

APSE Conversations: TX APSE with Britni Miles, Part 1

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Julie Christensen 0:10

Hi, this is Julie Christensen with APSE, we're excited to launch the APSE Employment First employment for all podcast as a new way to connect with you. This podcast is 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.

Erica Belois-Pacer 0:36

Thank you for joining us today. This is Erica Belois- Pacer from National APSE , and I am the professional development director there. So I get to do a lot of fun podcasts with members and folks in the field of Employment First and working with people with disabilities. So today we have a real treat. Britni Miles is with us today. And she lives in the state of Texas. And she actually played a huge part in starting their new chapter. So I thought it would be great to have her on to talk about her experience, where she came from and how she got started with it. So welcome, Britni. I guess I'll start off with if you want to just give us a little information about yourself. And maybe just let us know how you first got connected with APSE.

Britni Miles 1:27

Yeah, absolutely. Erica, thank you so much for having me on the podcast. I'm really passionate about apps and Employment First. And so any opportunity I get to just shout Employment First from the rooftops. I'm really excited to be here to do that today. And of course, starting a new chapter is something that I'm very familiar with and would want to encourage other states to do as well. So my name is Britni Miles. Like Erica mentioned, I am currently living in the state of Texas. But my journey in supported employment started in Washington State. And I started at 19 years old, I kind of got fell into the industry. I guess you could say one of my mentors recruited me at a young age. But I graduated from the University of Washington and at the time, there was not a disability studies major. So I majored in law, society and justice with an emphasis in disability studies, and then a minor in political science. So not only did I start so young in the field, but I also had some educational background. And every summer I would intern at an agency in a nonprofit in Olympia, Washington, while I was still pursuing my undergrad called Morningside. So I got some hands on experience with group supported employment and individual employment. And then when it came time to graduate, it was, oh, my goodness, it was 2008 2009 downturn of the economy. And I just really wanted to work for Morningside full time as an employment consultant. And but they didn't have the funding for me yet. So I did a little bit of work in the school systems as a substitute teacher until I was able to be hired on know that. Yeah, very briefly. And so, but it came full circle, because eventually

I'm learning sight. I was the transition manager. So our high school transition program, and I managed that department. So it was kind of it's perfect. Yeah. And so I connections at the school. Yes, absolutely. And I think anyone listening to this podcast, if you've worked in high school transition, it's something that once you're in, you're in it for life, and you just are passionate and love it. And so I still say that's one of my favorite jobs that I've had so far. Absolutely. And anyway, but how I got connected with APSE is once I was full time with morning side, but right before the CESP was be the certified employment support professional, I'm really bad at utilizing acronyms. And everyone's like, what, what what, hopefully everyone on this podcast knows what the CESP is, though. Right when it was in development, and right, I was part of a pilot program to do a special employment certificate through a community college in Washington. And so I had a year's worth of really wonderful training from experts in the field and it went through the history of Disability Studies to the disability rights movement then to job development and long term support job coaching. And that was supposed to prepare you for the CESP. And so about a year later, I took the CESP in Washington and then and while I was progressing through my career, and my husband got a new job in Texas, and I tell people that I, yeah, I tell people, it wasn't my choice to move to Texas, but I love it. I really do. And but I was nervous. I was nervous going from Washington State, a leader and supported employment and employment for people with disabilities to to Texas, and I thought the only opportunity I had to advance my career would be working in a sheltered workshop. And I just wasn't prepared to do that. Because I've worked really hard in in Washington to help move people from group supported employment, sheltered employment, to community integrated employment. And that was a principle that I firmly Stand by. And that's why I am inspired to be a part of APSE. See, because that's a philosophy that we share. So coming to Texas, I only cried on my pillow twice, at least is what I've told people. But it's been a stark difference.

And Washington, 86% of people with IDD are employed in competitive integrated employment. In Texas, it's actually gone down in the last year, it's only 6%. So I was really fortunate to be able to be hired by a provider that was known for day rehabilitation, but was merging with the longest standing employment agency in the DFW Metroplex. And so I got put in charge of that program. And, you know, three and a half years later, you know, we've done some really innovative stuff, and we're trying to move the needle. And since we're still on me and my professional development, I actually am starting a new job. I don't Did I tell you this? Erica, I don't know if I told you this. But I'm going to be working for the Institute of community and heard, did you hear that? Okay,

Erica Belois-Pacer 7:37

I heard through the grapevine that you would be taking on a new role, which is very exciting. Congratulations. But I'll let you talk a little bit about it as well.

Britni Miles 7:46

Yeah, thank you so much. I am really excited about two. It's really a dream job. If I got to task bundle customize a position for me, it would absolutely be what I'll be doing at the University of Massachusetts, with ICI, so I am very excited. I start March 8. And so I'm still employed in Texas,

and I'll still be here in Texas, I'm still gonna remain Texas APSE president. So really excited to continue that work and work from home. So that's me in a nutshell. Yeah, thank you.

Erica Belois-Pacer 8:31

So when you went to Texas, I pretty sure there was not an APSE chapter. And I know, like you said before, they were very involved in the state of Washington. So I guess, what were your first steps in looking to start a chapter?

Britni Miles 8:48

Yeah, so coming to Texas, I needed to make friends, I needed to make friends personally and professionally. And I've still like, not as socially integrated as I would like to be. But and I knew that what Texas was missing was what I really craved as a professional in the industry. And that is just being able to share ideas with like minded professionals that inspire one another. And also there needed to be some drastic change systems change to our vocational rehabilitation and our Medicaid waiver provider systems. And I knew I couldn't do that alone. And so the timing was really great where the agency that I worked for, that had they were a part of a merger with the employment agency called launch ability. And what happened was we got some a significant grant in order to merge together called the better together foundation and we got to use that money.

How we could be better together. And one of my initial thoughts was, well, we need to do some systems change, not only would that improve our services for people with disabilities, but it would also improve services at a statewide level which is, which is needed terribly in the state of Texas. And so we were able to devote a portion of my FTE my full time employment to the cause of starting a Texas APSE chapter. And so those I started with the people I knew which one of our board members at the company that I currently work for my possibilities, was really well connected. She's a former Special Education Director. And she had known that the Texas APSE chapter was was trying it was, had been established, but was waiting or had hadn't filed their their IRS tax exempt status. And so they they cease to exist about seven years ago. But she knew some of the board members from from back then and connected me. So I was able to make friends, like I said, and across the state with like minded professionals.

So we were able to get together. And we wanted to do this right, because we knew that from lessons learned from the previous chapter, that Texas being such a big state was difficult to keep momentum going. And we didn't want to be Austin centric or Dallas centric. We really wanted out all providers in the state and Employment First minded advocates in the state to be a part of the Texas APSE chapter. So we were very intentional when when we got going. And we partnered with UNTWise out of Denton, Texas, which is the statewide credentialer for vocational rehabilitation and in Texas. And they happen to have the listserv of all the credentialed employment consultants across the state, and we're able to get the word out, right.

It's all about meeting friends, I'm telling you. And we were able to get the word out across the state that we were interested in starting this chapter up again. And like I said, it was very

intentional. So we did a survey monkey, and we wanted to make sure people would get something out of their membership if they were to join and be a part of the Texas APSE each chapter. So we asked questions about what does Employment First mean to you? What would a Texas APSE chapter do for you and your, in your professional career and beyond, and we wanted to gauge interest and the interest was overwhelming from that survey response. So we decided to have a Texas APSE chapter kickoff meeting. And it was a webinar. And, you know, lessons learned, we set it up as a goto meeting has opposed to a Go To Webinar. So everyone that registered, we actually had to cap it at, like 60 people.

And therefore a lot of people didn't get into that kickoff meeting. But luckily, we recorded it and sent it out across the state, but it just shows you how

Erica Belois-Pacer 13:37

That's a good problem to have.

Britni Miles 13:39

Right? Yeah, we just it just shows you that we had 30 people in person attend the meeting. And then we had over 60, who even knows how many we're trying to to get into the to the kickoff. And so we talked about the problems that Texas has in terms of implementing competitive integrated employment. And we talked about, you know what the past APSE each chapter did and what it would mean to start a new APSE t chapter. And we did a call for board members so that we could get people and get this chapter started. And I had a lot of help from national as well. So maybe the checklists and and keeping tabs, because it was quite a process. I'd say the longest part was kind of out of our control. And that is once we filed our chapter with the Secretary of State's office COVID hit and we actually sent in mailed in documents, and there was no one working to process in person paperwork. So we didn't get our IRS tax exempt status until like seven months later. So I say that we've you know, just recently became a chapter officially at the end of 2020

However, we've been doing this for almost two years trying to get this this going. And we've actually done a lot of work before we were even an official chapter. Because like I said, it's all about making friends and networking and really having a common vision. And we were able to do a lot before we were even an official chapter before we even had dues coming in, we were able to advocate to our VR system and advocate to our Medicaid waiver system for some real change. And we've already started to affect some real change. So and that's, that's the story.

Erica Belois-Pacer 15:44

I was gonna mention that, you know, and I, it does feel like it's been two years. But I guess probably, obviously, COVID did not help being thrown in there in terms of turnaround. But I agree, I feel like you've already been doing a lot of great work. Britni I I won't take your thunder away. Would you mind talking a little bit about the different things that you've had published and kind of some of those impacts that you've had on the state?

Britni Miles 16:14

Yeah, absolutely. I'd be I kind of shared that. In Texas employment outcomes for people with IDD are not great. And a part of that reason is we as service providers rely heavily on the vocational rehabilitation system, because long term support or even pre employment before going into VR support is really non existent and not accessible to many Medicaid eligible waiver eligible individuals across the state. In fact, it's a 17 year waitlist to get on Medicaid waiver, as well as once you're even on

Erica Belois-Pacer 16:56

Oh my gosh.

Britni Miles 16:57

Right? Yeah, yeah. Sad. Once you're even on it...

Erica Belois-Pacer 17:02

How does that? How does that work? So 17 years, but like, what age are people typically when they try to, I guess, get on the waiting list?

Britni Miles 17:14

It varies, and it really depends on you know, parent education early on, and when they signed up, and, you know, we have a few different waivers, and some have longer waitlist than others. And but I'll just put a plug out there. If you go to the Texas atsi Facebook page, one of our board members, Doreen Gill, talked about her brother's story. And Josh Holloway, who owns his own business is a person with IDD. And he's 55. And about five years ago, just was able to get on the Medicaid waiver and open his own business and have not realized that. Yeah, and so when you think about what opportunities for employment when someone needs maybe customized employment or long term support with an employment consultant, I mean, you're not going to get that with vocational rehabilitation because it is meant to be a short term service. Once you've reached stability and case closure, then you're rehabilitated. And the way that people with significant disabilities are with IDD remain employed and progress in their careers. And sometimes it needs some support and that support looks different looks more but that that main support is through the Medicaid waiver system. And so it's been difficult as providers trying to get people with the most significant disabilities employed in good jobs when only access is really through through VR.

So the Texas isn't it needed some change and still need some change. And in fact that sb 50 is our employment first implementation. So we've had Employment First on the books in Texas for almost eight years. But there just hasn't been that implementation, and specifically on the Medicaid waiver side of things. And so we, to get back to your question, what we've already done so far in the state of Texas is our policy committees on fire. And I think COVID really just threw gas on the flames and we were able to write a position paper to Texas Workforce Commission, which is our vocational rehabilitation agency, and then also to hhsc Health and Human Services Commission which implements the Medicaid waiver system about just the injustices that are happening for me employment services for people with disabilities and TWC took note. They started listening to providers in the state of Texas. And we met with the policy

director, the policy, Texas APSE. The policy committee met with the Texas Workforce Commission, vocational rehabilitation policy director about six times after we published our position paper and went over point by point what needed to change and we did offer some solutions. And what came out of that is a systems redesign for supported employment.

Erica Belois-Pacer 20:39

Due to technical difficulties. Britni is in Texas, and I'm sure many of you know that there's been storms and a lot of damage, so their internet capabilities are a little hit or miss. We're going to redo the second part of this. So look for this part two of this podcast talking a little bit more about what Texas is doing, ready to move Employment First forward, it will be coming up next week. So thank you again for joining us and we look forward to next week.

Transcribed by <https://otter.ai>