



Podcast Transcript
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Federal Updates: With Julie Christensen, Policy and Advocacy

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.

SUMMARY KEYWORDS

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SPEAKERS

Julie Christensen

00:09

Hi, this is Jenny Stonemeier with APSE. We're excited to launch the APSE Employment First, Employment for all podcast as a new way to connect with you. And as a way to provide updates real time advocacy alerts and information related to all things Employment First, be sure to subscribe so you don't miss an episode. And thanks for listening.

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So without further ado, I am tasked with giving a little bit of a federal policy update and then Brooke is going to kind of bring it home in terms of Iowa. So I'm going to admit that I reached out to Kari earlier today because I was like I am such debbie downer. I don't know what to say to ice because there is no good news. What should I do and Kari, the ever amazing support, supportive co member of staff and part of the team was like, just tell the truth. So there you go, that's what you're going to get from me.

So things are not great in the world of disability policy. So let me just kind of recap where we're at first, first and foremost is that right now the only thing moving at the federal level in relation to disability policy is in response to COVID. The last congressional relief package that was passed, was back in March, you might remember this thing called the cares act. It was five months ago, which feels like five years ago. That was a pretty comprehensive bill. That provided relief in a number of different capacities, but did not include as we talked about at the last quarterly

meeting, and he targeted funding or relief for people with disabilities for the service systems that support people with disabilities and for the funding streams, that funds those services and supports. So we have been actively engaged for many, many months.

The house introduced the heroes act in May. We were somewhat, I will say, happy with the package in terms of our asks, but it still fell pretty short in terms of what we know is needed in the field and what we were hearing from all of you and from others around the country. But regardless, it was a start. The hope was that that package would be passed early in the summer and that we would have an opportunity to negotiate another stimulus package going into the fall. Obviously that has not happened. The Senate has not yet responded to the heroes act. And all talks at this point are stalled.

As of last week, the plan was to reconvene the Senate in September after the August recess. It would be a very tight window to put a package together because we are up against the election cycle. But also returning in September is appropriations time. And so passing a relief bill at the same time that we're looking at budgets for 2021 and beyond, is certainly a daunting task. We are anticipating continuing resolutions from Congress for a number of reasons. Are, I'm sure obvious. But I do want to say that the election is playing a key part, both in appropriations but also in COVID. Release. One of the things that became really apparent as the Senate in house were trying to negotiate a package for is that there's very little will to entertain I have an extensive package in general, but no one wants to touch Medicaid or social security prior to the election. And a lot of the relief that we were looking at fell into those two categories. And that was making folks on both sides of the aisle relatively nervous. It is something that we're continuing to push for.

For Iowa in particular, we know that Money Follows the Person the current Medicaid extender for that is set to expire on November 30. So that's the timeline we're up against in terms of MFP a lot of the other pieces of the cares act have now timed out. So the unemployment benefits the the P P P loans and some of the other pieces and parts that were helping to sustain Disability Services did expire the end of July without renewal. So that's kind of where we're at all though, because now happens in a silo.

There is some scuttlebutt that both the House and the Senate will return early to address Postal Service funding leading up until the election. And so there is a very small possibility that there will be an opportunity to get some language into what will essentially be a stopgap bill if they choose to do that. It's unclear every day is a new story about that. But at this point, they are the house is supposed to vote on Saturday. And the Senate is supposed to be coming back at some point next week around postal service. So we're continuing to look at what opportunities there are within that package.

So all in all, I would say the outlook is bleak. I am sitting outside because I need sunlight to remind me that you know, the sun does indeed rise because it's depressing. I'm going to tell you, you guys know you're in the weeds of doing that. The actual work I absolutely internalized

the secondary trauma of feeling completely inadequate to convince anybody to do the right thing to make sure that you all are getting the supports that you need to do the work that you do so well. But we continue to march on.

So package for the outlook is not great for all the reasons that I mentioned. Postal Service stopgap bill aside, the plan is for there to be some sort of a small bill released in September. with Congress not coming back to mid September. We're not looking at that happening before the end of September at the earliest. which we all know is is going to be too late. What we also know is that we likely have one shot so Postal Service stopgap aside it is unlikely that there will be more than the currently negotiated package prior to the election, we're just too close to that milestone for Congress to feel comfortable making any significant fiscal decisions. So next steps and timing.

We are continuing to advocate really around three primary areas we the best shot we had on the Medicaid front was the asked for some dedicated funding for home and community based services and on APSE's end, we've been adding comma, including employment services. To make it clear that when we're talking about home and community based services, we need some of that funding to filter down to ltss employment. Full VR allocation is another critical aspect. That should be a relatively easy ask because those are dollars that are already in the existence. Federal Budget, it does not require more money. But it does require congressional approval and some other hoops to jump through to allow the full state allocation of federal dollars for VR to be made to the states with no contingencies for the states to have to meet the 15% match. That one we know is critical because state budgets we're just starting to hear some of the impact of covid on state budgets and we're hearing in many states across the board cuts to rates both on the Medicaid and the vocational rehabilitation side. This should be a pretty easy lift, just to convince the federal government to release the full amount and to waive that 15% match. I will say in case you're really in the weeds of this there is a there's another ask that is floating to waive the 15%. And APSE is not supporting that. And I will tell you why.

We recognize that implementation of presets has been difficult. However, we know that many aspects of presets are able to be delivered virtually right now. And there are some great examples of where that's happening around the country that we're trying to raise awareness of. We also know that we're heading into a just bizarre 2020 2021 education year, and quite frankly, any dollars to support successful transition of youth to outcomes to positive outcomes, we want to see that funding remain in place. We know that there's a lot of barriers to that, but are continuing to work on that. And we're also advocating around the extender of the payment Protection Program. more dollars available, greater eligibility and longer time frames. So those are the key messages right now.

I mentioned the COVID survey. I encourage you all to take a look at that. But this was really a down and dirty opportunity to showcase to Congress, the direct impact on disability employment outcomes and services and service providers. So we did a two week national survey we got over 600 responses. And we found some really interesting stuff that if I am successful at sharing

my screen right now, I'm going to just very quickly run through Can you see it Can you see it? Alright, thumbs up.

So these are hard to see but you can see them better in link that I sent you. Words not working. Okay, so I'm just going to do this real quick. So we know in the beginning stages, so this data was collected in June. So this was, you know, sort of the April may impact of what was going on. We know this information is already out of date. But that being said, here's where we were, where we were at as of June 67%, decrease in VR referrals, 43% slowing of Medicaid reimbursements. A lot of this piece has been ironed out a lot of this was just systems trying to figure out how to work remotely. And we know that that's challenging. But we wanted to dig a little bit deeper. So what the charts are showing is, we did survey on furloughing of direct support professionals in the employment sector, specifically job coaches, job developers and the like. And we asked a couple of questions around that. How many have been furloughed or laid off? And what is the likelihood of those positions being rehired? Based on the fiscal situation we were all in in June 22%. At that point was the projected national loss in direct employment supports across the country based on where we were at in June. Some things have improved, others have not. We saw a lot of services closing, not surprising to see facility based services closing because of COVID and the congregate settings concerns, but a lot of other services closing as well. preeto programs, supported employment, customized employment. And so that's obviously very concerning. And then the only thing we really did get out of the great cares package back in March was the PPP loans. And we wanted to figure out how that was impacting us. And what we found out was that 50% of providers actually Applied lots of reasons why they didn't, that we have given that feedback to Congress in terms of more funding. But of those who did apply only 45% received alone, which means overall 23% of Disability Employment Service Providers received help from the PPP program. So kind of goes to show a little bit of the scope of what we're up against.

And then there's some bad news, good news. We did see some early job losses for people with disabilities. We did we expected that at the time. Those job losses were keeping pace with the general population. So we were not seeing in the early stages that people with disabilities were disproportionately losing their jobs. And when we looked at market sector, not surprising where the majority of those job losses initially happened, as as businesses and communities shuttered, you know, and people had to go home Obviously a lot of the retail out of the service sector. But here's the more important news despite all of the stress on the system and the stress on the work that all of you guys do on a daily basis that I just described, people with disabilities were also getting jobs that were filling essential worker jobs during the pandemic. And they were primarily doing it in manufacturing, in retail, particularly distribution centers, but also grocery stores and the like in healthcare settings.

And in the General Service population, so what we saw was an initial, an initial Exodus, but then a very quick opportunity for people with disabilities to fill essential jobs. That comes with a lot of other stuff that we did not have good data on at the time in terms of the safety of workers in general, not just people with disabilities. But I think the good news is that we are We'll go so far

as to say I get yelled at when I say this, but I but I think we have a pretty strong case, to say that our economy during the crisis, relied on people with disabilities. The types of jobs that were essential jobs, were always disproportionately filled by people with disabilities. To begin with, not to mention that people with disabilities were entering the workforce to fill essential jobs when, as they were becoming available. And so that is good news and something we can build on.

So that is what we knew in June. It is now August. We know things in some ways might have improved, but in many ways, things are even more challenging. So next week, please keep an eye out. We are doing a follow up survey. To get some current information, we'll be able to do sort of a compare and contrast have, you know, sort of where we were at in June and where we're at and, you know, August, September.

This is really critical because in terms of timing, we will be putting together an executive summary before the end of September of what is happening within Disability Services, to get that to congressional leaders, as they're looking at the next coded relief package. So, keep an eye out for that link and help us get the word out. We want to get as many responses as we can across the country. Also tying into National Disability Employment Awareness Month, we will be doing a focus on telling stories of essential workers during the pandemic and so we could use help from you amazing lowans and helping to tell those stories as well be that people with disabilities working in essential jobs, service providers, supporting people to work in those jobs or employers themselves who have retained or hired people with disabilities during the pandemic to fill these jobs.

The idea is That a combination of targeted stories as well as some data on what is happening in the service system, that we can align this to go along side the negotiations for the next COVID package, as well as leading into the election. So, I think, you know, we can't really there's nothing I can say about what happens in December, because we need to see what happens in November.

But there's a lot of work that we can be doing to try to at least get, you know, raise some awareness and do some education, about what's happening and what the impact has been. of the pandemic.

And I also want to give a shout out to two awesome ice members who are doing really cool things on a national level that I just want to make sure folks are aware of Page Easton the fabulous Page Easton did a huge favor for me and with that like three days notice did an awesome overview of Iowa APSE's day on the hill for a panel of different approaches around the country to engaging in state advocacy. So super, super grateful to Page and to, to Iowa APSE and ICIE for all the work that you guys continue to do, as well as the amazing Bill Stumpf, who is actively engaged in a coalition of individuals with disabilities and family members who are working with the Biden campaign right now on what policy priorities need to be put in place, heading into the election and depending on what happens with the election heading into

January, so just want to acknowledge that Iowa continues to be on the forefront of all things policy and disability employment, rightfully so has been certainly the history and the legacy and it's so Super exciting for me to be able to continue to watch that and support it.