

Transcript

Audio file: [SEEDEpisode1Cut3.mp3](#)

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(Intro music plays)

00:00:11 – Jim Ogsbury

(Intro music plays in background)

Hello! And welcome to *Out West*, the official podcast of the Western Governors' Association, a bipartisan organization representing the governors of the 22 westernmost states and territories. I'm Jim Ogsbury, Executive Director of WGA.

This episode of *Out West* celebrates the 75th anniversary of National Disability Employment Awareness Month. Finding meaningful employment can be extremely challenging for people with disabilities despite the many skills and competencies they bring to the workforce, Western Governors are committed to addressing inequities faced by those with disabilities and to promoting prosperity and expanding opportunity for all.

Today, WGA Policy Associate Lauren Cloward speaks with Bobby Silverstein, Legislative Council to the State Exchange on Employment and Disability, or SEED, about the Work Matters policy framework, which represents a repository of best practices for improving disability employment.

Lauren also speaks with policymakers in Alaska and Washington about the innovative ways they are using the Work Matters framework to achieve workforce inclusivity in their states.

00:01:26 – Lauren Cloward

(Intro music ends)

Bobby, thanks so much for joining us today. Can you just start off by telling us a little bit about SEED?

00:01:32 – Bobby Silverstein

Sure, SEED is basically a collaborative of organizations representing state policymakers, including WGA, National Governors Association, National Conference of State Legislatures, Council of State Governments, Women in Government, and others.

And the purpose of the collaboration is to provide policy assistance to state policymakers in the executive branch and legislative branch on ways to expand and improve employment opportunities for people with disabilities.

00:02:14 – Lauren Cloward

Great, thanks so much for that background and for the Work Matters policy framework specifically, how did that come about and what is its importance?

00:02:23 – Bobby Silverstein

SEED is funded by the Office of Disability Employment Policy at the United States Department of Labor and the first project was basically getting state policymakers together to look at best promising and emerging practices and policies that have been developed across the country. Rather than reinvent the wheel, it was thought that if we can share policy options and put it together in a document, it would make a life a whole lot easier for state policymakers if they didn't have to start from scratch.

And so, the first product was a Work Matters report, which pulls together hundreds and hundreds of policy options that states have developed in areas ranging from the state as a model employer to embracing and enhancing opportunities in the private sector, stay at work and return to work policies, as well as disability owned businesses.

00:03:39 – Lauren Cloward

That sounds like there are a lot of really great resources and support that are available for states in this space so thanks so much for sharing that context.

Now we're joined by Kristin Vandygriff, Executive Director for the Alaska Governor's Council on Disabilities and Special Education; Elizabeth Gordon, Executive Director for the Washington Governor's Committee on Disability Issues and Employment; and Rob Hines, Director of the Washington State Division of Vocational Rehabilitation. And they'll help us dive deeper into this issue at the state level.

Why is it important to have a diverse workforce and what are the most significant barriers for people with disabilities in the workforce?

00:04:21 – Kristin Vandagriff

And this is Kristin, you know, in my experience, a diverse workforce really includes seeing the world from different perspectives, really allowing the tackling of problems from a different angle, bringing unique skills to the workforce. Ultimately, everyone deserves the ability to pursue the American dream and truly meaningful jobs are for everyone.

As I've been working in this field for many years, tackling employment barriers, I've seen a lot of issues around the benefits myth, feeling like people with disabilities can't pursue employment because they would lose access to their vital public benefits. Employer perception challenges, certainly access to training and supports to enable employment, but I think the single biggest barrier that I've seen is truly expectations, running across all lines within the community, and I think the story that I really tell to exemplify that, my brother has significant intellectual and developmental disabilities and growing up as we would go out into the community, especially as we were older,

people would ask us both our names, but they would only ask me, "And what do you do?" They only expected myself to have a job. They didn't have that expectation of him. And I think as we hold those expectations, those are infused in the policies that we have and therefore the barriers that are present.

00:05:35 – Rob Hines

I think maybe from a people with disabilities lens, I would say that people with disabilities represent a vast talent pipeline and, you know, it has historically been untapped.

And so, I think also if you look at that pipeline, you can see that within that pipeline lies innovation. A will to meet challenges. A proven track record of successfully overcoming barriers. To achieving great things. And so, you know, when you when you look at the barriers that are out there, you know, my colleagues here have represented those pretty well, but some I think of the most prevalent barriers in the workplace are attitudes about and fear of those who appear or seem different than we do in the workplace.

And from a business perspective, I think businesses sometimes approach disability from a defensive, kind of risk averse place. And especially when it comes to reasonable job accommodations, and let me just underscore reasonable. My experience has been that most accommodations are of the low-tech variety and are usually affordable and very effective, and so I just think that, I like to look at this talent pipeline and what's the potential there?

00:07:05 – Lauren Cloward

Great, thank you all for those thoughtful answers. Next, what drew you to this line of work and what continues to motivate you to work on these issues every day?

00:07:16 – Kristin Vandagriff

This is Kristen, and to both of those questions they have the same exact answer. My brother was diagnosed at birth with very significant intellectual and developmental disabilities, a very poor prognosis from doctors, that at the time in 1994, they recommended that my parents institutionalize him and forget that they ever had him. I'm very blessed that I had parents that

really believed and had faith that he could have an awesome life. But that also said, we know we need to get him the services and support he needs early on have everything he needs to be successful.

And so, that has been something that has driven my life. It propelled me to start working as a direct service professional and then later work for our state DDI agency and the Intellectual and Developmental Disabilities Unit, and then from there moved to our Alaska Developmental Disability Council, and I think really being able to see, you know, motivating me is really seeing people with disabilities actually getting to have those higher expectations, getting to direct their own lives and services. It sounds so simple because we all do it every day for ourselves, but for those in the disability community, it is not that same path that they often get.

The ability to direct one's life is so innate and yet something that has been so far afoot for many in our disability community. So, I'm so blessed I think right now to work at a time where, at least in Alaska, we have this developmental disability shared vision that has elevated employment, but especially the talk of meaningful lives and person directed lives. That keeps me going even during all of these challenges amidst the pandemic, and being able to see people with disabilities say, "I am changing my own life and I'm directing that." It's really, really powerful.

00:08:55 – Lauren Cloward

Thank you, Kristin. Elizabeth?

00:08:57 – Elizabeth Gordon

Our work as our identity in the United States. And so, for a person not to have work and not to be engaging in the workforce is a really big way in which people are segregated out, and so being able to work with people to creatively look at their capabilities and figure out how they could get to their dreams really is inspiring to me.

I can think of one individual in particular that I had worked with for many years. He had worked in several jobs and just hadn't really found his niche and ultimately an opportunity came up where he could apply for jobs in state government. So ultimately, he did get a job. It was with DVR in Snohomish County and his role was to support the various counselors in the office and make sure that they had all that they needed to get their files in order and to make sure that things were being organized. And last thing I'd heard,

he was set up that he may retire from that position. And he loved his work, they loved having him, and it was just really an amazing success story.

And the irony is that going back to the very beginning when I first met with him at his home, his parents were really concerned about him working because they didn't think that he should

cross the street. And so, our initial thing was that we were trying to figure out how we could get him to a job where he wouldn't have to cross the street when he got off the bus. Ultimately, you know he ended up working in a job where he was crossing the whole county and going to various places. But you know, in the beginning people were very nervous and it was a great success.

00:10:48 – Lauren Cloward

Great, thank you for that story. Rob?

00:10:51 – Rob Hines

So, one of the things that initially drew me to this work is the opportunity to work with professionals like Elizabeth and Kristin.

And as far as like the motivation piece to keep going and keep pushing, you know, I know, and I think we all know, that people with disabilities are more than twice as likely to be unemployed or underemployed as those without disabilities. And even with all the changes that have occurred since the Rehab Act of 1973 and the ADA, 1990, the needle has stayed fixed at a place that I think is still unacceptable.

00:11:31 – Lauren Cloward

Why did your governors decide to prioritize improving disability employment and the Work Matters framework within your states?

00:11:39 – Kristin Vandagriff

This is Kristin, and in Alaska, employment opportunities for all is really generally held up as critical for healthy communities and healthy economies. Alaska, everyone in our administration really valuing employment for individuals with disabilities. Recently, our Governor actually just issued a proclamation to that effect.

00:11:58 – Rob Hines

And I do think that Governor Inslee recognizes, you know, what that that vast pool of untapped talent is and does put his, you know,

put his efforts into recognizing the achievements of people with disabilities and promoting employment for people with disabilities too. To see him actually show up to these award ceremonies and shake the hands of these businesses and to make a connection with the people that we are finding opportunities for is both inspiring and it's also critical that we actually, you know, put action to our words. So, I do think that his priorities shine through in in real ways that people can see and understand. So, to me that's been a very great thing to witness.

00:12:52 – Lauren Cloward

Alright, this next question we'll start with Kristin. What are the problems you face with disability employment in your states and how does that compare to the nationwide employment gap for people with disabilities, as Rob mentioned?

00:13:05 – Kristin Vandagriff

So, in Alaska I think similar to many states, we've seen problems around the employer perception. Some of the barriers we mentioned earlier, access to services and support, but I think the piece that when I really compare Alaska to other states and the employment gap, and just those challenges really come to looking at the nature of our state being so large geographically, but also so diverse.

When we think about urban versus rural and really, what defines a meaningful employment outcome, it's very different in the heart of Anchorage in an urban center as compared with, you know, a small community that might be rural or remote in nature. But I think one of the biggest things, it's really important to realize. is just when we define a meaningful outcome for those in Alaska, we really look at what's the commensurate employment experience for adults in that community. So, in Anchorage, that might be having a nine to five job. In Bethel, it might be a subsistence lifestyle, so it just really depends, and so I think for us it's tackling that problem holistically and looking statewide. That's been a really huge piece for us.

00:14:12 – Lauren Cloward

Thank you. Elizabeth?

00:14:14 – Elizabeth Gordon

Yeah, so Washington state is very similar in some of the things that Kristin discussed and we still are seeing lower labor participation rates, particularly in rural areas, and we're still seeing high unemployment rates even prior to the COVID crisis, and particularly for people with disabilities in the black community.

00:14:38 – Lauren Cloward

Next, we're going to move into some questions specific to states, so Alaska and Washington. We'll start with Kristin for Alaska.

Please share with us some of your work with the Governor to issue an executive order establishing an Alaska Work Matters employment task force and the support that you've been receiving from SEED and what that looks like in your state.

00:15:03 – Kristin Vandagriff

So, in Alaska, this has been a bit of a journey since I came to our Developmental Disability Council in 2013. This really spurred on, as we hit into 2018, our Alaska Department of Labor repealing sub minimum wage regulation in our state, only the third state to be able to do this. So, in our state, taking a really strong stance that Alaskans with disabilities deserve to be paid at that same wage as everybody else.

But at that same time in 2018, we were very fortunate that our Governor's office recommended our Council staff and some partners to attend the National Governors Association employment learning lab. At this point we were connected with the SEED team, which was amazing, and put together out of that event these recommendations to bring back and present to leadership.

As part of those recommendations, it really included a Work Matters task force to fully implement our 2014 Employment First legislation.

00:15:59 – Lauren Cloward

That's a good point. I want to touch on that idea of coordination and collaboration among state agencies a little bit more. How important is that and how has that furthered the work that you've done in the task force?

00:16:12 – Kristin Vandagriff

Agency collaboration is critical for this, and you know, as we worked with the SEED team to really think about a possible composition if this task force were to be created, we really wanted to make sure that we had all the right department leaders there to really look at full barrier elimination. We know that when we talk about successful employment outcomes, it's not just impacting one department or division. So much of the success is in wrap around services and all kinds of different pieces that need to fall into place.

00:16:41 – Lauren Cloward

Right, that segues well into my next question for you. What are the roles of the disability and the business communities within this work that you're doing? How do they play a role? I'm assuming you have, you know, members at the table, but what does that look like?

00:16:59 – Kristin Vandagriff

Certainly, and as the council we really have always tried to make sure that individuals with disabilities are providing their voice and input all throughout the different work efforts that we tackle, including employment. But working with the SEED team as we put together what a task force could look like in Alaska, a Work Matters task force, obviously we just talked about the

composition of all these state agency leaders that need to be there, but we want to make sure that this is really infused with direct voice.

When we talk about employment outcomes, I think we all can kind of agree that having people with disabilities themselves and employers at the table is critical, right? And so, SEED helped us think through with the structural format of a task force, how we could have an advisory committee component that would have business and disability community members present, whether it's community-based organizations, self-advocates.

We know that from our past work the Council has had a federal partnership and employment grant through the Administration on Community living, and it was so critical on that advisory board to be able to have employer voice there to really, you know, kind of help us shine a light on what could be effective policies to really promote real change, and similarly, being able to have individuals with disabilities be able to bring up their life experience, their lived experience, I think has been critical. So, SEED helped us kind of take that and format it in a way that could be really meaningful for this task force, so it isn't just something where the state agency folks get together in a vacuum.

00:18:28 – Lauren Cloward

Let's turn to Washington now and my first question is going to be about this idea of state as a model employer. But in 2013, Governor Inslee issued Executive Order 1302, Improving Employment Opportunities and Outcomes for People with Disabilities in State Employment.

The executive order, among other things, establishes hiring goals for state agencies and establishes a task force for the purpose of assisting state agencies with recruitment and retention of persons with disabilities. So, if you guys could just spend some time describing the successes and the ongoing challenges to accomplish the goals of that executive order.

00:19:10 – Elizabeth Gordon

To back up the train a little bit, the vision of this is that Washington state does a lot of engagement with employers through our community rehab programs and through a lot of different avenues to try to encourage private industry to hire people with disabilities.

And so, the idea was that when you come to the table with that, you want to be able to lead by example. By Washington state setting specific performance goals around hiring people with disabilities, we would be able to demonstrate that not only do we want to participate with public and private partnerships to further work for people with disabilities, but we also want people to have access to good jobs at the state level.

There's also been some recent conversation around really looking at how we ensure that goal setting involves people having a progression in their career as well, so that people aren't just coming into an entry level position and ending up parked there.

Long term, another piece that our state has been working on is making sure that we're working on our culture of inclusion, and I want to turn this over to Rob so he can talk a little bit about one of the strategies we've been working on.

00:20:35 – Rob Hines

Yeah, absolutely. So, the Disability Inclusion Network was established. I'd say we're in the third year now. It's kind of taking some time to get started, but it's a business resource group for state employees that really recognizes disability as a normal part of the human experience and just kind of tries to – and I don't like to use the term normalize – but to kind of make it so that it's not so mysterious, so that people have a place to go to learn about, to discuss, and to promote disability issues in the workplace so that Washington can achieve that model employer status that we are striving for.

And you know, just making sure that the discussion is not just occurring at the HR manager level, but at the principles within each state agency, that they're carrying that message that we are including people with disabilities in our workplace and that we want them here and they are a valued part of the work that we will accomplish as state employees.

I also wanted to just kind of piggy back a little bit on supportive employees in state government. We've seen many successes. I recently attended a 10-year anniversary and departure party for one of our participants, one of our employees in that program, who had worked in the Division of Vocational Rehabilitation doing administrative work for us. It was very important, and this person was actually promoted to a more coveted role within state government. So, they got a promotion and we got to celebrate 10 years that that person spent with our division and it was really exciting to see that. So, the program works.

Another thing that I thought would be helpful to talk about in Washington and engaging the business community is DVR. You know, or, you may not know, but as of 2014, with the passing of the Workforce Innovation and Opportunity Act, DVR has been called out to have a dual customer mode. We've always served people with disabilities, but now we serve people with disabilities *and* business. And we called them out as a partner and a dual customer within our model and one of the things that we do is provide training and familiarization for things like the Americans with Disabilities Act. You know, the Rehab Act, reasonable accommodation, disability etiquette, tax credits, and we can just consult with them on how to make a more inclusive workplace for people with disabilities.

I think one example of a partnership within the business community that we're pretty proud of is our work that we've done with Amazon. Amazon created an All Abilities or Alternative Workforce Strategy Department to help place people with disabilities in important jobs within the Amazon community, so that not only were we trying to find jobs for people with disabilities, but people were coming to us with jobs and we were trying to fill those job orders from our side of the equation.

It was an interesting change that we made and we adapted and we were able to find customers that wanted to do that work – imagine that! – working for a major employer. Over the years, in the past five years, we've had hundreds of placements with Amazon. It's a relationship that has bore fruit, and again, we look forward to what it does in the future.

00:24:14 – Lauren Cloward

So, before we wrap up here, I just want to ask you all, these are great strategies that you all are doing in your states, but what can other states and what can other stakeholders learn from you as they move forward within the disability employment field and improving that for people with disabilities?

00:24:34 – Rob Hines

Just to remember that as we move forward with our plans that we do include an equity lens, which is inclusive of people with disabilities, to make sure that that conversation occurs, and that if we're the only ones in the room that are willing to speak up that we *are* willing to speak up, because I've seen many conversations go down the path without the voice of people with disabilities being represented. And I think that when people with disabilities are represented, other people are represented as well, and so it's important to remember that.

00:25:07

(Outro music plays)

00:25:19 – Jim Ogsbury

(Outro music plays in background)

Thanks for listening to this episode of *Out West*, presented in partnership with the State Exchange on Employment and Disability.

A number of Western Governors have made commemorative proclamations in honor of the 75th anniversary of National Disability Employment Awareness Month, emphasizing the importance of focusing on disability employment in October and beyond. These governors include Governors Mike Dunleavy of Alaska, Doug Ducey of Arizona, Jared Polis of Colorado,

David Ige of Hawaii, Doug Burgum of North Dakota, Kristi Noem of South Dakota, Kevin Stitt of Oklahoma, and Mark Gordon of Wyoming.

To learn more about SEED's ongoing work on disability employment, please visit SEED's webpage at dol.gov, and be sure to join us next time as we continue to discuss critical issues facing the western United States.

Finally, WGA would like to thank Bobby Silverstein, Kristin Vandagriff, Elizabeth Gordon, and Rob Hines for sharing their expertise on disability employment.

Happy trails everyone.