APSE Conversations: Jenny and Kelly

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 Stonemeier: So, welcome Kelly to the APSE podcast. We're really excited to have you with us today. I'm going to let you introduce yourself because you have a couple of different professional hats that you're wearing right now. I just wanted to say that Kelly Nye-Lengerman is a member of the APSE National Board. Tell us about the rest of your professional life.

Kelly Nye-Lengerman: Thanks Jenny! I'm really excited to be joining the APSE podcast today. This is a new experience for all of us. My name is Kelly Nye-Lengerman and my current home base is in the state of MN. I have been a long time APSE member since 2009 and my role with APSE stated as a state chapter board member but I've been a part of our group for many years. I've had the opportunity to serve on the national board for the last 2 years. So I have a long-standing relationship both with MN APSE and now with National APSE. Beyond my connections through APSE, my professional job or professional hat I wear is at the University of Minnesota's Institute on Community Integration (ICI). ICI in MN is MN's designated University Center for Excellence in Developmental Disabilities or UCEDD. And that is part of a national network of University centers around the country who study disability policy and services, conduct research, do training and technical assistance. The ICI is MN's UCEDD. One other nugget I'd add is that while I've been with the University of Minnesota for 11 years, I'll be making a transition in the month of June to become the UCEDD Director for the Institute on Disability at the University of New Hampshire. STill similar things, just in a different state.

Jenny: That's very exciting, I know MN will be sad to lose you. What a great opportunity for you to take on a new leadership role as a UCEDD Director! Congratulations on that!

We're so excited to have you join us for this conversation. When we first talked about you joining us, it was within the context of "the COVID environment" that we're in. you have a unique perspective in that you are primarily a researcher and you're looking at employment services and supports for people with disabilities (PWD). I wonder if you'll start off by talking about your search focus pre-COVID and then we'll shift to how that has changed in this new COVID environment.

Kelly: Yeah it does have some similarities and some differences and challenges and opportunities in both environments. And while I do in training and by credential am ar researcher, I am also a social worker by training. A strong motivation for me and my colleagues is this intersection between policy, services, research, and advocacy. This loop that continually informs each of those ingredients together. Jenny you referred to it once as a "policy/research" loop and we can't have one without the other.

In the Pre-COVID environment I've spent the last few years with my colleagues in MN but also some colleagues from the University of Massachusetts Boston studying the daily activities of employment consultants (ESPs). That can mean business developers, job developers, or job coaches. They go by different names but generally, we think of Employment consultants as those really bridging job seekers with disabilities with employers. In many circumstances, you can think of the employment consultants as the direct support professionals specializing in employment supports.

For the last couple of years, we look at how do ECs spend their day. Who do they spend it with? Where are they doing those things? What are they doing? What are their outcomes - and by that we mean, what are the numbers and types of placements they're supporting people to get? What are the hourly earnings nad benefits job seekers are receiving once they're hired.

One fo the things we have looked at daily support activities is using a daily survey. That survey has gone out to hundreds of ECs thanks to the APSE Network. They would get a text message on their phone, click a link and it would ask them "What are you doing? Where are you doing? And who are you doing it with?" as a primary question.

Jenny: Such a unique research model, I love it!

Kelly: Yes, I definitely have to give a shout out to my colleagues at the University of Massachusetts's Institute for Community inclusion as well as we've been joint partners in this work. We have many iterations of using this survey as part of different interventions. Ultimately we're trying to understand not just their activities, but what were the kinds of things that got ot the outcomes we wanted of more people getting jobs, longer placements, maybe needing less support over time.

But now, in the COVID environment, the types of supports or how people are being supported in employment do look different. If you think about how employment has changed for so many of us around the country, the way that people are getting jobs, the way job seekers are getting connected to employers… even the ways ECs are interacting with job seekers and employers look completely different.

Jenny: Or if they're interacting at all…

Kelly: Yes! We had a study that was just getting ready to roll out at the start of the first early COVID outbreak in March. We were going to be doing qualitative interviews, these 1 to 1 open ended questions with a select group of ECs. many of whom we've connected with through APSE, to ask them about how do they make decisions on what kinds of supports they provide. How do you know when you're working with a job seeker to do this or that? How do you make a decision when an employer brings these challenges or opportunities?

Now, we have re-imagined what that research will look like. We'll still ask questions about how ECs do their jobs and what kinds of supports they use, but more specific questions about how COVID has impacted them as professionals, the organizations that employ them (employment providers, or community rehabilitation providers CRPs). Also, we'll have questions about how COVID is impacting the job seekers they're working with, people in that job search process or avoiding following along supports. We guess it's going to look pretty different.

Jenny: Sure, that seems like a logical assumption to be made. How are you, or will you assess or be able to assess folks who employment consultants/Employment support professionals (ESPs) are impacted in terms of their own work in the COVID reality? Are you concerned about the number of participants or networks you'll access?

Kelly: I do think that will be part of it, which it's a challenge in lots of types of research. How do you recruit the right participants at the right time? We have a pretty robust list because we've been doing this kind of work for a number of years. We've had several hundred employment consultants participate in the daily surveys and interventions, as well as through APSE. I think finding people who are willing to share their experiences will hopefully be pretty easy.

That said, we also know through some fo the work we do at UNM that the direct support workforce has been dramatically impacted by COVID 19 in a variety of ways, either from being laid off, working more or less hours, working in different settings. Not having a job at all, or completely losing their job… and so wone fo the things that we really do want to collect some data around is what has that done for ECs and employment professionals around the country as this time. We hear anecdotally in the news, in our email, about what is happening. Part of the value of research is collecting data in a scientific and structured way so we can find different types of meaning in that. Looking for themes, common experiences… by using a more rigorous method of gathering data we are able to more scientifically tease out those themes, ideas, findings and hopefully in a more meaningful and impactful way beyond individual anecdotal experiences.

Jenny: And this is a sector of the workforce that until COVID became a reality, we were struggling to find qualified candidates to work as Employment consultants, right? We had a presidential report on the workforce crisis among direct support professionals. I know that APSE has worked hard to help create pathways to careers and employment within the field. I'm particularly interested in how the workforce has been impacted by COVID and not only how they'll do their work differently, if the work even exists.

It's so interesting, I wonder if we could go back to some of the research you had done before. You spoke about the research where you sent a random text message to the participating ECs asking them those 3 questions about their work. Can you talk a little about the findings you found within that research? What were the overall findings and were there any surprises you found in that?

Kelly: Well there's always lots of surprises of things you think you'll see and then things of "oh I didn't know that would happen!" I think one fo the things that again we know anecdotally as an industry but we were really able to tease it out in seeing thousands of data points of people sharing their daily activities… many ECs spend a very large portion fo their day in administrative activities. We know both in evidence-based practices and in our professional experiences that the best way to support people to find and maintain jobs is those personal connections. It's when you're in the community, meeting with job seekers and employers. But when --

Jenny: It's not when you're sitting at your desk…

Kelly: Correct, correct. But we know again from looking at these daily activities of ECs that actually a lot people do spend a lot of time at their office, and a lot of time on paperwork. About 30% of any given day is spent on administrative paperwork, whether it's writing reports, charting data, case notes, billing summaries. That's not to say administrative activities don't play an important role and value, but what it does tell us is that … well, sometimes we're surprised by why aren't we getting better outcomes for people? But if you're spending 30% of your day in activities that aren't helping someone get a job, we shouldn't really be surprised at our results. In that regard, the amount of time that people are spending in that administrative space is pretty high. It's not really a binary of that's good or this is bad, it's a more articulate insight as to how we behave as employment professionals.

Another key finding, not just through our daily survey but also our other lines of research on this theme, is that EC activities or how ECs do their job are dramatically impacted by the culture and nature of the organization. We meet many ECs where their job primarily is to connect job seekers with employers. But we also meet and have heard from many ECs who also have some transportation responsibilities, or maybe thy work in a day or employment program, other roles. There really is no sort of traditional or typical EC, but how an individual's' job is structured, and the culture within that organization, really has a strong impact on how ECs behave. Again, not in behaving good or bad, and sometimes it might seem very obvious but we do have data that really reflects some of the features within an organization that can really impact the employment outcomes people are achieving just based on how much time and investment they support their ECs in. That was not necessarily a dramatic finding but now we have the data to show there is a level of evidence around how organizations support their ECs.

Jenny: And it's also the point at which we talk about the most basic tenet of research and drawing conclusions of research, that difference between correlation and causation. I am so

curious about organizational culture. Maybe that's a conversation for a different day, but I wonder if there's anything any one within your network or other networks doing research on that aspect of organizational culture. Because that's the really fascinating part for me.

Kelly: And it's so interesting you say that Jenny because I think for those within APSE who really care about our field, and there are thousands of us, it's sort of like where do we put our investment. Do we put it in research around job seekers themselves? In supports for direct support professionals and ECs? On organizational capacity? Or hey wait a minute, maybe we should put more investment into researching policy. And the answer is we need all of it.

Jenny: Right, the answer is YES!

Kelly: Yeah, yes. It's yes to everything! One of the things we really worked hard at in our partnership between MN and MA is that we've really tried to experiment with different types of interventions over the years to say where can we get the most traction in improving outcomes? Is it really through empowering job seeker sand family members? Is it that we need to make sure the ECs have the best training and support? Or do we need to think about how organizations restructure to support employment and make meaningful change? It comes back to all those components.

That said, we also want to find scalable interventions that work across environments. One of the things that can be an often hard truth in research is are people researching things that really matter? I would argue in this case and across our UCEDD networks, we want to do research that helps improve the quality of supports. If we can understand how ECs are spending their day, we can really understand what kind of supports do they need to be the most effective in their job. If we can understand what types of tools or structures so organizations can make database decisions...we care about that stuff. Some of our future work between MA and MN will focus on an intervention about strategies to support ECs using that daily survey and also some strategies and supports for organizations that employ them. How do you make database decision making? How do you create meaningful feedback loops for your consultants? How do you make sure you're giving your ECs a wide berth so they can deploy best practices. The reality is that some of the support that we know can produce the best outcomes can be uncomfortable for organizations.

One of the examples I'll say, an APSE colleague of mine said "hanging out with intent." I think that comes from some discovery or DIscovering Personal Genius language… is your employer going to pay for you to hang out with intent with a job seeker? Many organizations are really uncomfortable. Like what can you learn about a job seeker by playing frisbee golf? Or spending an hour in their home?

Well, we know, anecdotally from our ECs, that you get a lot out of those experiences. Yet many employment organizations aren't to a place yet where they feel really comfortable with ECs engaging in certain types of behaviors. It's like "well does that actually produce the outcomes

we want? Can we justify to our funders that we have an EC playing frisbee golf with a job seeker?" And these are tough questions.

Jenny: Right, and they're tough in terms of what are the ethics of the work and what are the ethics of the relationship between the EC and the individual/jobseeker? And where are those boundaries? I can absolutely appreciate how that notion of "hanging out with intent" can certainly have a positive impact on an outcome and make employers uncomfortable. That… yeah… that makes sense.

Kelly: It's a really uncomfortable space. So part of again when we look at what are the functions and goals of our research, ultimately we want to improve employment outcomes for people with disabilities (particularly those with intellectual or developmental disabilities).

With that said, we also are very motivated by improving how employment consultants get support, training, and guidance in their positions. We care a lot about helping organizations to work as effectively as possible. And we really want to make sure within our state and federal government/agencies, we have policies that can make these types of supports as seamless or smooth as possible. It's this multi-pronged approach.

One reference I'd encourage people to take a look at, it's called the 10 Elements of Organizational Transformation and it is put out by the folks at the Institute for Community Inclusion at UMASS Boston. If you google it, you'll get it. It's a great piece of work they did that informs our EC work around what do organizations need to be doing and focused on to not only increase competitive integrated employment but also move from maybe a dependence on a facility-based or segregated program to one that's more or fully community-based. I encourage folks to look at that. While there are some essential elements high performing organizations are doing, it's not a matter of just doing 1 or 2 and saying "we are a transformed organization." It's more about commitment to quality and improvement over time. To say if we're going to continually improve employment outcomes we as an organization need to pay attention to multiple things. It's a great resource, especially as you had mentioned, organizations are using best practices.

Jenny: It also sounds like a great resource because one of the first impacts of COVID 19 pandemic that we saw amongst service providers was the closing of day programs and of loosely termed "congregate settings." Any place that people would come to gather as a group, those were some of the first programs closed. It's such an amazing opportunity right now so the resource you're sharing from ICI Boston is really timely in terms of helping provider agencies re-imagine what that day program might look like in a sort of post-COVID environment. How do we continue to provide supports for individuals with disabilities so that they aren't socially isolated? So that they are getting services and supports and also get them in a safe and healthy environment?

Kelly: That's such an important point I think, Jenny. There's a number of silver linings in the COVID crisis that we are in. There really are, and sometimes we have to focus on the silver linings to help us get through.

Jenny: Make it through the day, yeah!

Kelly: Well, we're heard this from a number of organizations in a technical assistance project we have with employment providers in MN. We heard from a number of them talking about how they were on a journey of transformation. They say now their buildings are shut down now and they'll never be reopened or look the same way again in a post-COVID environment. And that's good and bad…

Jenny: Right...

Kelly: Some organizations have strategically positioned themselves for more community-based supports. Other organizations have, or are, recognizing that the world in how we do business will drastically change. There can be good on the other side of this.

Another silver lining in thinking about how do services look post-COVID is another one of our APSE colleagues had said on a webinar that she and I did last week, she said often times we struggle to have language for "what is it that we do as employment professionals?" When we talk about customized employment, supported employment, sometimes it can be a novel term to someone who doesn't work in our industry. Maya said what we're doing in living today is customized employment. Our jobs look different, our schedules look different, the technology looks different. She reminded folks on the webinar that we all have language for what customized employment is, and we all now have experiences for what customized employment is so when we talk to employers in the new/different economy, we'll have some concrete experiences to say "PWD not only can and want to work, but they can work with a variety of accommodations or set-ups that we've given to all types of employees.

Jenny: Exactly.

Kelly: So that part is really exciting and when Maya framed it that way, I think it resonated with certainly myself but many of our audience members. There are some changes we'll have to see and we need to try to position ourselves to be prepared for when our economics and our providers will open. And there are some good things that can come out of that as well.

Jenny: The other part of that that I hear is that I want to say out loud is that we, as in society, now have this shared experience around feeling socially isolated and feeling disconnected from the community that we value. Feeling, powerless in our day to day activities and our work. Not only have we shared experience around customized employment, we have this shared language because so many of us are working in very different work environments and doing that work differently in the day to day and using technology to support that work all the time… But

we also have some of those social experiences that individuals with disabilities experience all too often in their sense of isolation, disconnection, and that. And no, it's not a silver lining…but it does give us a frame of reference to have conversations going forward about bringing employment, competitive integrated employment for people with disabilities into sort of a post-COVID reality.

Kelly: To your point Jenny it gives us new shared experiences from which to draw from. You pointed out on the positive side, we'll have words and experiences for customized employment. But also some fo the sadder sides, we have common experiences around social isolation, disconnection, or feeling a sense of purpose when we're in our homes all of the time. Again, there are both challenges and opportunities in that and I think circling to where we started talking about research as we do these interviews with ECs starting this week, to be really able to unpack what some of that looks and feels like for employment professionals. Certainly, we can identify some of our own experiences but hearing that from the folks on the front lines, both with job seeker sand employers, I think we'll hear some things we don't expect in both good and bad ways.

Jenny: Right right. Well, Kelly, this has been a really great conversation. We knew this would happen, we could continue talking for a long time. You've mentioned a couple of resources and things that we will be sure to put into notes so anyone listening can click on them and see things we're talking about. Thank you so much for joining us and talking about your research and this COVID environment and reality we find our selves in. It's been a pleasure and we wish you the best of luck in your transition to New Hampshire!

Kelly: Thank you so much, Jenny. I want to again express my gratitude both to APSE. You know to my many colleagues at MN and UMASS Boston because we are really working hard to improve practices and services through research. There are a lot of different pathways to move forward to do that. It was enjoyable to be able to share some of the nuggets we've learned along the way. I would definitely encourage people to check out thinkwork.org or visit ICI.umn.edu. There are other great strong resources through VCU at worksupport.org or worksupport.com. Again, thank you for the time. Thanks to folks who have listened today. If you have questions, comments, ideas about research. Find me through the APSE website!

Jenny: That's right, under the national board!
Kelly: Thanks, Jenny, have a wonderful day!
Jenny: Thanks, Kelly take care!
Kelly: Bye bye.
Jenny: Bye.