

Alderbrook 2007

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“There’s something happening here. What it is ain’t exactly clear...”

(Stephen Stills, from “For What it’s Worth,” 1967)

Who should work?

In American society, it is nearly unthinkable to plan for life that does not include some kind of productive activity – some kind of work. That is, unless you have a developmental disability. The prevailing image of people with developmental disabilities, indeed nearly anyone with any kind of disability, is an image of disability benefits, some kind of social welfare, of a lack of potential and widespread unemployment or under-employment. Harris Polls over decades now predictably discover that the vast majority of people with disabilities rarely work full time and receive company paid benefits. A requirement of eligibility for cash and other benefits from the Social Security Administration is to clearly demonstrate that you cannot work.

The facts about mass unemployment or under-employment of people with disabilities are curiously juxtaposed to another set of facts and well documented research that has emerged across the last forty years establishing that people with nearly any sort of disability label can, in fact, work productively, when provided the environment, training, technology, or other supports tailored to the person.

In the face of this stark contradiction, societies and governments worldwide have gently ventured into initiatives to “do something” to promote employment of people with disabilities. In the USA, about 22% or less of individuals with developmental disabilities work in integrated settings earning at least a minimum wage. Annual earnings in excess of the federal poverty level are an exception even among those who do work. Despite initiatives to promote employment, the outcomes have largely not changed for several decades. And the core expectations by society and government, for people with developmental disabilities, remain one of under-employment, unemployment, and disability benefits. In a word: poverty.

There is an exception, however. In the state of Washington, there is an expectation that people with developmental disabilities, like other adults, are expected to work and earn a living wage. Washington State has a policy called The Working Age Adults Employment policy, signed in 2004, with full implementation in 2006. This policy states that adults with developmental disabilities are fully expected to work in integrated settings or be on a pathway to such employment. No other such policy exists in the USA, nor indeed in the world, which declares such an expectation. Other policies support the value of employment, or even promote employment, yet no other policy sets this expectation. This

policy stands in a line of innovations and forward thinking that has long established employment as the main focus when defining day services for people with developmental disabilities

The purpose of this paper is to explore how this has happened and is happening in Washington, to describe an event known as “Alderbrook 2007,” to explore how this progress in employment of people with developmental disabilities is tied to a tradition of leadership, discussion and debate, and discuss how this continues to unfold. This paper first considers a core of values, rights and responsibilities. This is followed by a discussion of some of the culture, traditions, and unique features of this developmental disabilities community. Finally, the outcomes, the emerging situation, and the implications of Alderbrook 2007 in the stream of developments in Washington are discussed.

Values, Rights and Responsibilities

Even a casual look at the last fifty years of history in developmental disabilities in the USA shows an evolving emphasis on values that focus on the rights of individuals to be full and participating members of society in every way. From laws that established the right to a free and appropriate education for children with disabilities in the 1970s, to the Americans with Disabilities Act in the 1990s, establishing that it was illegal to discriminate on the basis of disability, the securing of equal rights under the law represented true milestones in public policy and societal viewpoints. None-the-less, clarity about employment was lacking. Declaring discrimination in employment as illegal is not the same as providing worthwhile employment for people with disabilities. And, given the confusion of images of inability based on disability, of social benefits that assume an inability to work, and the lack of community and government structures to develop jobs and support employment outcomes, there can be little wonder that the unemployment rates continue despite progressive legislation like the Americans with Disabilities Act.

The progression of thinking about employment for people with disabilities over recent decades is a curious discovery of the talents of people and a rejection of the notion that disability means an inability to work. The progression in thinking about employment possibilities evolved in modest steps. The ongoing discussion about equal rights for people with disabilities often has focused on access to education, environments, services, stores, parks, and so on, even employment. And, it is unfinished work to establish equal access and acceptance of people with disabilities in all walks and parts of community life. An important point here is the focus on rights.

Parallel in time to the discussion of the right to community, that includes employment, was the discovery of the abilities of people with developmental disabilities. Fifty years ago it was assumed that real work for people with disabilities was largely impossible. As we collectively discovered that people could learn and be productive, the discussion shifted from “is it possible” for people to work – to a discussion of how beneficial “it is to work.” As data in the USA, and indeed worldwide, has shown, the benefits of working for people with disabilities are the same as the benefits of working for everybody else. The discussion then evolved into how to make employment outcomes “allowable” in a government system and in social services originally designed to avoid employment outcomes (for example, some

funding sources for day services prohibited employment), While Harris Polls identified again and again that unemployment for people with disabilities was high, those same polls acknowledged that people with disabilities want to work.

Washington takes this discussion of values and rights to a new place. It is one thing to establish that someone has the right to decent employment to the extent that anyone in society has a right to employment. It is another thing entirely to assert that individuals have a responsibility to work – to the same expectations as anyone else in society. Some have pointed out the expectations of responsibilities equal to others is what gives meaning to having rights. Failing to accept some responsibility for working in our society comes with consequences. The choice can be made not to work, of course, and with that comes the consequences of conditions of poverty (unless of course you can live with someone with sufficient discretionary resources that it is unnecessary for you to work).

The thinking about employment for people with developmental disabilities can be summarized in this way -

- From impossible to possible
 - From possible to beneficial
 - From beneficial to allowed
 - From allowed to preferred
 - From preferred to expected
 - From expected to required.....
-to the same standard as everyone else.

The Policy

The “policy” or WAAP, as it is sometimes called, emerged in Washington in a unique way, and in keeping with the Washington tradition of emphasizing employment outcomes for people with developmental disabilities. Washington has a long and curious history of innovation and investment and a dogged determination to focus of outcomes – decent jobs in community settings. In the late 1970s and early 1980s, Washington was one of only a few states in the USA to boldly pursue employment when the prevailing beliefs was that people with disabilities were largely assumed unemployable, or if employed, found that employment in segregated settings. Washington challenged such beliefs and created model programs and projects. This determined attitude was, and remains, unusual. Most states hover below or near 25% of people with developmental disabilities in some kind of integrated employment. Vermont is the first state without sheltered workshops and its reported employment rate is 48%. Washington’s reported rate is about 62% while at the same time publically proclaiming that it is not good enough. Hence the policy that states, “each individual: will be supported to pursue his or her own unique path to work, a career, or his or her contribution to/participation in community life. All individuals, regardless of the challenge of their disability, will be afforded an opportunity to pursue competitive employment.” The policy also specifies that such employment will be at minimum wage or better and in integrated

settings, and is defined in a way that reflects “achievement of, or progress towards, a living wage.” One must wonder if the developments in Washington over time, the outcomes to date, and this new policy, create a tipping point toward greater employment outcomes. It is also important to note that this policy has roots in Washington in previous statements of goals and values. In the mid 1980s, the state division of developmental disabilities issued a set of “county guidelines” for day services, creating at the time an unprecedented bias toward community employment. These county guidelines established an intent to emphasize employment outcomes without creating a full expectation of employment then.

All means all in this policy. This is a unique challenge. Washington has achieved notable success in supporting employment for people with significant challenges. None-the-less, significant challenges remain. I am reminded of a notion offered from Don Baer, formerly of the University of Kansas, when discussing taking on the challenge of supporting people with complex needs.

“There are two ways to be wrong about a person. We can meet someone and assume they are too severely disabled and fail to try and be wrong because the person was capable. Or, we can meet someone and believe that in the right way and the right place, the person can learn and be well matched to a job, and be wrong because we could not figure it out. If we are going to be wrong about people, we must always be wrong in the second way (paraphrased, circa 1987).”

Nationally and internationally, there is a curiosity about this policy for several reasons. Some are simply impressed by its boldness, acknowledging that the only way out of poverty for any minority group is economic empowerment and employment that pulls individuals beyond the poverty line. Others challenge the assertion that day services should emphasize employment when it restricts access to other day services. Some believe that expecting everyone with a developmental disability to work is an unreasonable expectation (after all, in order to receive social security benefits, you must first demonstrate that you are unable to work). Others view this policy as a goal too big, too radical, too impossible to achieve, and therefore not a reasonable goal.

Some states see and understand the policy as the next important goal for true community membership for people with developmental disabilities. Even so, there may not be other states that are in a position to adopt such a policy and have it be more than a hollow call for a nirvana that cannot be reached. In fact, several states have started discussion of adopting the policy as it is in their own state environment. Frankly, I have advised against that for this reason – Washington has adopted this policy because it can embrace it. That is, the developmental disabilities community in Washington can, and is, embracing the policy with enthusiasm even as there is considerable trepidation, uncertainty, and a great deal of saying “I don’t know...” And yet, Washington can continue the work of implementation of this policy because of its own traditions, attitudes toward change, learning, and pursuing worthy accomplishments. Any state needs a policy that not only reflects its values and goals, but also reflects its own unique history and culture. It is also clear that a number of states are moving in the direction of “Employment First” including Georgia, Indiana, Minnesota, and others.

Relentlessness

Along with the emergence and implementation of this policy is a willingness, even relentlessness, to pursue innovations. Some three decades ago, Washington developed its own culture of continuous improvement and methods of involving everyone in processes for change. This culture is as important as the policy for the future of its implementation. Conventional wisdom in the implementation of good ideas often revolves around the ideas of some noted developer of innovations or some kind of model program. Often, these developers are called upon to instruct others in how to “implement” the model or the idea. And, the scope and integrity of the original idea is largely in the hands of the developer as the implementers seek to follow their counsel. That may overstate the notion of some approaches to widespread implementation, or scaling up. One point here is that implementers are often expected to reproduce what has been demonstrated rather than expected to innovate on their own. Washington has a curious habit of inviting into the state, leaders and innovators from anywhere they can find them. And, at the same time, people across the state take the ideas and advice and innovate from there, involving seasoned people and people new to the field, and valuing the roles of each.

A Curious Tradition

The developmental disabilities community of the state of Washington has a curious tradition of naming events after places. An annual conference is simply known as “Ellensburg.” Ellensburg has a history of innovation, participation, and enthusiasm unusual for any conference of five hundred or more people. A discussion meeting from the 1980s is still referred to as “Lake Wilderness.” Discussion meetings for emerging leaders were called “Sleeping Lady,” after a lodge in central Washington. A series of meetings of leaders of employment programs was long known as “LaConner.” Another was “Skamania Lodge.” Another repeating series of intense discussions about employment for people with developmental disabilities is known simply as “Alderbrook,” a lodge and a place of beauty on the Olympic Peninsula. Another series of gatherings is known simply as “Off The Clock.” This refers to an informal gathering, usually in some hotel lounge of 40 or more people from various roles in employment services, including employment specialists, government people, managers of programs, and more. The goal is to meet “off the clock” for lively conversation that drifts in and out of work related topics. “Off The Clock” originated from emerging leaders in the state.

The occasion of this event comes on the heels of its predecessor known as Alderbrook 2006, one in a series of milestones in Washington’s long time pursuit of worthwhile employment of people with developmental disabilities. Alderbrook 2007 was a “discussion” among some 150 people, about current attempts to implement this new policy in communities statewide, and to learn from each other about how to do it better. The expressed purpose was discussion of “what’s working” and how to improve and expand the implementation of the new policy for all adults with developmental disabilities.

Alderbrook 2007 followed “Alderbrook 2006” which had a very different purpose. Alderbrook 2006 was a discussion of the meaning and possibility of implementation of the new policy. In reality,

Alderbrook 2006 included a great deal about concern of the difficulty (impossibility?) of implementing this policy. Some described the 2006 event as “deer in the headlights” of uncertainty and alarm at the boldness of the policy. Hence, Alderbrook 2007 discussions were crafted to be positive and proactive and focus on solutions that were emerging in statewide efforts to implement the working age adult policy. As one participant aptly stated the situation – “The discussion about IF we are going to do this is over. This discussion is all about how we are going to do it.”

This now well developed habit to involve everyone in change, innovation, and implementation has proven to be successful over time. And, it is chaotic, unpredictable, and confusing. Alderbrook discussions are a case in point. The focus is on discussion where everyone’s ideas and questions are valued rather than presentations by “experts” followed by questions and answers. Any given session began with “session starters,” ten minute kickoff observations by one or two people, followed by a managed discussion of ideas... what is working and what else might be done. The first 15 minutes might be scripted, or at least predictable – the remaining hour and a half is not. Perspectives vary, good and bad experiences are revealed, ideas are offered, and questions are raised. Disagreements break out, but generally in a spirit of understanding, even as some arguments are heated. The discussions spill out of meeting rooms and into hallways, the bar, people’s hotel room, over dinner, and on walks around the Alderbrook resort grounds. A session the next morning might begin with someone recounting a night time conversation where a new idea crystallized and even weak memories realize a possible solution is now more possible.

Unique Components

There are several unique components in the mix of developmental disabilities work in Washington that contribute to the progress to date, the current policy, and to the future of the endeavor. First, the state division of developmental disabilities services has a history of leadership in commitment and in funding innovation across the state. This has included dozens of exemplary programs in the state, resources to explore new ideas with individuals and employers, and technical assistance to providers of services, county governments which run day and employment services in Washington, as well as to families and self-advocates. Second, the state has a unique structure for governing employment services. These services are contracted through county governments rather than directly from the state level or through a regional structure. This county structure has also provided a platform of leadership and developments of innovations and improved outcomes at a community level. Third, Washington has a unique mix of large and small non-profit agencies that provide employment services. While some states have long opted for primarily funding large agencies in given geographic areas, Washington has encouraged innovations by funding unique, small, innovative providers of service, in addition to funding larger, more historical service providers. Innovation, however, has emerged from both kinds of agencies. This approach has also allowed, even encouraged, some level of choice and competition (often in a spirit of collaboration) in communities. Fourth, present and effective in leadership is an active parent coalition across the state. The parent coalition is clearly an opinion leader in promoting valued employment outcomes for people with disabilities, engaging the community of families and individuals, and promoting employment with the state legislature. A fifth component is

“P2020,” a loosely formed organization of providers of employment services, keen on innovation, active in reciprocal support for one another, focused on improving employment outcomes, and on organizing support from the state legislature. P2020 exists in addition to a more traditional state association of providers known as Rehabilitation Enterprises of Washington (REW). REW also participated and played a role in the Alderbrook discussions. A sixth unique component is the presence and effectiveness of training, technical assistance, innovation, and leadership organizations. O’Neill and Associates and the Washington Initiative for Supported Employment are both viewed in Washington and across the USA as homes to innovation, promotion of employment outcomes, skilled providers of technical assistance and training, and always on the front edge of ideas and new developments that might improve employment outcomes. A seventh component is a state legislature that specifically engages the need for employment of people with developmental disabilities. Over time, the Washington legislature has been active in funding innovations and technical assistance. In addition, the legislature has a history of providing funding specifically for employment services for youth leaving high schools in the state. These components can be found in other states. However, it is rare to find all of these components working together on the common purpose of decent employment for people with developmental disabilities.

Alderbrook 2007 – The Event

As noted earlier, Alderbrook 2007 followed the event of a year before and also focused on this new policy. And, as noted, the event was framed to elicit a discussion of what was working in communities across the state rather than as in 2006, pondering the meaning of the policy, the extent to which it was possible, and what problems would have to be solved to move forward. In 2007 the questions were framed and each session begun with a focus on “what’s working?” As such, it was designed to energize rather than focus on difficulties and the possible paralysis that can result from discussing seemingly overwhelming obstacles to success.

With a discussion rather than a presentation focus, each topic addressed began with about five minutes of ideas from two selected people from around the state, and from varied roles in working to implement the policy. Each session had a discussion facilitator and a recorder that captured ideas, questions, and comments that emerged. Participants selected sessions of interest. Fifteen to thirty people participated in concurrent sessions.

The discussion topics included:

- Creative partnerships
- Training and technical assistance
- Working with schools for transition
- Jobs for people with high support needs
- Alternative funding strategies
- Working with families and residential agencies

- Possible government funding combinations
- Job development
- Collaboration with residential programs and schools
- Organizational change for improvement
- Working with case managers
- Specific pathways to employment
- Creative support strategies
- Working with the broader community
- Staff development and relationships

In addition, two “Town Hall” style meetings were held of all those present. One focused on ideas for change and implementation of the policy from a local perspective. A second town meeting focused on funding partners from state and county levels.

The People

About 150 people participated from around the state. This included people from various roles and perspectives in implementation of the policy. Participants included employment specialists, middle managers in provider agencies, directors of agencies, county coordinators and other county staff, and state level and vocational rehabilitation personnel. Intentionally, this event did not include case managers, individuals with disabilities or families, nor residential agency personnel (such an event including personnel from a wide range of roles related to people with developmental disabilities is occurring in 2008). The intent of defining participants in this way was to keep the focus on the implementation of day-to-day, very local ideas, for helping people with developmental disabilities find and keep jobs. As you might expect, many more people than the building capacity of about 150 were interested in participating. This meant there had to be a process for deciding who would participate. In order to get diversity of participants from across the state, counties were asked to nominate a number of people from their local area who could be expected to add value to the discussions as well as learn and implement new ideas after the event. Participants included people who have been working on employment issues for decades and people that have been working in the field only months. All perspectives and viewpoints were welcomed, while maintaining a focus on discussion of “what’s working.”

The Lessons (“Take aways”)

Two or more days of discussions, along with untold hours in hallways and late nights, generated lively, sometimes loud, and always intense discussion of ideas and possibilities. While it is impossible, and not particularly helpful to cite all of the ideas generated, it is possible to cite themes that emerged

that frame the possibilities for continuing to implement this bold policy for employment of people with developmental disabilities in the state of Washington. In the stream of events and developments in Washington, this event carried forward the notion that something is happening here, and continues to happen over a sustained period of time.

Some things old, some things new, some things rediscovered

The value of creative job development, of purposeful relationships with employers and the business community, of involving family and friends, and crafting individualized supports were affirmed as tried and true strategies with or without a new state goal for employment outcomes. Strategies and tools Washington has known for some time. Some things new have been discovered in the recent past that adds value to what is known – things such as customized employment, self-employment, and redesigned business partnerships. A training curriculum has been developed and set up at the Highline Community College to better develop employment personnel. Some things rediscovered that have been a part of the progress of the past included the need for precision training skills with people with significant disabilities and the importance of telling stories of successes and stories of difficulties as ways to learn from each other.

All we have to offer is the value of our time

Perhaps this falls within the notion of “some things old” and perhaps it was discovered for the first time by some. The point is that employment success for people with developmental disabilities in Washington depends, in large part, on the quality of the minutes employment specialists spend with individuals, and with their coworkers and managers. It depends on the quality of the minutes spent by agency managers and directors in organizing ways that maximize the quality of direct support time. This work does not come in “units” or “products.” This work is measured in the unforgiving outcomes of the number of people employed, how many hours they work, how much money they make, the variety of jobs acquired, the degree of integration, and the number of jobs with company paid benefits. A corollary to this is the point that “great staff matter.” As such, finding and keeping creative and skilled people in employment agencies is, and will continue to be, critical for success.

Every community is different

Some things may seem obvious. Such as, every community is different and, therefore, requires different solutions. Yet, the obvious can be overlooked in pursuit of “the answer” that will result in leaps forward in progress not seen to date. Even so, the communities of Washington are different. From urban Seattle, to suburban Vancouver, to rural Yakima, and many more, the history, the economic structures, and the community culture vary from highly technological to remarkably rural and everything in between. Any solution sought to work for all, cannot really be expected to work for many. Hence, in the search for solutions, even when listening and adopting new, great ideas, solutions must always be made local. And while every community is different and solutions will vary, the commitment to the policy extends statewide even as solutions are often local in their nature.

Stories matter (data too)

Despite the “down to earth” nature of an Alderbrook crowd, discussion can inevitably move toward a search for solutions that call for logic models, conceptual configurations, and summaries of ideas that may appear theoretical in nature and difficult to apply, even when the originators of the ideas are very “down to earth.” It is interesting that a theme that emerged at Alderbrook 2007 was an assertion that stories matter in trying to understand ideas and how to move forward with full implementation of the new policy. In the 1980s’, as Washington launched an aggressive supported employment initiative statewide, stories and brief videos mattered in communicating vision and ideas that many could use. Many were familiar with images of people in a number of Washington businesses working successfully and the range of what was possible expanded. And while so many at Alderbrook might think about specific people they know as they discussed “business relationships,” it could be hard for others to have the same visual image without a story, hence, the notion of the need to tell new stories to exemplify ideas, successes, and possibilities. And while these stories and images can create value, Washington continues to recognize the need for data. Data that is clear about progress or lack of progress within a community, across a county, and across the state: hard numbers about success. And yet that data will have less meaning without the images and the understanding that comes with renewing the stories that contribute more than numbers to the future. This focus on outcomes and stories is extending into media presentations, such as a professionally developed video entitled “Great Hires.” (Go to www.theinitiative.ws to view.)

Maybe all finally means all

Washington is at least as good as any in the USA in creating examples of people with complicated support needs being very successful in community employment. None-the-less, this new policy offers very few exceptions to the expectations of working. And such a policy brings everyone face-to-face with the notion that “all means all” in the expectation of working successfully. Which brings the question marks about people that we all know for whom solutions are complicated? Stories and well-known examples make a difference as the reality of “all means all” becomes apparent.

Nobody can do it alone

Perhaps another obvious and relevant point from this discussion is the simple reality that every employment specialist, every middle manager, every parent advocate, every non-profit director, and more, are faced with the reality of needing other people in other roles to successfully implement this policy. This suggests the importance of connecting to others openly and with enthusiasm, even in the confusion of uncertainty. To discover together, to re-learn together, and share solutions that are more difficult to discover alone. As one participant said, “Each of us has a different kind of headache and problem to solve. I need to understand yours and I need for you to understand mine.”

New ways to be; “teams of friendly rivals”

A novel descriptor emerged at Alderbrook 2007 about the relationships of people who are somewhat alike in their roles within Washington. Given the obvious emphasis on choice for people with disabilities in what vendor of services they can choose, the sense of competition that can create, and the

natural tendencies of people of success to compete, it is a curious phrase and a curious concept: “teams of friendly rivals.” The three main words matter in this phrase. “Teams” can mean people of different strengths working together for a common goal. “Friendly” can mean accepting each other in a spirit of common comfort in a shared goal and a welcoming of each other. “Rivals” can mean that you are seen as a competitor or likely to be a competitor for the foreseeable future. What does it mean to combine the meanings of these three words? Perhaps it means that competition is valued because it spurs everyone on to something better. Perhaps it means teams can often accomplish more than an individual, and more than individuals each behaving separately. Perhaps it also means that competition can be productive and is friendly and collaborative. Perhaps it means traditional rivalry can be set aside for spirited collaboration and reciprocity, given the common goal of employment for every one with developmental disabilities in Washington. This also suggests a spirit of taking risks, and taking risks in a spirit of trust with one’s own, friendly rivals.

There is a limit to the things that vendors control

Vendors. Well, it’s the vendors, the providers of service that are expected to deliver the outcomes of the policy of full employment for people with developmental disabilities in Washington. Or so it might seem in structure and on paper. Vendors do control the direct financial resources expected to provide employment outcomes. However, there are multiple actors that vendors do not control. They do not control the expectation that people should work (what is the role of families, vocational rehabilitation counselors, and case managers in creating that expectation?). They do not control the extent to which a person gets up in the morning dressed and prepared to go to work each day (what is the role of residential programs and families in this?). They do not control entirely the willingness and expectation of employers to welcome employees with developmental disabilities (what is the role of the broader community, the vocational rehabilitation agency, local government, schools, and more, in this kind of expectation?). This realization and the point is – vendors may have tremendous influence and control of outcomes – and – there are many parts of an employment equation where others are needed – others who value the outcome of employment as much as the policy of the Washington Division of Developmental Disabilities states. The point is – as important as the vendors, the providers of these services in Washington, there are elements that are beyond their control and, thus, need all partners – in solidarity with people with disabilities, their families, schools, other government agencies, and the community at large.

Get help where ever you can

Another part of the Washington culture was affirmed again at Alderbrook 2007. That is, affirmation of the importance, even the expectation, of seeking assistance if you are a provider of service or a county funder of employment services. In the Washington version of seeking assistance, it is largely assumed that the provider of assistance will not have a perfect solution for adoption by the recipient. Instead, assistance is sought for ideas and ways to shape a local solution. Getting assistance is as much about a willingness to explore possibilities for improvement as it is seeking assistance from someone who has ideas and can help shape a possible solution for the situation. This culture of

continuous learning has been a hallmark of the developmental disabilities community in Washington for many years.

Count on leadership: known and emerging (young and not so young)

Another asset in the Washington culture is an expectation of leadership from many. Regardless of role, age, or experience, leadership is welcomed in taking risks, offering ideas, and leading by example. Leadership knows no specific role, experience, or age. Rather, leadership can be shown from anyone committed to the employment outcomes. This promotes an attitude of accepting the situation and acting on it rather than getting stuck in the paralysis of uncertainty.

These lessons, these “take aways,” summarize many of the themes from Alderbrook 2007, themes that focused on solutions and ideas for improving the employment outcomes for people with developmental disabilities. Still, problems remain unsolved and threats are acknowledged.

Threats

It is no surprise that such an ambitious policy comes with problems and threats. Even while the specified purpose of Alderbrook 2007 was to identify solutions and ideas that are working, there was acknowledgement of threats and challenges for which solutions are needed.

Perhaps these threats are obvious. Perhaps not. They included issues that could impede successful implementation of the policy and must be addressed more completely. This list included the need to:

- Insure that people work enough hours to make a meaningful work week and eliminating the need for “day services.”
- Insure that people make enough money and work enough hours to approach the notion put forth in the policy of earning “a living wage.”
- Make certain that stories of success (and of difficulties) are told and heard.
- Avoid possible paralysis in moving forward given the scope of the task at hand.
- Address the possible role confusion of employment specialists, schools, case managers, personal agents, and others as new ideas and structures emerge.
- Keep the goal, even as progress as measured may be a disappointment to some. The point being that the goal of employment outcomes is worthy and the pace of success, slow or fast, should be used as a gauge toward improvement rather than seen as a compromise.

New developments and challenges beyond 2008

At this writing, this policy of full employment for people with developmental disabilities, while acknowledged widely as a worthy, appropriate, and needed goal, is not without concern and criticism. Indeed, the issue was raised before the Washington legislature for modification. While support remains high for the policy, some of the realities are worrisome, especially related to the number of hours a week individuals are engaged in employment or on a pathway to employment and the extent to which people and families believe the goal is appropriate for all. Perhaps this is an important discussion to clarify several things: that “All does mean all” and there is evidence to show that meaningful employment is a real possibility for every person with a developmental disability with very few exceptions; it is important to engage this discussion with individuals, families, practitioners, and policy makers, again and again, about the roots, the possibilities, and the realities of reaching this difficult, possible, and worthy goal. I might also observe, that much of the discussion about possibly attenuating the goal is not so much about challenging the appropriateness of the goal as it is to point out the need to address the difficult realities of being successful in the implementation of the working age adult policy for employment. The issues are real and themselves worthy of attention and resolution. The question may be the extent to which employment outcomes remain the main focus in Washington. In continued pursuit of this, leadership discussions across roles and systems, and beyond developmental disabilities issues, are being organized to promote community participation and full employment from a broad community perspective.

I am reminded of a source (the name long lost) from some years ago, commenting about change and progress, however enlightened and however worthy, and the need to engage everyone in the discussion.

“When we find people that disagree with us, we must ask them “Why?” in as many ways as possible – in order to understand – because they – in their power and their resources - may control more of the outcome than we do...”(source unknown).

Purveyors of Hope and Freedom

A decent job, economic empowerment, is a great equalizer in the USA, for anyone and including people with disabilities. A decent job, at a living wage, and at a significant number of hours a week, is the gateway to choices in life and a role in community as a contributor, as well as providing a common social structure to time. There are many worthy agendas in the disability community: equal rights, family support, a good education, and more. Employment is special among those goals because it brings results best defined in the meaning of such words as “hope,” and “freedom.”

Hope means believing that tomorrow will be better than yesterday. Hope means believing that life does get better and better. Hope means believing that a fabulous vacation is a real possibility. Hope means believing you have enough money to give a really special gift to someone you love. Hope means believing that you can make enough money to make a contribution to a worthy cause simply because it matters to you.

Freedom means having choices. Freedom means accepting responsibility for your choices, big and small. Freedom means the ability to choose a life away from poverty, with the resources to do so.

Employment is about hope and freedom for people with developmental disabilities.

“There’s something happening here. What it is ain’t exactly clear”

The state of Washington’s policy of full employment for people with developmental disabilities is a bold, even audacious, goal – uncommon in the world and roundly recognized as the way of the future across the USA and in other countries. There is “something happening here.” The nature of how this plays out in Washington, is not certain and is being watched in the eyes of many, in many places. So – “what it is, ain’t exactly clear,” in terms of how it will transpire in the months and years to come.

In Washington, there is a notable constancy of several decades of supporting the goal of employment for people with developmental disabilities. It is the main thing for so many associated with, and committed to, this goal. The size, the shape, the strategies, the nuances vary over time, yet the goal remains the same for employment outcomes. It is the main thing, however defined in the past, the present, and the next decade. The Main Thing is to Keep The Main Thing – The Main Thing.*

*Quote attributed sometimes to Stephen Covey and sometimes to Mulla Nasruddin

March, 2008.

Notes:

The Facilitators and Recorders:

- Cesilee Coulson
- Lee Valenta
- Wally Tablit
- Jim Corey
- Joyce Black
- Dave Black
- Trish Borden
- Paula Johnson
- Sandeep Bhuta
- Susan Harrell
- Marsha Threlkeld
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