

“Reclaiming the Future” Conversation

Hosted by SourceAmerica and the Institute for Work & the Economy

June 25, 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 June 25, SourceAmerica and the Institute hosted “Reclaiming the Future,” a conversation among about a dozen leaders whose organizations serve and employ people with disabilities. The goal of this conversation was 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 acute phase of the pandemic and early stages of 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. Two presentations framed the conversation: Shane Kanady presented the report paper that SourceAmerica published: **How COVID-19 is Reshaping the Future of Work for Persons with Disabilities**; Debra Brucker, Rehabilitation Research and Training Center, University of New Hampshire, presented a statistical snapshot, *Employment of People with Disabilities* (attached).

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

1. The pandemic provides an important opportunity for advocacy on behalf of people with disabilities. This is a time to be talking about the attributes, assets, contributions of people with disabilities who are proving throughout the pandemic that they comprise one of the most resilient workforces. This is a time when commercial businesses may consider people with disabilities as being especially vulnerable to the novel coronavirus. Indeed, some residential facilities that serve people with disabilities may be at higher risk due to congregate living. But call-backs of workers who were temporarily furloughed because of the pandemic are seemingly omitting workers who have a disability. It seems that many employers mistakenly conflate many disabilities with higher risks of disease and are therefore unwilling to rehire people with disabilities. Center-based work may need to expand to include workers who are furloughed or laid off by commercial businesses, but hopefully only as an interim measure.
2. While this may be an opportunity, the pandemic also poses clear challenges. First, federal and state procurement programs appear to be a stabilizing factor during this period of uncertainty created by the pandemic. But what of the larger number of community rehabilitation programs (CRPs) that do not hold service or commodity

contracts through federal or state programs? Is there reason to be concerned about their viability? Also, there has already been debate about congregate settings for people with disabilities. Will the pandemic prompt this debate to become more pitched? If so, will this prompt legislation and funding that expedites the transition to regulatorily defined integrated settings?

3. The community of service providers and employers of people with disabilities need to advocate for their interests and the interests of their workers. They need to: 1) lead and convene; 2) design, support and implement support services that wrap around and that help people with different disabilities and abilities to match with training programs that maximize their skills and opportunities; 3) create a greater demand by businesses to employ people with disabilities by highlighting the resilience, effectiveness, and dedication of the workforce as well as their talents; 4) join with the workforce development system at-large and be included in the full range of publicly-funded training and support programs. The two sets of communities share common interests and can be formidable in advancing collective interests and initiatives.
4. At the same time, the pandemic triggered a recession that poses unique negative consequences for people with disabilities. For example, employment rates for people with disabilities typically drop more steeply during a recession and rise more slowly afterwards. In addition, people with disabilities are often left underserved by government initiatives intended to counteract the negative effects of recessions. For example, workers who are not required to file income tax forms had to take extra measures and then wait to receive government stimulus payments. The pandemic further exacerbated these challenges as businesses providing important support services to people with disabilities are being forced to close.
5. Many businesses deemed as essential services employ people with disabilities. Several have taken on new work in response to public health needs, such as manufacturing personal protective equipment. They have instituted mitigation measures when their workforces face increased exposure to infection while working in “front line” jobs, such as custodial and hospital housekeeping and food service. These factors combine to add further stresses on the disability network.
6. Structural weaknesses in Vocational Rehabilitation (VR) systems brought on by the cumulative effects of years of policy changes and regulatory changes, and increasing expectations without adequate funding, have been made more obvious by the stresses brought on by the pandemic. Efforts to extend VR services remotely are not widespread and success is spotty. Although VR services vary greatly across states, many in the conversation believe that COVID-19 has put the VR system on a precipice. Changes in the mix of federal and state contracts are causing several contractors to adapt to new business opportunities and markets.
7. Organizations with federal and state contracts have – for the most part - managed to navigate the upheavals created by the pandemic. Unfortunately, community-based

organizations providing services to people with disabilities have struggled to stay open during economically challenging times. The impact of the pandemic on community-based support systems for people with disabilities is unstudied and unknown. These services are the foundation of the people with disabilities employment system and without them they face a potential collapse of operations. High-contact services bring added risk and extra costs associated with mitigation efforts to prevent the spread of the virus. For example, public transportation services in many places have been curtailed. This puts a heavy burden on people with disabilities. Door-to-door services also have been sharply curtailed or shut down. In addition, public transportation, where it does operate, presents particular hazards. Other services have been determined by state authorities to be unessential, yet without them, many people with disabilities are denied critical support. The absence of any data on the condition and viability of these services puts the entire disability services system at risk.

8. Disruptions in the delivery of services brought on by the pandemic have put organizations operating with tight margins in jeopardy. For example, this has prevented them from billing state systems, leading to cascading adverse effects on cash flow as well as in the services they provide to their workers and clients.
9. The group visited the matter of 14(c) certificates, which enable employers to pay wages below the general minimum wage. Many organizations elect to not take advantage of these certificates. Some participants noted that state and local minimum wage laws that exceed federal minimum wages draw a sharper contrast between conflicting social and legislative expectations.
10. Some participants pointed to the expansion and normalization of remote work as providing new employment opportunities for people with disabilities. A few participants reported on making investments in technology and have made Internet-based resources available to their clients and workers. Prior to the pandemic, many employers were reticent to allow employees to work remotely. The pandemic makes this less of a special accommodation. Nonetheless, there are accessibility and technology constraints. Broadband is not ubiquitous. People with disabilities often do not have easy access to necessary technologies that they need to make full use of the Internet. Businesses that have expanded to remote work are still learning how to do it well – including how to support proper knowledge and use of technologies. People with disabilities who have been able to phase into these new models of work have done so through dedication and resilience and proper support. Some may be at an advantage as businesses permit more remote work
11. Month-to-month employment tracking of people with disabilities tells only part of the effect of the pandemic on these workers. Studies of prior recessions show that the negative effects with respect to people with disabilities may lag a recession and general recovery by several years. In addition, traditional measures of employment may not tell the entire story. The job trajectories of people with disabilities may be affected

negatively as employers move to put others ahead in the queue for jobs or advancement. The right questions need to be studied and more rigorous data collection is required.