APSE Conversations: Jenny and Maya

Introduction: Hi, this is Jenny Stonemeier with APSE. We're launching the APSE: Employment First, Employment for All Podcast to continue to provide updates, real-time advocacy alerts, and information related to all things Employment First. Make sure to subscribe so you don't miss an episode and thanks for listening.

Jenny: So, Maya, you are an APSE board member and you've been on the board, how long as it been? You're almost finishing your first year, that right?

Maya: That's right I am almost finishing my first year.

Jenny: Your role here at APSE board is really important to us but it's not your only job and we are here today to talk about the work that you've been doing in your the other side of your professional life, particularly as it relates to response to COVID-19. You have some really interesting, you have a really unique perspective in your work and so I wonder if we could talk a little bit about that.

Maya: Absolutely. I work for Public Consulting Group which is a consulting firm that supports States across the country and we support different state agencies. I work personally with different voc rehab folks across the country, 5-6 states now. We support Support agencies we work with agencies that support intellectual and developmental Disability Services as well as workforce development, TANF, a number of state agencies. My personal work is to support vocational rehabilitation agencies around policy, programs, how to make things better for vendors or providers, for state staff. And of course, ultimately we're all working toward the same goal of improving outcomes for people with disabilities (PWD) as it relates to employment.

J: I think it's really cool that you're in this, not quite technical assistance, but in that role of supporting state agencies to be better in their work and services they're providing. I think that that's one thing that APSE's really focused on is how do we work to create better systems interaction and better communication between systems. Because we know that anyone interacting with systems, there's so many intersections and overlaps and disconnects.

M: -- right, absolutely

J: We're hearing so much about the challenges that obviously everyone is facing right now with COVID-19 and responding to it. I wonder if you could talk about how not only your work has

changed in the past month, 6 weeks, and what you're doing now to support states in the COVID-19 response.

M: Sure, well you know what, I think that everyone's world has turned upside down. *Laugh* and of course mine is no different. I think that states across the country are trying to pivot and allocate resources to immediate needs. I've seen a lot of state agencies trying to make sure services continue and people get the services they need. People that are employed are able to pivot the way they need to. Are their jobs going online? Do they need to take extra precautions if they're still going into the workplace? And we know unemployment rates are rising, I think I saw on the news today 10% right now.

J: Right, 17 million.

M: Wow. So people may need to get reengaged, right? So of course, agencies that provide these services are also trying to make sure they take appropriate and adequate precautions. Making sure their staff has the resources they need and information they can get to provide services virtually and in a way as safely as possible.

M: I think that in some different projects I'm working at, we are doing a couple of different things to continue to support states and in providing effective services. Doing all we can to improve those outcomes. I think that one thing we're trying to do is as states reallocate resources, a lot fo those resources are technology, of course. We are relying heavily on technology right now for communication, continuing our work. So resources that were previously being used for training, technical assistance related activities are now being reallocated to COVID-19 communications. And so, inf a few of those cases we are working with states to use PCG resources. How can we leverage our system of resources?

J: Tell me what PCG means, that's not an acronym I'm familiar with.

M: Oh, I'm sorry! PCG is my employer, Public Consulting Group.

J: No worries! I was like wait, what technology is PCG.

M: *Laughs* My employer, we have a number of great resources as far as technology goes. We have -we're a larger firm - so we have folks who are experts in how to help people go into online workplaces. We've got folks who are experts in online learning and have different kinds of technology available to us to help states support continued operations as well.

J: I wonder if we could talk for just a second about some of those resources. I think that we, well, APSE hosted a webinar on providing remote services and it ended up being in the early weeks of COVID-19. So it was extremely relevant and we had such an amazing response to it. This notion of providing remote services or online services - how is PCG, how are you and your

employer working to support communities that are under-resourced or who are not yet prepared for remote service delivery or online service delivery?

M: So, I don't think there's ever one silver bullet, right? Any time you want folks to transition to online service delivery it does require that there is some infrastructure, understanding, and resources available to make sure that people have what they need in order to do the work well. I think the situation always requires a different combination and way of addressing it. Every community is unique and there's no one size fits all solution.

But I think that often what is a good way to go about things is to have multiple opportunities for people to coordinate and access services. I think that when you can provide different options and different ways, that is often an important component.

J: Sure, I was going to ask a follow-up question about the necessary mindset shifts that have been required in supporting people to do their jobs differently. I'm thinking specifically about Employment Support Professionals, who many of whom have been doing their job for a number of years and they're very familiar and very comfortable providing supports in an in-person capacity. And that acknowledgment of "well, we can't do that right now" and what does that mean when you have to learn a suddenly new way to do your job to support someone in learning things to do their job as well… how do we? I don't know that there's an answer, but just an acknowledgment of the amount of change that has been kind of thrust upon us in the last month and what your thoughts are.

M: Sure. So, Jenny I've been thinking about that a lot in both a personal and professional perspective. About what a difficult time that we cannot be face-to-face, and I think that as humans we are social right? A lot of our world, a lot of our day… at least for me personally, has been based around social interactions and being around people and that's been such a big transition. What I've been trying to think about as we transition, and I think it makes sense for Employment Support Professionals as well, is instead of thinking about "I need to think about specifically how to do my job differently because now I have to use technology and that's not how I did it before?" I think we consider it in the "what are the ways we use tech to communicate with other sand how do we leverage some of those resources?"

M: So I know WINTAC has shared professional development around ways we can use Zoom and how we can use it to provide face-to-face communication. I know that's something I'm leveraging more and across-the-board more people are. So that I can see parents, my friends, when I can't be near them. And now we've got the opportunity where we can download software on our phones and have that capacity. Or of course, we can use a number of other software programs available to us. I would encourage people to think about it in a way to do things more efficiently? Why wasn't I video conferencing with my parents all the time already?

J: Right, right, exactly!

M: if we can look at this as an opportunity of how can I make additional connections, how do I make some lemonade out of lemons. If we can learn about job coaching virtually, what a great opportunity to, if it's ok to cut out that commute time and provide assistance when I need it *now* rather than all the time - isn't that great opportunity for fading? As we look to work our way out of the workplace? That's making lemonade out of lemons.

J: Right. I think one of the things I've been thinking about a lot, like you said, both personally and professionally, is that we work in human services field. And it feels right now like we've lost the human interaction part of that human services.

M: right.

J: I have found myself feeling a wide range of emotional responses to this. Sometimes there's the resentment, sometimes there's the sadness, sometimes there's the rage over it all. So I appreciate your positive reframe on it, to say that this really is an opportunity and even if it is video conferencing with your parents or sharing a holiday meal with a bunch of computer screens on the table so that you can see everyone else who'd usually be at the table with you… but how do we also maintain those communications with the people we are supporting? Because those are really really important relationships.

M: Absolutely. I know texting and phone calls can also get the job done, but I tell you what, even in my professional work we've started doing more video conferencing where we have to put on our clothes, brush our hair, all those things… it is so worth the while to be able to see the expressions, the body language, I don't think there's anything that quite replaces it.

J: No.

M: so I'd encourage folks to make the effort because it makes a difference.

J: Right, we can say "I'm doing fine." and the words are one thing but if you see my face, my face will betray me. My face will tell you more truth than my words. Because maybe I'm not doing ok that day. Maybe I'm struggling, maybe I'm lost…

M: Right. And I'll tell you what, a lot of employment professionals are a very important relationship and a lifeline in the life of the people they've met through employment services, right?

J: Absolutely.

M: Some will have a rich social support network and others have fewer opportunities to have that social interaction, but I know everyone's struggling. I know I've observed Employment professionals being key supporters, key folks who check-in and some of the key cheerleaders. We all need a cheerleader right now right?

J: Previously in my career, I worked in the education field doing systems change work. And David Pitonyak was a researcher and a trainer and he always talked about the importance of relationships in education and in special education, supporting students with disabilities. He said in a keynote speech once that humans are hardwired for relationships. And I keep coming back to that at this point, right now. Again, personally and professionally, we're hard-wired for relationship. No matter who we are, no matter what our individual set of circumstances are, and so how do we create… and I think in this conversation we've talked about ways we can use technology to approximate some of those relationships and check in with people and continue to provide the supports to everyone.

M: Right.

J: Making sure that the people with disabilities getting the supports have what they need but also ensuring the ESPs whoa re providing supports are getting what they need all the way through in this community to take care of one another. I'm really grateful for you taking a chance with us to have this first conversation in podcast form.

M: Oh thank you!

J: This is something we're really excited to launch and i really appreciate you taking the time to do this and thank you for the work that you're doing and take care!

M: You too, you too!

J: Thanks, Maya.