now Uber and different things like that. Kathy had hit on most of the ones that I had looked at. I think also on the misconceptions not only for a person's ability. I actually years ago did a little community television show called *Focus on Abilities*, but on the misconceptions I think the state can really help. But with a public awareness campaign promoting the success stories from the governor right on down to the departments that are working on workforce development and everything, so really helping people learn and see that there are potentials there and that this is an untapped workforce that we're not utilizing to the fullest extent.

MS: And Kathy and the Senator you both made some really excellent points. Both about voc. rehab and transportation, which year after year is the number one issue in Ohio. Let me just throw in one of the biggest challenges for employers is if you have a person that has multiple disabilities, so you're a person with a physical disability, as I have, but maybe you have some intellectual disabilities, maybe you have some mental health issues. Sometimes having multiple disabilities can be a real road block where employers might need assistance, and that's where not only do you work with

voc. rehab agencies, vocational rehabilitation, forgive the shorthand. But also, in many states you've got a partnership between the development of disability agencies and the voc. rehab agency called Employment First where they work together to try to help people with significant disabilities work in the community. So government agencies are trying to work across together to give more supports and I think several times my learned colleagues here have mentioned job coaching, for example. That if you have hired someone and they have new job responsibilities many times a state agency will send in a job coach to help them learn those new responsibilities so they can work with the employer. There are a lot of supports out there that are available.

SSH: In 34 states, the employment percentage gap between those with a disability and those without was 40 percentage points greater; only three states showed an employment percentage gap less 23 percentage points. Senator Duncan Massey, what role does state government and legislatures, in particular, have in helping employers create opportunity for individuals with disabilities?

BDM: There's a lot of opportunities there, and this I think kind of blends in to some of the things that definitely can be done. But on the big picture scene, through the departments they can set policy so the governor's office set policies and practices of the state to foster this. But also in the legislators can pass legislation that can support these employers, which will then include the incentives and the tax credits. Another thing then, is to help develop a qualified workforce of persons with disabilities through education and career readiness

policies. The fostering sustainable partnerships and you've got to publicize those partnerships, so the businesses know who they can call on, what agencies, what resources are there, what toolkits are there to help them in this new endeavor if they are just starting with developing an active unemployment practice of folks with disability. And then also, I think the state can make disability employment as part of the state workforce development strategy.

SSH: Certainly there are multiple tools that can be used and I heard you specifically highlight the incentives, so thank you for reading my mind and going where I wanted to go next. Mark or Kathy, would you like to respond to that as well and what you're aware of, of what states are able to do to provide incentives to employers?

MS: I really do want to focus on the states as the incubators. I'm an old state senate staffer from years ago, but let me just throw in a couple of federal incentives real quickly that everyone ought to know about. There is a disability access tax credit for small businesses, so you can get a tax credit to help make your business accessible if you're a small business. There's also a work opportunities tax credit that will reimburse you part of that first year's salary for that person. So there are some federal ones that I just wanted to put on the table so we know about.

But, many states have similar tax credits and the Senator quite specifically mentioned workforce. I mean, all states have workforce boards under the Workforce Innovations Opportunities Act and those work and a lot of

the different issues across the state with people with disabilities at all kinds of different employers, so we've got to use those workforce boards.

And then let me just reiterate, one last time, what's been said once before, we really need to work with vocational rehabilitation, DD, mental health agencies—all of which sometimes give the supports which make that first leap towards employment. It's not just rehabilitation, excusing the nomenclature, it's habilitation, that first job. "I've never had a job before and I have to learn how to do this." So people always talk about "aw I lost a job, I got to get a new one." What about that first job? So that's what states do. States really are the incubators of helping people get that first job.

KB: One other approach I think too, is the states need to support apprenticeships and internship programs. But as far as the on-the-job wage reimbursement programs that most states offer, I think they need to streamline the approach because often times as an employer, there's a ton of paperwork that you have to fill out and complete, and that can be a turnoff to employers because "it's too complicated. You know I can't do that." So, I think that if they had a more streamlined approach to the wage reimbursement programs would be really nice because I think more employers would participate in it if it was more streamlined.

KB: That's a really good point Kathy, if I may.

SSH: Thank you. We're discussing employer's perspectives for improving employment outcomes for people with disabilities. Could each of you

share a single idea for where the audience can get started or build on the disability inclusion efforts in their own state? Mark, let's start with you.

MS: You probably heard this before, but this is where I have to start. I'm a pretty basic guy. In the disability community, it's nothing about us without us. And, you have all these folks that sit down and decide they're going to figure out how to hire people with disabilities and nobody with a disability is sitting at the table. There's a problem with that. That's like trying to build a building and not hiring and not having anyone at the table that knows how to build a building. So, we really need to look at all those ways you can include people with disabilities in all sections, in all functions as you're going down the line. In every state you've got Developmental Disability Councils which I happen to have been on. But you've also got independent living centers under the Workforce Innovation Opportunities Act. You've got the workforce board. You've got all sorts of local, for-profit, not-for-profit groups that are people with disabilities. You've got to reach out and have those people at the table when you're constructing any kind of a program to help people with disabilities get jobs.

SSH: Kathy, anything you'd like to share or maybe a single idea that we can share with our audience?

KB: Be creative. As I said earlier, there's really no cookie cutter approach. It's what fits your business and your business needs. I also think yes, partner with community resources, state agencies, educational institutions cause they can support quality candidates but often times when you partner

with these agencies the candidates have gone through some type of job readiness program, so you have a candidate that's already ahead of the game and you'll get a candidate that's really excited and wants to work and we see a higher retention rate. And then, I also think though when you partner with any of these agencies you should have one point of contact. Because as a business you can't be reaching out to six, seven people to create a program. Businesses just won't do it. So I think be creative, and start out slow, build on a foundation, start one program get in a success and go do the next program, and I think you will end up with an inclusive, ready to work, engaged workforce.

SSH: Thank you and I can't forget Senator Duncan Massey. I know you probably have lots of ideas, but is there a single one that you might want to share with the audience again?

BDM: It's interesting, I, you know, I actually bring a unique role to the legislature as I just stepped down running an intellectual disability provider agency in Tennessee and I was with them for 24 years. So I've seen it from both sides of the coin. I think the state needs to be setting the example themselves to be the model employer. And I think when they set that example and promote that they've done it, it's a lot easier for the businesses in their state to follow along. Walk the talk, don't just talk it.

SSH: Yes indeed and I couldn't agree more. I know here in the state of Maryland we have made strides, but are continuing to learn from other states and that's what this is all about.

I'd like to thank all of our guests for joining us in the latest Women In Government Podcast. We're dedicated to helping state legislators effectively address policy barriers that may hinder the employment of people with disabilities. I'd also like to say thank you to all of the listeners for taking the time to hear this important discussion. Don't forget to subscribe to, like, or share our podcast. You can also email us by visiting womeningovernment.org.

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