



E02: Advancing Competitive Integrated Employment- With Taryn Williams, Assistant Secretary for Disability Employment Policy for the U.S. Department of Labor

Voice Over:

Welcome to Let's Get to Work Reimagining Disability Inclusive Employment Policy, brought to you by the Burton Blatt Institute at Syracuse University. And now, here's your host, Michael Morris.

Michael Morris:

Welcome listeners. Today is another episode of our Let's Get to Work Reimagining Disability Inclusive Employment Policy. I am so pleased to be able to introduce our guest Taryn McKenzie Williams is the Assistant Secretary of Labor for Disability Employment Policy. That's a very important position and we're really, really appreciative of her time today. I'll be asking questions, which will provide insights, new understandings, help all of us better understand where we are in promoting inclusive employment policy that can improve economic stability of youth and adults with disabilities. Taryn, it's a pleasure to have you here today. Maybe to start out, share with us a little bit about what is the Office of Disability Employment Policy?

Taryn Williams:

Absolutely and thank you for having me on your podcast today, Michael, and congratulations on the new center at the Burton Blatt Institute. We at the Office of Disability Employment Policy, or ODEP for short, look forward to working with long time friends like Gary Shaheen. In answering your question, it's important to note that I'm a woman with a disability and I believe that my perspectives and the

perspectives of all people with disabilities add value. They add value to society and they add value to the workplace. At the Office of Disability Employment Policy, it is our mission to advance economic opportunities and employment for people with disabilities. We do that by working with all levels of government and designing and implementing policies and practices meant to increase inclusive workplaces and increase opportunities for people with disabilities.

Michael Morris:

When I use the term disability inclusive employment policy, what does that mean to you and why is it important to employers and people with disabilities and the economy as a whole?

Taryn Williams:

That's a great question. Whether within the private or public sector, or in any organization, disability inclusion adds value. Given our lived experience, people with disabilities often bring new and different perspectives to an organization. My own experience growing up with a digestive disease when I was a child, acquiring arthritis in adulthood and needing accommodations to thrive in my career, is part of what motivated me to embrace disability employment as a focus of my public service. To people with disabilities, disability inclusive employment policy ensures full access to employment. We know that with full access, comes economic empowerment and independence.

Taryn Williams:

For employers, people with disabilities present an enormous business opportunity to utilize untapped talent. Disability inclusive employment policies help open the door for talented people with disabilities to be able to access the more than eight million job vacancies that businesses are urgently working to fill. For our economy, disability inclusive employment policies have the potential to increase the labor force participation rate and to support a global economic recovery. It's my belief and the belief of my colleagues at ODEP and throughout our administration, that it's through disability inclusive employment policies, that we can really turn barriers into accelerators.

Michael Morris:

Oh, a wonderful, wonderful perspective. You have this unique job, unique role at the Department of Labor. You have the opportunity to invest in funding of activities that can reshape the participation of people with disabilities in the labor force, and that can advance their economic wellbeing. Can you share with our listeners your goals to change opportunities for economic empowerment for individuals with disabilities, who historically have been particularly devalued and marginalized?

Taryn Williams:

Absolutely. At the US Department of Labor, our vision is a more inclusive workforce. One where every person who wants to work, can work and has access to the services and supports that they might need to do so. Achieving this requires change, because there is a gap in labor force participation between people with and without disabilities. We know that this disparity is even larger for people with disabilities from historically marginalized communities. To create that change for today's workforce and in the context of today's world, my four priorities under this administration include ensuring an inclusive recovery from the pandemic, advancing equity, promoting competitive integrated employment and helping youth and young adults with disabilities transition to employment.

Taryn Williams:

I'll talk a little bit about each of these priorities. The first priority ensuring a disability inclusive recovery, has a number of dimensions. It includes assisting workers with disabilities to find employment, so they benefit from new job creation, including those who lost jobs as a result of the pandemic. An example of that work is that we're working closely with the environmental protection agency and the Departments of Energy, Commerce, Transportation, and Agriculture, to help ensure that people with disabilities have access to the approximately three million new jobs expected in clean energy and numerous job opportunities that will emerge from our historic infrastructure bill. It also means when we're working on creating an inclusive recovery, that we're promoting best practices for workplace mental health. That's another critical dimension of this work. Something we know is of concern to so many American workers and their families, given the stressors and losses of the past two years.

Taryn Williams:

Our second priority is to promote racial and social equity in disability employment. Recovery that is truly inclusive, must address historic inequities, including those that long predate the pandemic. As you may know, Michael, one of President Biden's first executive orders was entitled Advancing Racial Equity and Support for Underserved Communities Through the Federal Government. It charges all agencies, including the US Department of Labor, with increasing racial and social equity in our policies, our programs, and our actions. We are committed to recognizing and remedying the structural and systemic inequities, the bias and what has amounted to unvarnished racism that prevents people with disabilities of color from reaching their fullest potential in the workplace.

Taryn Williams:

Promoting equity is also essential to another executive order. EO14035, entitled Diversity, Equity, Inclusion, and Accessibility in the Workforce. I know that our listeners can't see me, but I am smiling as I say the title of that name, because I get so excited that we're talking about diversity, equity and inclusion, and we're including accessibility in that effort. That EO was issued in June and it focuses on making the federal government a model employer of people with disabilities. We are working closely with OPM, the Office of Personnel Management, Equal Employment Opportunity Commission and other federal agencies to fully implement this executive order.

Taryn Williams:

I'll talk just a little bit more about our third and fourth priorities. Our third priority is advancing competitive integrated employment. President Biden has made it clear what his goals are here. And in fact, on the 31st anniversary of the ADA last July, something that we're coming up on the next anniversary soon, he announced investments to expand access to competitive integrated employment opportunities for workers with disabilities. For anyone unfamiliar, competitive integrated employment, or CIE as we sometimes call it, is work performed on a full or part-time basis with competitive wages, comparable to those without disabilities in an integrated setting. CIE provides real opportunities to interact fully in the community. It allows for meaningful career advancement.

Taryn Williams:

At ODEP, we have a number of initiatives focused on improving CIE, including our National Expansion of Employment Opportunities Network, or NEEON, where we partnered with national provider organizations to develop and release a national strategic plan to increase competitive integrated employment. We have another initiative Aspire, which is supporting seven states in aligning policy, programming and funding infrastructures to scale up evidence based supported employment services for workers with mental health conditions. I would finally note in this priority that we are leading a work group of an active and enthusiastic collection of colleagues across the federal government. They're working on resources, policy guidance, and data to help states, service providers, families, and individuals with significant disabilities successfully work and live in the community.

Taryn Williams:

Then finally helping youth and young adults with disabilities prepare for and succeed in employment is our fourth priority. This has always been a focus of ours. I got my start at ODEP working for the team focused on youth policy, and it's especially critical now, as we navigate the post pandemic era. During the pandemic, we know that youth and young adults with chronic health conditions and disabilities were more likely to report that their work situation changed from being employed prior to the pandemic lockdown, to being unemployed or not in the labor force. In order to support equitable transition from education to employment for all youth and young adults with disabilities, and to really close the gaps that exist in our labor force, we have to support the holistic needs of youth.

Taryn Williams:

Entering and building a meaningful career requires not only access to high quality education and training, but also access to work-based learning, to support from caring families and friends, to leadership and mentoring opportunities and basic necessities like housing, transportation, and healthcare. That's just some of the work that ODEP is doing across our four priorities. There's much more that I could talk about, but not available in this as limited time. But, we're certainly busy and committed to building an inclusive recovery.

Michael Morris:

Taryn, just such a comprehensive agenda covering so many issues. Really pleased that you talked about how you're working across the federal government, not just with others that are in the space related to disability, but you also talked about working with commerce and transportation and other agencies where the jobs of the future are going to be, and certainly could be jobs for people with disabilities. In some ways public policy, which is the focus of this new center, funded to researchers at Syracuse and Harvard and Rutgers Universities, is that some public policies are holding people back with disabilities. There's probably not just one. There are multiple ones. But, I know from your own personal experience and your interactions with other federal agencies, what might you highlight? What do you think is the one or two, maybe that gosh, if we could just change that this, this world of employment and economic advancement would really open up?

Taryn Williams:

Sure. That is a great question. Then I'll say you've asked me to identify one or two, and I'm going to be fair to say that I'll likely identify a few others, because really when we're talking about disability employment policy, we're talking about all aspects of an individual's life that must be addressed in order to ensure that they thrive. Foremost, ODEP is going to support policies that expand access to opportunities for people with disabilities. We look at our research, we look at the research of others as we're examining, what are the policies that can really meet the holistic needs of people with disabilities and increase access to a range of services? That can include affordable and stable transportation. It includes access to livable wages. It includes paid family and medical leave. It includes accessible and affordable childcare.

Taryn Williams:

There are so many other policies. You asked me to identify one or two, but certainly we could spend more than the time that we have here talking about what's truly needed in order to advance competitive integrated employment. But, there was something else in your question that I want to address, which is we can talk about the policies that we're seeking to advance, but also we want to acknowledge what

are some of the barriers that exist. One of those, I'd just like to highlight, there are increased efforts right now in Congress to eliminate section 14C of the Fair Labor Standards Act. 14C perpetuates separate and unequal treatment of people with disabilities, by allowing people with significant disabilities to be paid at less than the minimum wage, which means it is a policy that limits the employment and economic advancement of people with disabilities.

Taryn Williams:

Through our work on expanding competitive integrated employment and advocating for some of those policies that I just identified, including customized employment, employment first and provider transformation policies. We know and we've been able to demonstrate and replicate that real work, integrated work at competitive wages, which truly recognizes the value of these employees, is possible. Our work is in advancing policies that are inclusive, and it's also in addressing the barriers that prevent the economic advancement of people with disabilities.

Michael Morris:

I think your answer is so wonderful, because no one could limit to one or two. You've really provided the broad spectrum that's wonderful to think about for our listeners. I'm going to switch us to this COVID environment that just doesn't go away. We're seeing more flexibility for employees to work from home, to telework. What's from your perspective in the work at ODEP, how can employer policies support this change for more telework that might be beneficial to increase the percent of people with disabilities able to work?

Taryn Williams:

Sure. If you ask people how the COVID-19 pandemic changed the world of work, I'm sure that many would cite the widespread move towards remote work. As a result of the pandemic, the ability to telework, which has long been advocated by, but largely denied to many people with disabilities, has become mainstream, along with additional expanded work for flexibility in terms of when and how work is performed. There is no doubt that this shift to a virtual workspace has altered the way of work in ways that will likely be permanent. Many employers have realized the significant benefits of allowing employees

to work from home and have come to value telework for its ability to expand and diversify their labor pool and increase their ability to attract and retain talent.

Taryn Williams:

It's also clear that telework can be a reasonable accommodation for many different jobs. As a result, new opportunities have been opened for people with disabilities who may need or prefer telework. Those who acquire a disability due to an age, injury or illness, I would say although this major transformation in the future of work holds significant potential to increase the percent of people with disabilities able to work, the adoption of disability inclusive policies and practices by employers will really need to be realized to ensure this potential. Telework alone will not transform disability employment.

Taryn Williams:

As employers are even now reassessing their employment practices post pandemic, for instance, their recruitment, hiring, onboarding, compensation and evaluation processes, many will have the opportunity to increase the inclusion of people with disabilities within their organization. A good place to start is by ensuring that digital tools used to facilitate communication between employers and employees is accessible. Truly the best way to ensure people with disabilities can benefit host pandemic work flexibility, is to ensure that they are included in the design of accessible workplaces and in developing inclusive policies, technology, and infrastructure.

Michael Morris:

Great thinking and hope to our listeners in the future of this podcast in the business community, will take your words carefully and think about change to business, culture and receptiveness, to hiring and retaining and advancing workers with disabilities. Really, your point is also well taken that we talk about public policy, but public policy only takes us so far. It really is a partnership between the public and private sector, who need to work more closely together to change and encourage and support employment and career advancement for people with disabilities. Do you have some thoughts about how, in your work at Department of Labor, what's changing? Is apprenticeship a part of the solution? Are there other things as well?

Taryn Williams:

Absolutely. We are grateful for the research that has been conducted by various companies and organizations on the value proposition of recruiting, hiring, retaining, and advancing people with disabilities. Because of these efforts, there's now a solid business case for workplace diversity and inclusion. This case has not only been made domestically, but also globally by the valuable 500 in places like the World Economic Forum in Davos, Switzerland. The work of Accenture, the American Institutes for Research, Disability:IN, Harvard, Cornell among others, have been instrumental in educating leaders in the C-suite about the importance of disability inclusive workplaces. While there is much work to be done to also ensure small and medium size business owners understand this value proposition, we believe that business leaders are truly understanding the importance of workplace flexibility, not only for employees with disabilities, but for their entire workforce.

Taryn Williams:

There are so many opportunities for innovation and for growth. You point to apprenticeship as one example of that. For more than a decade, ODEP has worked closely with our sister agencies throughout the department of labor and truly across the country, to ensure that there are increasing numbers of pre-apprenticeship programs and apprenticeship programs that are inclusive of people with disabilities. It is a sure, tried and tested career pathway into employment. We do see it as a model for those jobs of the future and one that can ensure that people with disabilities are included in our workplaces of the future.

Michael Morris:

I'm going to come back for a second and you introduced yourself and told a little bit about your background. In talking with you. some young adults with disabilities, often what's told me is a lack of role models and you're an incredible role model. Growing up, did you ever imagine you would be what you are today? Able to influence policy, able to influence the dynamics of employers working with people with disabilities and how do we get more role models like you? And to help youth and young adults who are looking ahead and wanting to know anything is possible, because it is.

Taryn Williams:

I appreciate that question. I will say that I am who I am because of the role models that I've had at every point in my life. I point to, as I was growing up, my mother who has, as one of her most deeply held values, self-determination. I point to self-determination because as a young child, she would have me, as I went into the doctor's offices, she wanted me to know how that I would communicate with the doctors. She wanted me to know that ultimately it was my choice. The decisions that were being made about my health and about my education, and that really truly helped to equip me with the confidence and the assurance that I would be able to build a pathway for myself that would lead to success and that would allow me to thrive.

Taryn Williams:

In my employment, I can also point to a number of role models across numerous sectors early in my career. Certainly now, I point to peer mentors throughout the disability community, as being critical to who I am. I think this is something that we need more of, both in education and employment. Individuals with disabilities, both young adults and adults, need opportunities to connect with and better understand their history. Disability history is history. It's important that we are providing opportunities for individuals to build their self-determination skills, to build and test their leadership skills. In that, they become thriving employees and something that we all care very much about full participants in community life.

Michael Morris:

Thank you for those insights. I know none of us have a crystal ball, in terms of what happens next. We don't even know what next week will be like in this turbulent times that we live in. But, you have a unique status and vantage point to think about economic advancement, employment advancement for people with disabilities. When you think ahead over the next five years, are you optimistic? If you are, why? About how this picture is going to change, in terms of as we're seeing, even in this COVID era, an increase in the number of people with disabilities who are now working. People gaining in terms of status, employment status, income levels. What do you think the future looks like and are you optimistic about economic gains to be made by people with disabilities?

Taryn Williams:

I will say that what gives me a sense of optimism is that more employers understand and are tapping the talent pool comprised of people with disabilities. This can be seen, for example, through new hiring initiatives by employers focused on hiring individuals who are neuro-divergent. I am also optimistic because the pandemic has made us recognize that there's a universal need for a flexible and supportive workplace and for empathic leadership. These are things that have long been advocated for by people with disabilities. It's also forced us to understand the importance of accessible technology. Technology that is accessible for people with disabilities often results in better technology for everyone. Technology that is more versatile for all employees, regardless of ability or disability. I would perhaps just say as well, that I'm optimistic that the changes that we are experiencing will be transformative and lead to new workplace norms that can be advantageous to all workers, including workers with disabilities.

Michael Morris:

Wow. It's a great picture to think about ahead and Taryn, thank you today for your vision, your values, your perspective that I think has provided all of us much to think about. Look forward to the work ahead you're doing at ODEP, which is going to affect the disability community, the employer community, and our economy as a whole. Thank you so much for your time today.

Taryn Williams:

Thank you for having me.

Voice Over:

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