

# “Reclaiming the Future” – 2nd Conversation

*Hosted by SourceAmerica and the Institute for Work & the Economy*

*September 17, 2020*

SourceAmerica and the Institute for Work & the Economy are committed to sustainable and meaningful employment of people with disabilities in their home communities. Finding ways to increase employment for people with disabilities are ongoing and front-of-mind. The Covid-19 pandemic exacerbated elevated rates of unemployment for people with disabilities relative to the rest of the workforce.

On September 17, SourceAmerica and the Institute hosted “Reclaiming the Future,” the second conversation involving leaders advocating in behalf of workers with disabilities. The first conversation was among about a dozen leaders whose organizations serve and employ people with disabilities. The 2<sup>nd</sup> conversation involved thought leaders from nine advocacy organizations supporting workers with disabilities and in human resources management. The goals of both conversations were to consider the impacts of the pandemic on employment for people with disabilities, whether the pandemic can serve as an inflection point for disability rights, and how the crisis may be leveraged to put employment rights for people with disabilities on a better and more equitable path. They were invited to imagine the “day after” in the aftermath of the pandemic and during economic recovery and to share their ideas on actions that can be taken to leverage current events for the benefit of people with disabilities and for disability rights. Shane Kanady presented the report that SourceAmerica published: **How COVID-19 is Reshaping the Future of Work for Persons with Disabilities** as context for the conversation. The September recipients also received the summary of the first conversation hosted in June 2019.

The following is a summary of the main points raised during the conversation:

1. There was good agreement that the pandemic exposes fissures in the systems that support workers with disabilities. The pandemic also opens great opportunities to span those fissures. Measures that were once viewed as special accommodations are now emerging common practices. This is especially evident with the growing ubiquity of remote working arrangements. These new practices both eliminate differences between workers on the basis of accommodations, but it allows workers with disabilities to be recognized first for their technical proficiencies and knowledge. Workers with disabilities and organizations representing their interests have long advocated in behalf of alternative working arrangements are better able to make the business case for their adoption now that employers are realizing productivity gains and improvements in job satisfaction as realized through some surveys. As one participant put it, “... this is an opportunity for disruption... this is an opportunity to leverage platforms in terms of

accommodations that are being extended to regular employees – individuals without disabilities, because, I think, there is a stigma and a bias and belief that providing accommodations to individuals with disabilities is extremely prohibitive from a cost perspective.”

2. The normalization of telework is also opening new labor markets for workers with disabilities that are outside of the boundaries of their local labor market. One participant reported that conversations with businesses, irrespective of the size of business, have changed to be more inclusive of workers with disabilities in the face of perceived talent shortages over the long term. New technologies are also opening new markets for service providers that are willing to expand their reach. As one participant put it, “the pandemic has allowed for greater flexibility, greater risk taking on the part of providers that have chosen to do so.” Some have even expanded their revenue model to accept both public and private payers for their services. Such an approach makes them less reliant on government-only funding. On the flip side, the financial plight of service providers that have failed to avail themselves of emerging technological solutions is an indicator of the downside risks of standing pat.
3. There are many challenges and barriers. One concern that was raised in the prior conversation is that some that who moved into community-based, competitive employment may perhaps be pushed into center-based work. This would be appalling, however, there are no clear data on whether this is happening, and if so, how it is manifested. Are workers moving from center-based work, into community-based work, and then back again? It is not clear what happened following the Great Recession, and it is unclear how the added challenges of the pandemic are having such an effect. As one participant indicate, what is certain is that adding more workers with disabilities to the employment rolls of center-based work is the “antithesis” of what should happen.
4. Transportation poses extraordinary challenges. People with disabilities are already overly reliant on public transportation. The shutdowns that occurred during the early days of the pandemic kept workers with disabilities from doing their jobs. Since public transportation has re-opened, people have been concerned about its safety with respect to the spread of COVID-19. In addition, disruptions in public transportation and its perceived safety have adversely affected attendant care at centers for independent living. New technologies and business models may offer some solutions: Lyft, Uber and other platforms may enable workers with disabilities to travel to on-site workplaces.
5. There are growing concerns regarding food and housing insecurity brought about the loss of income due to layoffs, furloughs, and unemployment. While not unique to persons with disabilities and their families, they add to an already chaotic environment.
6. The return to work is also fraught. There is growing concern that workers with disabilities will be viewed as being more vulnerable and higher risk in an in-person setting. This may result in two employment paths: one that creates more barriers for workers with disabilities who are considered vulnerable, and another that opens doors

for workers who are able to work remotely. Workers with disabilities have routinely faced the challenge of last in, first out: they are the last to be hired and the first to be let go. Many feared that the pandemic and the return to work will follow the same pattern. One participant noted: “What you’re seeing on the other side is people being asked to come back to work when it is competitive, integrated employment, but into jobs that tend to be very risky. And it is a subtle form of discrimination of employers feeling that this person should be very glad to have a job in this economy, even though it is risky.” At the same time, Disability IN and the Employee Resources Groups of member businesses may provide some answers to the challenges posed by the pandemic for workers with disabilities.

7. New technologies alone are not a panacea. They may provide new opportunities; however, they have extreme limitations with respect to accessibility. Popular meeting technologies do not adequately support the needs of those who are blind or have significant hearing impairment. For example, a screen reader may not be used at the same time with a live picture of the user. Or a deaf participant who does not do ASL requiring an independent real-time transcription because the captioning function is so poor. On-line conferences that are essential for professional advancement are effectively inaccessible to many who have disabilities. Government offices that are putting more and more functions on-line are also inaccessible either because the technologies are inadequate or because of the large digital divide that exists for people with disabilities: they either do not have the right devices, they lack Internet access, or they may not have the needed skills to make full use of their devices.
8. Traditional career pathways for youth with disabilities are being muddled especially if there is a premium placed on skills that are in demand by a world that favors remote work. People facing services – while many are essential – will not provide the same measure of growth as those that occupations that can be done remotely. At the same time, remote work requires a different set of work skills and resources from on-site work. People need to establish an office, acquire the needed technologies, establish healthy work routines, and new social skills. New technologies are being introduced that affect how and whether people are hired. They are used to screen potential employees and can do so through on-line interviews and assessments. In the pre-pandemic world, a great deal of work got done in afterwork events and other social gatherings. Workers who have difficulty with socializing remotely will be at a disadvantage. While schools may be able to accommodate students who are able to connect on screen, it is unlikely that many employers will do so.
9. One of the major reasons cited why employers do not hire or have challenges hiring workers with intellectual developmental disabilities – and why, on the flip side candidates with intellectual development disabilities struggle to find work – is that these workers lack skills and professional experience. In response, the IDD support system is developing a self-advocacy computer assisted training program. The program is developed and taught by self-advocates for other self-advocates. Thus, self-advocates

are empowering each other with needed and necessary skills. This program can be used by people irrespective of where they live and work. It is not bounded by education jurisdiction lines.

10. The public takes for granted that relief initiatives in this pandemic are available universally. For example, many individuals with disabilities in congregate settings in pre-vocational training funded by Medicaid discovered that they were not eligible for unemployment insurance upon being separated from their work. In addition, financial cliffs embedded in Social Security assistance acts as a disincentive for workers with disabilities to advance in their careers. Workers that accumulate more than \$2,000 in assets face the prospect of losing essential supports that they cannot cover with a marginal change in income. The Social Security cliff has remained unchanged for decades, but efforts to change the underlying formulas have been resisted by some advocates for workers with disabilities out of concern that it may result in a net loss of benefits. Also, the disability service organizations do not speak with one voice on other matters, such as with respect to community-based services.
11. Workers with disabilities are not defined solely by the barriers that they experience. The identity of every worker is an intersection of many identities and communities in addition to whatever their challenge or challenges: race, gender, age, career path and occupation, English proficiency, geography, etc. There is an opportunity in the aftermath of the pandemic to join with others who share many of these identities in common cause. Broadly, the workforce system must recognize the intersectionality of the policies and programs that they offer and eliminate the barriers placed in front of workers with disabilities. At the same time, deliberate actions need to be taken to assure a level playing field. Entrepreneurship and self-employment are career options that are available to workers with disabilities but also have their own challenges, such as access to capital and benefits. In addition, some jobs may need to be customized to fit the needs of workers with disabilities.
12. Change must occur at all levels. Service providers need to align in their business and operational models to reflect the realities of the economy, emerging technologies, and changing work structures. Federal and state programs need to be reformed to conform them to economic conditions. In addition, they must de-siloed and address the intersectional needs of the workforce, including workers with disabilities. The chronic health conditions stemming from COVID-19 will add a new population of workers with disabilities; disability is not an exceptional condition. At the same time, employers still require special incentives, such as those included in the Disability Employment Incentive Act introduced by Senator Bob Casey.