

Celebrate National Disability Awareness Month By Taking Your Legislator To Work | CPD Blog

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October is National Disability Employment Awareness Month, this year with a focus on "The Right Talent, Right Now." This event couldn't come at a better time because, while people without disabilities are enjoying relatively low unemployment, workers with disabilities still experience unemployment at higher rates than almost all other groups, regardless of their education, age, or skill level.

While a full 65% of people without disabilities are gainfully employed, less than 20% of people with disabilities have jobs in the community. According to the Department of Labor, the National Disability Employment Awareness Month "celebrates America's workers with disabilities both past and present, and emphasizes the importance of inclusive policies and practices to ensure that all Americans who want to work can work." It also emphasizes that all potential employees have access to services and supports.

Through its employment efforts, the Utah Developmental Disabilities Council is working to further these goals and raise awareness about the importance of employment.

One way the Council recognizes the yearly awareness campaign is through its ongoing advocacy training program called Take Your Legislator to Work. This is done by supporting a person with a disability who has a community-based job to invite their lawmakers to visit them at work. The employee hosts their legislator—whether at the state, local, or federal level—while they're on the clock. They show the lawmaker the work and activities they accomplish throughout their workday. The advocate teaches the legislator about the importance of work, and their employer often will spend time with the legislator to talk about the employee's contributions.

Through seeing employment for people with disabilities in person, the legislator is often given a personal insight to the importance of gainful employment for all Utahns. Last year, two state representatives and a state senator participated, and information about this campaign was distributed to four members of Utah's federal delegation. This year is ramping up to be an even more successful campaign.

The program's activities create a handful of interlaced outcomes. The self-advocate learns that speaking with lawmakers is not so hard, because lawmakers are people too. They also learn about political engagement and how to be a good advocate for disability policy and for others who want to work. The lawmaker comes away from the experience with a better understanding of the issues surrounding disability employment, and is more comfortable talking about it. They often report their own personal experiences with people with disabilities, including family members or coworkers.

This year's program continues through March 2021. Are you interested in participating? Email the Council at uddc@utah.gov for more information!