



ADALIVE!

EPISODE 61: EMPLOYMENT FIRST AND THE ADA: WORKING TOGETHER

Event Date: October 3, 2018

Presenters: Jenny Stonemeier, Executive Director - APSE National

Host: Barry Whaley – Project Director, Southeast ADA Center

VOICE-OVER ANNOUNCER: Blog Talk Radio. (Music) Welcome to WADA ADA Live! Talk radio. Brought to you by the Southeast ADA Center, your leader for information, training and guidance on the Americans with Disabilities Act. And here's your host.

BARRY WHALEY: Hi, everybody, and good afternoon. Welcome to WADA ADA Live! and on behalf of the Southeast ADA Center, the Burton Blatt Institute at Syracuse University and the ADA National network, I want to welcome you to episode 61 of ADA Live! I am Barry Whaley and the project director at the Southeast ADA Center and I'm your host. On today's episode of ADA Live, we celebrate National disability employment awareness month, N D E A M. October is our opportunity to recognize the contributions people with disabilities make in the workforce and spread the word to employers that they should always consider people with disabilities when hiring employees. Before we begin, and as a reminder, you can submit your questions about people with disabilities in the workforce at any time at ADALive.org. It is my pleasure now to introduce today's guest, Jenny Stonemeier, the Executive Director of the Association of People Supporting Employment First, APSE.

APSE is the only national organization to focus exclusively on the inclusive employment and career advancement opportunities for people with disabilities.

And it is an organization that I have been a member of for nearly 30 years now. So Jenny, hello! Welcome to the show and happy disability employment awareness month!

JENNY STONEMEIER: Hi, Barry! Thank you. Happy disability employment awareness month to you.

BARRY WHALEY: Very welcome! Before we get into talking about Employment First, can you tell us a little bit about APSE and the role of chapters and some of the benefits of membership?

JENNY STONEMEIER: Of course. As you mentioned, APSE is the only national organization that is focused exclusively on inclusive employment and career advancement for people with disabilities. And we do that because we are a membership association. Individuals choose to be members of APSE, which means that anyone in the country can join. However, like most people, we are longing for a sense of community, and individuals are trying to find people with whom they share values and priorities and with whom they can find a connection. And that is really the purpose of APSE. It is an organization of like-minded folks who are working within this disability space; really focused on competitive, integrated employment opportunity for individuals with disabilities. And when we say individuals with disabilities, we mean individuals with all disabilities, all individuals with all disabilities. We are not a disability specific organization. We are truly a big tent and an inclusive community.

So we're hoping that people find personal and professional connections and our APSE chapter structure is the way folks are often able to make these connections. We at APSE national are the national organization and our chapters are groups of individuals who are living in, or working in a state, who come together to organize themselves as an organization essentially. But it's a chapter structure.

So when they organize at the state level, they have the ability to host events, provide training, to network, both personally and professionally, and most importantly to mobilize for advocacy purposes around local issues that very often the national organization; we just don't have the ability to be responsive to.

So becoming an APSE member means you can connect to colleagues and peers in your state, while also receive benefits of the national organization. And our members are not just individuals, they are businesses, they are organizations that are providing services, employment services and other services for people with disabilities. They are corporate partners; they are businesses that are interested in employing people with disabilities.

So we are really a diverse group of people, but we are brought together around a shared set of values focusing on competitive, integrated employment for people with disabilities.

BARRY WHALEY: Thank you, Jenny. Like I said I have been a member of APSE for 30 years and when you attend events or are part of this organization, you do feel a real community, a real connection with people, and really even beyond that, lifelong friendships that I have made with folks as well. So APSE, as I said in our introduction, the Association for People Supporting Employment First and that is kind of a curious term, Employment First, can you tell us what that is?

JENNY STONEMEIER: Employment First is a movement. It is not a policy. It is not a plan. It is not even really an initiative. It is a movement of individuals across the country who are focused on providing meaningful employment, fair wages, and career advancement for people with disabilities. We are really a value based organization and Employment First is the encapsulation of those values that anyone working deserves to be paid a real wage. And to have a real job. And to work alongside their nondisabled peers. And when it really comes down to what does Employment First mean, it is an effort, and it is an outcome that any individual who is receiving assistance through public dollars, whether they are Medicaid dollars or vocational dollars, or any other sort of public support, that the first and primary goal for that individual is that they are working in competitive, integrated employment, that they are a part of their community in a meaningful way that allows them to live a self-directed life.

So Employment First is a value proposition. It is also an advocacy movement. And it's also the compass by which they do their work.

BARRY WHALEY: That is an excellent answer. Thank you. And when we think about the roles that we all have in life, you know, certainly two of the most powerful ones are that of being an employee and being a coworker. So that helps define who we are to other people.

So Employment First; when we are thinking about each of the individual states, Jenny, how does Employment First come about? Is it by legislation or executive order? And how many states have Employment First?

JENNY STONEMEIER: The answer to your first question is yes. Employment First comes about in states through a variety of policymaking opportunities. And sometimes there is legislation. Sometimes there is a directive or an executive order that would typically come from a governor or the highest ranking leader of a state department of human services, if that structure exist in the state. So the number changes very often. And we know that there has been changes happening recently, in Kentucky for example, only a few month ago there was a new executive order. Georgia has recently had a new executive order signed. In four states, APSE host a site that has a lot of resources and information including what we call the Employment First map that shows that states and what kind of legislation or executive order, if any, they may have is in their state.

So four states have a legislation directive or an executive order. 13 states actually have legislation that support Employment First. And 16 states have a directive or an executive order. 17 states have what the researchers call "Other Employment First activity." Which is maybe an initiative, maybe a proclamation, something that is less politically juicy, if I can use that. It doesn't have a lot of teeth in terms of enforcement, but it is a statement of values and support. So certainly still if we talk about incremental change, it is definitely a positive step toward incremental change. And there is only one state in the country that doesn't have any activity related to Employment First.

So it is very broad across the country. And I think the diversity of legislation or policy, or the diversity of policy making procedure is really indicative of how states manage their own political cultures and their own way of doing things. But the good news is that

across the vast majority of the country, there is some sort of governmental declaration of support for the values of Employment First.

BARRY WHALEY: Wow, that's great! Thanks, Jenny. Since we are celebrating National Disability Employment Awareness Month, let's talk a little bit about employment policy and what is going on nationally. You know, Jenny, each month the Office of Disability Employment Policy, ODEP published statistics in every month and I take a look at those statistics kind of as a barometer of how we are doing. We know that in August, the last reporting months, that the numbers show that the unemployment rate for people with disabilities is right around 80%, which at this point is now double the rate for people who do not identify as having a disability. I am wondering; how can Employment First help close that gap?

JENNY STONEMEIER: Yeah, that is a great question. So we already talked about this idea that Employment First is based on the outcome that people with disabilities are working, and not only are they working, but they are working in competitive, integrated implement settings. Which means that they are able to live self-directed lives. We know that when people with disabilities do not have access to, or they aren't supported in integrated services, they are more likely to need other public funded services and supports.

So the short answer is that Employment First initiatives help employ people and that reduces the unemployment rate. Employment First initiatives also help really spread the message that individuals with disabilities are primarily individual. They are individuals first. They are people first. And just like everyone else in the country, they want to work and they want to work in meaningful jobs.

So there is not only the policy and how do we use our public funds, we want to make sure that people with disabilities are given opportunities and supported to find meaningful employment. But there is also the messaging component that Employment First initiatives can get involved with and helping to dispel the myths with employers about the myths that exist around employing people with disabilities. That, Oh, it is

expensive or oh, it is hard or... I don't know. We know that these myths exist and we certainly know that these myths exist within employment and around ADA issues as well.

So Employment First can serve both as we policy push to decrease unemployment rate for people with disabilities and it also serves as the messaging campaign to start conversations in communities about what we want for our community; do we want all people to be able to live independently and contribute to society in the ways that we all do? Do we want them to live self-directed lives? So there are so many other sections and factors that Employment First can contribute to, that I really feel like those are the two primary contributions that Employment First can make to reducing the unemployment rate for folks with disabilities.

BARRY WHALEY: Right. Thanks, Jenny. You mentioned the ADA a minute ago and obviously, we are with the Southeast ADA Center at Burton Blatt Institute.

So I am curious, what is the intersection? What role does ADA, title I play in supporting Employment First?

JENNY STONEMEIER: I say that the ADA is the foundation upon which Employment First stands. Without the ADA, individuals with disabilities would be at risk of segregation, isolation, and institutionalization. Moreover, the ADA serves as the roadmap for employers and businesses and governments to be more inclusive both physically in terms of building a transit system, but also in terms of building a workplace culture that recognizes strengths and assets of individuals as well, creating flexibility within they workplace that allows employers to capitalize on the skills of their workers.

So the ADA is really the base of everything that we are doing. Without the ADA, this would be a much different conversation and I believe that without the ADA, we would be looking at very, very different statistical situations as it relates to employment for people with disabilities. So I think the ADA is pretty much everything.

BARRY WHALEY: Right. And as you mentioned, not only title I, but also those title II issues as well in regard to state and local governments and transportation. ADA Live! listening audience, if you have questions about employing people with disabilities or any

of our other ADA live topics, you can submit your question any time to our online forum at ADAlive.org and I want to pause for a minute forward about word about National Disability Employment Awareness Month.

ANNOUNCER: Observed each October, National disability employment awareness month, NDEAM, celebrates the contributions of individuals with disabilities in the workforce throughout American History and promotes the value of a workforce inclusive of diverse skills and talents. The theme for NDEAM 2018 is, "America's workforce and all." For more information, resources, and ideas, visit their website at dol.gov/ndeam.

Also, the third Wednesday of October is Disability Mentoring Day, DMD, which promotes career development for students and jobseekers with disabilities through hands on career exploration and ongoing mentoring. Learn more and get involved at [www.aapd.com/disability mentoring day](http://www.aapd.com/disability-mentoring-day), or just Google Disability Mentoring Day. In addition check out the videos and toolkit from the campaign for disability employment. "At work, it's what people CAN do that matters" visit the website: <https://www.whatcanyoudocampaign.org/>.

BARRY WHALEY: We are back and we are speaking with Jenny Stonemeier, the executive director at APSE. Jenny, in June the Bureau of Labor Statistics released a report on disability and labor force characteristics. I was wondering if you could talk about some of the highlights from the 2017 data for us.

JENNY STONEMEIER: These are always really interesting data sets and I think the thing that stood out to me the most or the numbers related to employment and those numbers tell us that 18.7% of people with disabilities were employed compared to 65.7% of non-disabled individuals. While only 9.2% of people with disabilities were unemployed compared to 4.2% of non disabled individuals. So when you look at the numbers individually, they're pretty staggering. That only 18% of people with disabilities are employed and then you compare that to the nondisabled population, individuals who do not identify as having a disability and their employment rate is 65.7% and that gulf between those two numbers is pretty staggering to me.

The unemployment rate; while still starkly in contrast to one another, they feel a little bit closer together. The unemployment rate for people with disabilities is 9.2% compared to a 4.2% unemployment rate for people who don't identify as having a disability. Its twice. It's 100% more and yet those numbers still feel relatively closer together and a little bit less staggering. And we will talk more about these numbers as the conversation goes on, but it is really important I think when we look at the data to understand that the statistics are extrapolated from only 60,000 households.

And while I have every confidence in sampling methods and statistical analysis of the reporting agency, it is still a very small sample size given the fact that there are 320 million-ish people in the United States. If we look at 60,000 households, it is a very small number. I always read these numbers with a very critical eye and I usually end up asking more questions about the numbers that I feel like I get answers for. But they are really important for us to pay attention to as a society.

And the fact that the Bureau of Labor Statistics is even reporting on this data is really important as well.

BARRY WHALEY: Right. I agree. And you know those numbers are reflected, going back to the monthly is statistics that we see from ODEP. Those numbers stay pretty constant. A couple of things, Jenny, 1; it seems to me, if we are discussing 320 some odd million people in the country, we are looking at an aging population and as you age, that prevalence or that likelihood of disability increases and I am sure that factors into the statistics as well. And you know one thing that caught my eye, as I read through the report, thinking about where people work and what they do, there seemed to be an awful lot of people who have disabilities who work in service occupations. I am wondering if you could talk a little bit about that?

JENNY STONEMEIER: It is a really interesting finding. Yeah, I agree, and for me, as I kind of hinted at, it is often the case when statistics and a large data sets are involved. I end up asking more questions than finding answers necessarily. But it is interesting that the percentages are relatively proportionate to each other. That is that 20% of individuals with disabilities are working in the service industry compared to 17% of

individuals who don't identify with a disability. That feels actually pretty comparable to one another. It is really difficult too because the data sets are just a snapshot. It is really difficult to dig any deeper into, you know, drawing out what does that mean for us in terms of the job? I do believe that it may represent a workforce sector that is recognized, the contributions of workers are recognized in the ways that other sectors have yet to do.

And I have this sort of alternative interpretation, which is that the data may indicate that employers in service sectors are more focused on finding good candidates, hiring them, and then training them versus other sectors that expect a certain level of education and training before the candidate gets hired. So the theory, and I stress that it is only a theory and it is only my theory as far as I know, but I feel like this theory is supported by the fact, by the finding and in the report that people with disabilities are much less likely to be employed compared to nondisabled individuals even when they have the same education level, which means an individual with a disability who has achieved a bachelor's degree is still going to have a harder time finding a job compared to an individual who do not have a disability who also has a bachelor's degree.

So when we look at those two data points together, it certainly asked the questions of why does one sector seemingly be more open to the opportunity of hiring individuals with disabilities compared to other sectors of the workforce?

BARRY WHALEY: That is interesting and very insightful. I am just kind of thinking through what you are saying there. You know there was a bit of good news in the report and that was that in fact, the on the plummet rate for people with disabilities had declined compared to the 2016 numbers. Why do you think that is?

JENNY STONEMEIER: I would love to believe that it is a true representation that it indicates that more people with disabilities have seen positive gains in employment. But the pragmatic side of me knows that data are not always effective at telling the complete story.

So yes, on the surface it is an indicator of change that is definitely positive, but I also think that we have to, again, consider it with other data points as well. And primarily the other data point that I keep looking at is the labor participation rate.

And that labor participation rate is the number of individuals who are actively participating in finding a job. Maybe they have a job or maybe they consider themselves unemployed and they are actively looking for a job. But the labor participation rate, if we consider employment data to be made up of three indicators: Those who are employed, those who are not employed, and those who are no longer looking for work, but are also not employed; those folks are not participating in the labor force and that is the number of individuals who are no longer participating in the labor force. That is the number that I find to be the most important. The labor participation rate for people with disabilities has been slowly, but steadily declining since 2009. Right now, in 2017, which is the data that is being reported in the Bureau of Labor Statistics report, fully 80% of individuals with disabilities are no longer seeking employment. And to me that indicates a systemic problem that goes beyond employment or unemployment statistics.

BARRY WHALEY: Yeah, you know the unemployment rate just only shows part of what is going on. And you are absolutely right. Labor force participation is of great concern. That 80% of people who identify as a disability are on the economic sidelines and have just given up, or are not looking for work. I am wondering; who are those folks that compose that 80%? Is there a way to characterize them?

JENNY STONEMEIER: I think that there are at the risk of making assumptions about data, which is tempting and easy to do, I think that it is a population of people who have either given up in looking for employment. They may have had a change in life circumstance where that has prevented them from looking for employment. The other factor; we talked about the aging population in a previous comment that you made. I think it is important to note that the labor participation rate is limited to the population between the age of 18 and 65.

So it would be tempting to say that the labor participation rate has gone down, meaning that individuals are just no longer looking for jobs because they are aging. But we know

that the data reflects that the 80% number, saying that 80% of individuals with disabilities are not participating in the labor force. That number is reflective of the population of what we would typically consider working age, between 18 and 65.

BARRY WHALEY: Right.

JENNY STONEMEIER: So again, I think that there are a lot of fairly factually based assumptions that we can make about these statistics and these data, but it is really an opportunity for researchers to dig in and get us some more concrete answers by doing follow up studies, which is the role that researchers play in this work. And so we may not know.

BARRY WHALEY: Right, right. Will thank you, Jenny. Jenny, we are about out of time. And so as I like to do, I want you to pull out your crystal ball that you keep under your desk, dust it off, and tell us a little bit about what the future for employment for people with disabilities will be.

JENNY STONEMEIER: I think the future of employment for people with disabilities is genuinely bright. And I am a fairly pragmatic person. In my answers in this conversation, it has been proven that I am not the sunshine and roses kind a person all the time. But I really truly believe that employment for people with disabilities is a growing sector within our general workforce in this country.

And the reason that I believe that is because of the ongoing interest and conversation and media coverage about the value that workers with disabilities bring to any workplace. Value, all the way from bottom line efficiency and reliability and hardworking and they show up on time, they do their work, they go above and beyond. So their contributions to the workforce is recognized. As well as the contribution that having a diverse workplace culture brings to any workplace. And I feel like this conversations are happening more and more and they are happening in mainstream media more and more as opposed to off on the fringes.

It is no longer in disability scoop, which is our primary news outlet for disability related issues. It is not just any longer in disability scoop talking about employment for people

with disabilities. It is LinkedIn putting out resources for jobseekers for people with disabilities that are exclusively focused on that population of, folks. It is becoming more and more mainstream. And it is the fact that 49 states in our country have some sort of Employment First action, which is a political system, a governmental structure that recognizes the value that employees can bring to the workplace. Those are indicators that I base my opinion that employment for people with disabilities is going up and is being shined in the best light possible.

BARRY WHALEY: Well said, Jenny. Thank you so much. Listeners, our guest today has been Jenny Stonemeier, the executive director of the Association of People Supporting Employment First. That is APSE. You might want to check out their website, apse.org, consider membership. I want to thank you again for being with us today, Jenny. This episode it all previous ADA episodes are available on our website at ADAlive.org. The episodes are archived in a variety of formats including streamed audio from our website, accessible transcripts of audio, and are available to download as a podcast on the SoundCloud platform. I want to thank you, our ADA Live! listening audience for tuning into today. We are always thankful for your listening support and listening to our series of ADA live broadcast. If you have questions, you can submit those any time at ADAlive.org and most importantly if you have questions, concerns about the Americans with Disabilities Act, you can contact your regional Center at 1 800 949 4232 and remember, those calls are always free and they are confidential.

VOICE-OVER ANNOUNCER: Thank you for listening to ADA live! Talk radio. Broad to you by the Southeast ADA Center. Remember to join us the first Wednesday of each month for another ADA topic and call 1 800 949 4232 for answers to your ADA questions.

CAPTIONING PROVIDED BY: ALTERNATIVE COMMUNICATION SERVICES, LLC

* * * * *

Communication Access Real-time Translation (CART) is provided in order to facilitate communication accessibility. CART captioning and this real-time file may not be a totally verbatim record of the proceedings.

* * * * *