

Tricia Jones-Parkin On APSE, Employment First In Utah | CPD Blog

JoLynne Lyon

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This spring, Tricia Jones-Parkin of the Center for Persons with Disabilities was elected to the Association of People Supporting Employment First board, representing the Rocky Mountain Southwest Region.

She sat down with the CPD for an interview about the organization, its mission, and why competitive employment for people with disabilities matters.

What influence does APSE have in the field of employment for people with disabilities?

TJP: APSE has been and continues to be a national non-profit organization that has a primary focus on competitive integrated employment, that includes people with more significant disabilities. ... There are over 3000 members nationwide with state chapters in 37 states. APSE leaders and members are made up of employment provider professionals, family members, advocates, educators. The focus is on improving employment outcomes in their own states as well as regionally and nationally.

In the early 2000's National APSE made changes to chapter by-laws and developed a strong position regarding the phase-out of subminimum wage and segregated employment. Utah had an APSE chapter until this time and, unfortunately with those changes and expectations from National APSE, the Utah Chapter closed. Recently the chapter was restarted by a group of committed employment specialists within provider organizations, wanting to build their supported employment services. The Center for Persons with Disabilities is a strong partner and Utah APSE Chapter supporter.

I am hoping as I get more involved at the national level, that I can support our chapter to continue to grow in membership and presence in our state and connect with the good work happening at the regional and local levels.

So it does sound like Utah maybe has a philosophical difference with subminimum wage. Can you talk to me about that, why you think that is, and what should change?

TJP: The subminimum wage and sheltered work is a difficult issue. Many of these "legacy" services were started by parents who didn't have their son or daughter go to an institution or care facility. Now, we know that many people can and want to belong in more meaningful ways through individualized employment and other types of roles in their communities. In my experience change can be hard, especially for those who do not want or fear change. It is difficult because while we want to honor people's preferences and choices and we absolutely should, some ways in providing services (as a whole) must evolve. We have to find a way to help people receiving services and their families through it...one person at a time. The conversations that I find to be the most difficult are those that are filled with low expectations and the use of words like "never" "unemployable", "low functioning;" yet opportunities based on the person's real strengths and talents have never really been explored.

I think the other piece is, we don't always provide the right resources and supports in a way that makes sense to people. Adult services are structured in a nine-to-three day, just like it is a school. And so we've conditioned families, parents,

residential services to think of providing services in siloed time blocks. And so those group supports have continued to stay siloed. Where and how does individualized employment and other wrap around services get prioritized, when most services are based in fixed time frames with groups of people?

Let's talk about the advantages of Employment First and of people not working for a sub-minimum wage. What would that mean for them and their employer?

TPJ: The advantages of Employment First are only as strong as the entities that prioritize and support those efforts. What I mean by that is, we can say we are an Employment First state, but if values, practices, policies, and funding structures do not evolve and align, it doesn't really mean anything. Employment First legislation is meant to provide a framework for states to prioritize competitive integrated employment services. It doesn't mean, you work or else! It means, we believe in really helping people live their best lives and having a job like everyone else can certainly be an equalizer in so many ways, right?! People who work have more expendable income and financial freedom; people who work often have larger social networks. There are lots and lots of benefits, but it doesn't mean that if you are a person who has a disability and you do not want to work or have acute reasons preventing the pursuit of work for a period that your needs or your contributions are of any less value, and certainly that it could negatively impact the priority of getting services. You may have to demonstrate your "why" if work is not something you are focusing on, but the philosophy of Employment First has often been misrepresented or misunderstood.

In terms of people not working sub-minimum wage, I can say in my experience—and the experience of people that I have supported who have transitioned out of sheltered work—that there has been a tremendous amount of growth, that nobody really expected. And I would say it's almost always been for the better. There were a couple times that maybe the first job wasn't a good fit, or something maybe didn't go right. But even then, it was a learning experience, and, in those instances, the people wanted to find another job. ... I can honestly say that when somebody has worked in the community, that's something that they always want to go back to doing or that they prefer doing. There have been times people missed seeing friends from the sheltered workshop, so we had to coordinate ways to keep those connections happening, just like we all do with important relationships.

It wasn't that long ago that I worked with a man who got his first job in the year that he turned 50. We supported to provider organization to learn and complete the discovery process with him, and he's into trivia and classic rock. The provider helped him get a job at a local pub helping in the back and during the lunch hour with trivia and talking with patrons. Of course during the pandemic, he was furloughed, but the provider reached out to me and let me know he was going back and was so excited. I share that story because it would be easy to say, "Well, he is 50, do we have to think about employment?" It is something he wanted, and it has been a wonderful experience for him and the business!

I noticed that in past interviews, you mentioned systematic barriers that keep people unemployed. What are they?

TJP: In my experience of working in both the adult and transition age systems, is that we (agencies/systems) need to do a better job of transforming our services together.

So when I say systemic barriers, what I mean is at all levels, federal, state and local, we have to continue to identify the places where people with significant support needs are not getting included in opportunities. Here is an example. In Utah's school to work project we have spent a lot of time learning about transition services and post high services. The focus is to prepare students for adult life, employment, increased independence, self-advocacy, all those things. There are wonderful educators and some incredible pockets of excellence. But there are also challenges. Access to work-based learning and the expectation of exploring employment does not happen early and often enough—and for some students with significant support needs, not at all. With our project, our goal is to help students exit school with employment, through a customized approach. We have brought together multiple agencies and been very successful connecting students and families to services. In our work, we did find that as adult services get introduced and conversations of employment are happening at age 20 or 21 or 22 and it is the first time anyone has heard it, is difficult.

So, as the HCBS settings rule is guiding the transformation of the adult service system for people with intellectual disabilities, there really needs to be a lot of work happening in the education system with the opportunities that exist in WIOA and other legislation as well, because we all need to be working together to really support people and their families through this incredible opportunity for change.

This interview was edited for clarity and length on June 10, 2021. Find out more about the [Association for Putting Employment First](#). Find out more about [Tricia and the Center for Employment and Inclusion](#) and the training it offers.