

APSE Conversations: Brittany Edwards-Sharpe with New Mexico

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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.

Kari Tietjen

Well, welcome to an APSE podcast, my name is Kari Tietjen, I'm the certification director with national APSE, and I'm located in Iowa, and I'm really excited to be on another APSE podcast. I've started doing more hosting of these usually I've been on the back end so me making a hosting appearance isn't the worst thing. My role since the podcast. I'm really excited to be featuring CESP's and APSE members, people from across the United States that are really doing cool things around disability and employment. I'm going to be joined by one of my favorites that I get to work with on committees, and that's Brittany Edwards Sharpe, out of New Mexico. So, welcome to the podcast.

Brittany Edwards-Sharpe

Thank you. Yeah. Again, my name is Brittany and I work as an education specialist at the Center for Development and Disability which is housed under the University of New Mexico, and we focus mainly on training, but we do some really cool things within what our department, our division is called which is partners for employment with students in schools, but mostly my side of things is the adult side in training provider agencies and staff.

Kari Tietjen

Well I've never been to New Mexico. I was supposed to go in 2020 and present because we've had this great partnership between your program, and especially you, helping to lead some initiatives for employment support professionals. So, I hope that I get to visit one day and meet some of the professionals that you've gotten to work with and train. There's really a developing cadre, or group of people that are becoming employment support professionals and well trained, so excited to hear about what's going on in New Mexico.

Brittany Edwards-Sharpe

Yeah, yeah, you know, New Mexico, for being one of the poorest states in the nation is really doing so well with employment and employing people with intellectual and developmental disabilities. And I think one of the main reasons that has been the case is because we're the

main use set for Mexico. And we have a pretty solid partnership with our funding partners, the Division of Vocational Rehabilitation and the developmental disability supports division which is housed in the Department of Health.

Kari Tietjen

And those are all state based right?

Unknown Speaker

Those are all state based yes and those are our main funders, and so they they design the contracts for us. And they design and outline the deliverables and then our partners for employment, we take that funding and we're able to be super creative and bring quality training to New Mexico and work with other national experts, we partner with wise out of Washington State, and have incorporated, much of what we've learned from them into the New Mexico based trainings that we have for folks on which is the College of employment services here in New Mexico.

Kari Tietjen

Yeah we spoke with Emily on a podcast a couple of weeks ago actually so people know wise hopefully if they're listening in, but yeah, great, great partners to me and they do such innovative trainings that are responsive to employment. And you mentioned a few really interesting key facts, and I don't want to pass over too quickly Brittany, because New Mexico, you're right, has a very diverse population, especially in comparison to some other states, I live in Iowa, a more homogenous state, that kind of falls in the middle. You know, you mentioned New Mexico is the poorest state so finding resources within this system that has clearly dedicated itself toward employment is so important. So, I just don't want to gloss over that I...

Yeah, no thank you, you know, and I think, you know, New Mexico has a lot of heart and it is very much community based. You're correct in the fact that it's very diverse and the needs that the Pueblo peoples are the indigenous peoples within the Navajo nation need are, you know, somewhat different than the rural communities in Clovis, New Mexico or even the border towns in Las Cruces, or even, you know some of the Hispanic families in northern New Mexico it's so diverse in the range, but what, what I've learned to discover and I'm sure everybody at Partners for employment can also attest to this, is that there is such a strong community and wanting to support not only people with intellectual and developmental disabilities but everyone coming together to make communities better. Even with the challenges and lack of resources that can be Mexican. So thank you.

Yeah. So tell me more about what the last year or two at the University of New Mexico word has looked like I know you've done a lot of trainings with employment support professionals at we should mention to you also do sit on the recertification committee for CESP which is really where we've gotten to collaborate because I have a passion for helping lead people and mentor them through processes that are growing them professionally.

Brittany Edwards-Sharpe

So, yeah, sure, a little bit about what you've been up to and sure a couple of years, partners for employment has been so busy and I'm going to focus more on the adult side of partners for employment, which is our sole focus right now has been the College of employment services. And what that has looked like in the course of the last year has been, or even the last two years now with COVID has been astronomically different. And so for people who aren't familiar with college of employment services or CES. It is material that we purchased from the Institute for Community Inclusion in UMass Boston. It is a series of 11 modules that leaves no rock unturned when it comes to learning about any kind of employment-based support, and so you really get to learn how to create an elevator pitch talk about job development job carving, working with businesses collaboration, individualized support. And so, it's a set of 11 modules that can be accessed online at any time. But what we did with with what we purchased from ICI UMass Boston is we layered it with for in person sessions and prior to COVID those four in person sessions, or in person, there were about four hours long, and why we did that is because what we learn from talking to all of the diverse communities within the state, is that they wanted a place to have conversations they wanted a place to practice, you know, employment has been so linear for people to where, you know, maybe you look online, Or maybe you look in a newspaper you thought your resume you turn it in, you maybe get a job interview, you might not use it all over again. That's not the only way for employment,

Kari Tietjen
or the most efficient way

Brittany Edwards-Sharpe
or the most efficient, exactly, or the most efficient. And so when people only know how to teach and how to do what they know themselves teaching about employment and customizing employment and working with the business and doing tasks like discovery is just different people don't know how to do it but they want to learn. They want to space to learn. And so, when we were collaborating with, you know, numerous national experts through wise we worked with Griffin and Hammis we worked with Marc Gold, and we really saw activities that we thought we could do here in New Mexico. And so within those in person sessions. We took a little bit of everything that we learned from national experts, put a New Mexico spin on it, and then allowed our students within college of employment services to practice those activities in real time, so that if they wanted to get an acre certificate, they were already prepped for that, or if they wanted to take the CESP exam, they had some experience under their belt and they had some knowledge and even if they didn't have a full years of full year of experience. They had a solid foundation to set themselves up to practice that type of work. And so what we had to do in order to make that more inclusive and efficient, moving into COVID is we put it on Zoom. We made the sessions shorter, two hours we noticed four hours on Zoom is impossible. Two hours we wrote were really able to show that that's the amount of time that we could engage people, and we took the activities that were in person, consolidated them a little bit, and then had them practice online with their electronic peers and students, and it's been very successful, it's been very successful. I think you could probably attest to the growing numbers of CESP's in New Mexico, even in the course of the last two or three years. And I think the same

goes for for other trainings that we have in New Mexico, people are really, really enjoying this process and we're enjoying watching people enjoy the process.

Kari Tietjen

Yeah, because the outcome is people are more creative in their jobs supporting people with employment regardless of circumstance. Yeah, you get to bring more creativity, more tools in your tool belt, use the phrase, no, no rock unturned or. It makes me laugh because Nikki used that a couple of weeks ago to talking about the job process but you're right, like, you just get to see professionals that are going through this process of entering the field and learning so much more. Yeah, yeah, I'm curious, so I agree, there have been more CESP's in New Mexico. I've seen, you know, promotions for these other training programs. So many providers are in other places having a hard time recruiting people right now, and where you don't know who to pull from into employment. I'm curious if you've been seeing that with providers in New Mexico.

Brittany Edwards-Sharpe

You know I, I don't work as directly with provider agencies as I used to when I was a case manager even when I was a service coordinator, I feel like it felt it a little bit more. I'm sure that our funding partners probably feel that a little bit more because they overstate the provider agencies. Um, so I honestly, I do think that this field can be a tough field, in the sense that, you know, I think, in the sense that employment is now moving into a new era of wanting people to think outside the box, in regards to even finding employment for ourselves. I mean we have customized our jobs in COVID significantly, just by working remotely now that we all are moving into a hybrid model, and our kids are still in a hybrid model in school and maybe we're taking care of grandparents or family members. Some of us have moved across the country to be closer to home and now our jobs that were in LA, now I need to be placed in New Mexico I have a ton of friends that uprooted back home. And that is customized employment, you know, and it is working with your agency, your place of employment, communicating your needs to develop something that is efficient for the employer and for yourself. And so I don't think people realize that they're already practicing, customized employment, you know, and it's trying to show people that perspective to where you can do the same to support an individual with intellectual and developmental disabilities to seek to have the same opportunity and chance. And so it's trying to get out of that when your mindset of, this is how we find employment.

Kari Tietjen

It's really empowering, I think, to encourage people to think outside of that linear process, and say, You do not have to rely on traditional techniques of applying for 100 jobs, and I remember, I remember doing that, you know, and it was not efficient, it was not effective. I didn't know anyone in those places, so I didn't get callbacks, even if I could have represented myself really well in an interview. So it's just really interesting I agree that many jobs have become more customized in the last year and a half, as people have moved between jobs, you know, added duties to their role had different duties taken away, but particularly for people with disabilities, recognizing that both the boon of remote work is a great thing, right, like it creates more accessibility availability of how we do our work to make it work for ourselves individually and,

yeah, as everyone, and many jobs still rely on being in person. So it's just this interesting time isn't it an employment and I'm so curious to see where the employment support professionals will be creative with.

Brittany Edwards-Sharpe

Yeah, yeah. And I think, ideally, at least in New Mexico, I'm, I'm very impressed with, you know, the inter agencies the provider agencies and even the schools because we had so much more turnout of our trainings once we put them online. We still have people actively taking the College of employment services that are our new, new to the field, but also people that have been in the field of employment for 20 years are taking CESP and they're leaving, there they are leaving the class with such positive stories of, I never knew that this could be done, I never thought that I could do this, I never thought to think that this is how it could be done. And now I'm going back into my career of 20 years, and going to reshape and reorg and change the dynamic of the of the agency in employment based support so that it starts to kind of flow and transcend, because we're still on the beginning frontline phase of this movement. And so we're seeing very small changes, but it's starting to radiate and ripple to where the long term effects. Look, positive, moving forward. So I think it's, I think that's a really great positive thing that came out of throwing everything remotely and COVID just creating this astronomical barrier has also opened up a lot of possibilities as well. Absolutely.

Kari Tietjen

Yeah, I think it depends on how people approach this, And their mindset too and what resources are available around training, you know, so it's so cool to see a state like New Mexico, really taking the initiative of training new employment support professionals and empowering them to like see this as a career and grow into. Yeah. So I see that very much as a success of the state and wanted to make sure that we talked about it right. Our work over the last few years is now. I'm excited to see where it continues to go, right. Yeah, me too, me too. We also presented a couple of months ago on recertification that was fun. Gave some tips to people looking to recertify and walks through that process I know you like to help lead people through those processes in New Mexico, can you share how you've kind of mentored people with CESP.

Brittany Edwards-Sharpe

Sure. Um, and so, along with the so the College of employment services that we have in New Mexico, if it is completed 100% All the online modules through ICI UMass Boston and 100% Perfect Attendance at all four of the in person sessions, Then they have two pathways, they can either do part two and get an acre certificate, or if they have a year of experient experience or nine months, depending on trainings and qualifications, they can get the, they can take and sit for the CESP exam. And what we, what I've what I've come to notice and then people within partners as well, is that folks are intimidated by new application process sees. And so, we've found more success in providing one on one mentorship with people and walking them through the application process, teaching people how to convert some of their documents from Word or pictures into PDF fits the format, helping them with their resumes, and really outlining and showcasing one year of experience even even coaching some of the supervisors to provide the recommendations through the APSE portal. And so pretty much hint, and pretty much

mentoring, anyone who needs to, to be able to submit, and be able to sit for the exam and I think the reason why that has been so successful is because of my partnership with you to akari is because if there are hiccups in, in technological systems, it's just natural. And I think, when there are any kind of hiccups or even if somebody wants to appeal a denial for whatever reason, I can reach out to you and then we can work together to collaborate. And I don't think that we would have as many successful numbers without that collaboration and partnership, because I think people really just want somebody to support them through that process, and then give them words of encouragement. All and really hype them up to say you know you've got this he completed, yes we learn the material. You know you have a really high chance of passing the exam. And I think now that Apple has created the practice exam. It's made people, especially people have testing xiety. It helps to ease that anxiety a little bit more so I imagine that will continue to increase the pass rate. You want to take the CESP exam.

Kari Tietjen

I'm curious what you hear from people because I totally hear and understand that the process is a little cumbersome right it's not meant to be easy, necessarily, because it is a professional credential, like you said, there's always tech issues, but so when it's helpful to have a connection where you can, you know, prioritize and know that you've probably troubleshooted a little bit before, to support someone, and can escalate at work quickly to our team, but I'm curious after someone earns CESP or goes through this process, but what do you hear from the employment support professional.

Brittany Edwards-Sharpe

To be quite honest, there are most people go through the application without any hiccup without any trouble, they do it on their own, you know, they're, they're really quick, Like some people you know, and I'm just speaking for some of like the older population or the older generations that have been in this field for 20 years, they want to get the CESP credential. But, um, and, and people have been very honest with me about, you know like, this is new to me it's a lot going on, even this train of people how to use Zoom in New Mexico during the early stages of COVID, there was a huge initiative, because if you're used to pen and paper, moving into an electronic system is significantly different and there is a learning curve to it and so, you know, we work with populations that have different abilities, and even non disabled people have, you know, have certain things that they need time to learn and require a little bit of mentorship and you know a little bit of support. And so, after the application is is done for people and they take the CESP exam and they pass the CESP exam, everybody of course is really really happy they have great things to say. They want to know what trainings that they can take, so that they can continue and get recertified most of the people that are currently CESP certified in New Mexico are already actively thinking about recertification. But I think the reason being is because partners for employment with our partnership with DVR and EDI SD is providing training. Every month, multiple times throughout the year including our conference that gives people the opportunity to hold to continue to hold their certification and so right and one of the great things about New Mexico is we're even though we're funding scholarships for people to get CESP certified, the state of New Mexico is still funding opportunities for people to continue their professional development, and they're still offering these things, free of charge. If that'll

be the case moving forward in the future, who knows, but I really do think that New Mexico has created a model that other states should follow in the sense that we set people up for success, then people will become excited knowing that this is a resource for themselves that they can continue on for their professional development.

Kari Tietjen

Thank you, you, you touched on some really important pieces that I think are key to this conversation that impacts employment support professionals, thinking about what states are doing to support their professional development, how do you initially support it and continue supporting throughout the lifespan of that professional working in employment. So it's not just a one and done thing or putting in a requirement, even for a credential or a training without some sort of support and backing to say, here's how we plan to offer the training, and provide it in a sustainable way. Very cool. Well, I also need to say based on our conversation that we should promote to current CESP's who are looking for a mentor, obviously Brittany's New Mexico based and gets to work with all the New Mexico folks but our committee has been working really hard to develop a mentor process so every other week, we have a CESP conversation, or those who are credentialed. You can join the second one of the month, and we'll talk at the end about recertification. And also identify if you need some more mentor one on one support. There's a group of people that are ready to provide that. If you want a one on one zoom call I know you're headed into one later today Brittany with a CESP just some more support for her recertification process.

Brittany Edwards-Sharpe

Yeah, so the same, just like you said, I mean the same support that we provide and mentor people in New Mexico. I'm so happy to see them making more of a national mood. And so yeah if, if anybody needs my support with with recertification. Absolutely, reach out to me, and I apologize. I'm dog sitting, the dog, the dogs. My and just tell you if you can keep these on, well I guess. I have been on my computer all day yesterday and working from home they slept all day they didn't do anything. And I knew the minute that I got on this recording I even, I even before I left them inside I was like puppies. You guys have to be on your best behavior and I swear the minute we hit record. They're destroying...their dogs I swear it's not just me breathing.

Kari Tietjen

Oh my gosh like so funny. Oh gosh okay well I was wondering who was up and walking around, I'm glad to hear the explanation

Brittany Edwards-Sharpe

Ossa and Duke making a showcase hello.

Kari Tietjen

Oh Fun.

Brittany Edwards-Sharpe

I think this is the time of COVID Still, this is what we do. People have children still at home. I have dogs...

Kari Tietjen

That's true. I have found that there is great humility in this time of something will go wrong, it's just a matter of what and how you handle it. So you know. Yeah, especially with technology, I get that. All right, well it should be our time probably we should wrap up. Thanks again, Brittany for the conversation, And, yeah, I just always appreciate talking to you because I get to hear what cool things are happening about different states that I haven't yet been to, but hopefully one day.

Brittany Edwards-Sharpe

I'll host you. You've gotta come to New Mexico. And it's always great talking to you.

Kari Tietjen

Very cool. We'll talk soon.

Brittany Edwards-Sharpe

Okay, sounds good.

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