

# APSE Conversations: Meet Christine (GA)!

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Julie Christensen

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

Welcome to another episode and podcast with national APSE. This is Erica Belois-Pacer and I'm joined with Kari Tietjen and Christine from the Georgia APSE chapter today. So last month in October, we did a lot of stories and conversations around national disability employment Awareness Month and we're continuing on with talking with folks in the field of supported employment, competitive integrated employment. And we're excited to have Christine with us here today. Kari and Christine, do you mind introducing yourselves?

Kari Tietjen

Sure, I'll say Hey! My name is Kari Tietjen. I am the National APSE Certification Director and also do marketing and stuff with APSE and you know, the back end of this podcast and now also get to talk with people on it. And I also sit on the Iowa APSE Board. And I know Christine that's something we share in common. We sit on our chapter boards. So I'm sure we'll dive into that today. You want to go next?

Christine Gudgin

And I am Christine Gudgin. I am the president of Georgia chapter of APSE and I have been with Briggs & Associates, which is a provider in the state of Georgia for 14 and a half years. So I've been in the field for a time.

Kari Tietjen

Yeah, absolutely. Can you tell us more about Briggs & Associates and what you do?

Christine Gudgin

So Briggs and Associates - we are a virtual supported employment company. There is no brick and mortar building our offices our cars, we are out in the field working totally community integrated.

Kari Tietjen

And that was before pre COVID even though that was remote?

Christine Gudgin

No

Kari Tietjen

Ok

Christine Gudgin

It's been that way third for 33 years. It started that way 33 years ago, and it has grown it started off with just Jennifer Briggs and by people and we have approximately 86 staff and serve over 900 individuals in the state of Georgia serving good intellectual developmental disability diagnoses and also people with mental health diagnoses and it's a blended braided format. Everyone just serves people. And so whatever they need, you know, then we figure out the funding on the backside of how to make that happen.

Erica Belois-Pacer

That's awesome. Christine, and actually I was in Georgia quite a while ago, but on do you find that there's great communications towards the different funding streams? I mean, I think feel like we always talk about having that braided funding and I think it's amazing and I wish more people could pull it off, I guess, but a lot of times, you know, we hear that there struggles with different state entities funding streams, maybe not communicating. So I'm just curious how that works in Georgia because that that is intriguing to me.

Christine Gudgin

It is challenging. It is a challenging thing. And it really took a lot of tenacity on Jennifer brings Park even create that because that is not typical in Georgia. It's always been very siloed between the two. But it just works. You know if you can get out of your head seeing people defined by either funding or diagnoses and see people and figure out what do they need and use whatever resources are available. Is it a lot more work? Yeah, because you have to know the rules for this funding stream and this funding stream and that funding stream and, you know, a single career specialist needs to be knowledgeable in all those areas. But it works. I mean, our numbers are always just you know, we run even right now, as we're coming off COVID We're at about a 75% employee rate.

Erica Belois-Pacer

That's awesome.

Christine Gudgin

We've never dipped even through COVID the lowest we want was 33%. So it's one of those things because all the resources are there. It takes some negotiation, like I said, but it can be done. And it's just whether or not people want to step out of their little mold to to make that happen.

Erica Belois-Pacer

That's key. I think people get used to doing things a certain way and it's hard to look outside of that whether it's billing or just you know, in terms of hiring people sometimes having part time staff can be more. I don't know what the word monetarily helpful, as opposed to having lots of full time staff and then worrying when you can pay people and if there's enough there, Christine, I'm curious because I don't know your background. Did you think when you were growing up that you wanted to go into this field, or did you have other aspirations?

Christine Gudgin

So I always say in my younger thinner days, I was a barn rat. You know, I rode horses. I am originally from Maryland. And my family moved to Georgia and I'm like, Nope, I am not going to the south unless you buy me a horse sorry. So I wrote and train horses, and did three day eventing and competed with a member of the active riders list for the United States equestrian team. And I was drawn to problem horses and problem riders. I began to realize that it was a lot to do with what was going on inside the rider and how that horse performed and started kind of doing it from like a sport psychology perspective. And it which of course, then leads you into therapeutic horseback riding also, you know, the more traditional hippotherapy type. Yeah. So I was one of the first certified instructors back then it was Nora that did the equine facilitated mental health and helped develop some of the certification process for that, but was also certified, you know, working with developmental disabilities and physical disabilities. And so that was kind of what funded the dream of riding around and at the point that I decided, hey, I need to go back to school and like actually have a piece of paper. I didn't know what I wanted to do. So I designed my own degree. That's the joy of going back to school a little bit later. Is that administrators tend to listen to you and your life experience. And so I created an undergraduate degree in educational psychology, because I was fascinated by how people learned, you know, was like, how do you make this how do you make the situation the best for someone to learn? You know, What materials do you need? And that's exactly what we do as career specialists, employment specialist. We go into a work situation, it's just learning for adults, right? You're going in what do I need to set up that this is the most positive experience for you? This is the easiest way that you're going to learn this information in this scale. And so it was just right there. And the joke was I graduated, right in 2007. The economy was tanking and being the responsible adult, I'm like, Okay, I'm going to go to work because I've got student loans to pay off. And I laugh, I'm like, I'm only gonna stay here a year or so. Because I need to go do that graduate work. So 14 and a half years later, I'm still in the field. Because it it touched all these things I've learned more than I could ever learn in any graduate program by just being out in the field and doing it.

Erica Belois-Pacer

I think that's a huge takeaway. I just talk about that a lot. You know, you can have a lot of degrees and that's wonderful. But having that hands on actual experience is really what is helpful, I think, especially when you're training and teaching others who might be newer to the field. So no, that's impressive. So my big question is, do you still have horses?

Christine Gudgin

I do not. I traded. I traded the horse for a child. It's kind of the joke, you know, it's my version.

Erica Belois-Pacer

I agree!

Christine Gudgin

They're real expensive. Both of them are so right now but maybe one day once I get back into that forum I once was in have the time for that. There. There may be a pony in the future. I still when pony penning days up at Ft. .. and in Maryland, Virginia area Mike I'm just gonna drive up they put one in my truck. Just keep it in the yard.

Erica Belois-Pacer

Oh, how funny.

Kari Tietjen

Come home with a horse, ha! Well I know that you mentioned your president of Georgia APSE, I've never been to Georgia. I'm a Midwest girl. So I'm curious to hear about your chapter. What do you all focus on? What are the main employment discussions that are happening in Georgia?

Christine Gudgin

So I think COVID opened up a lot of opportunity that wouldn't necessarily be there with everyone being so busy. So we've focused a great deal on transitioning to a more modern and digital format of communication and dealing and interacting with people. You know, because it's been a long standing board we've had so we got stuck in a rut. I think some of the, you know, probably older boards can relate to that, that you kind of been doing it this way for so long, and it's just easy for people to transition in and out of that role that has been there for so long. And we had difficulty getting we had some really strong board members and then we would have kind of those folks that would want to participate and then disappear. And that happens. There's a lot of turnover in the field. There's a lot of commitment, both on the working end and then also on the board end of things and we just it all just fell into place. We used those the ability to appoint people once something had been you know, position a bit a term had been elected. to And then someone dropped off to really target areas in which you wanted to bring people in and wanted their voices and did a lot of recruiting that way and created just I would have to say a magnificent board. I couldn't. I mean, this group of people is just phenomenal. We have folks that specialize in micro business and entrepreneurial activities for people with disability. We have someone from southeast Ada, we've got a benefits navigator we have providers both in the mental health field and in the intellectual developmental disability. We have academia, you know, and it just creates this wonderful environment for discussion challenges. You know, always pushing the envelope of how good we can be, how accessible can we be and it's just been this great thing that just started rolling, particularly during COVID where, you know, we were able to update that website make sure was totally accessible to partner with agencies such as why out of Washington State and with our state agencies to create content and programming and webinars that really give our members something that stands out that says you know, hey, as a member of APSE I get this and it likes it. It's just opened up, it's pushed us all its challenges all where we were and what

we would accept. You know, we just keep pushing that envelope farther that we're just not gonna stand for different little things. So I can't I couldn't ask for a better group of folks to work with.

Erica Belois-Pacer

We know some of them and I would agree. Amazing humans, so that is great. So um, Christine, are there any goals or plans that the APSE board in Georgia has for this upcoming year?

Christine Gudgin

So of course everything will you know, we're still pushing 14 C in the state of Georgia. You know, getting rid of that it just we're working with the University of Georgia is their HDD division is really looking for some grant money to be able to do more advocacy around that in the state. And Georgia the our Department of Behavioral Health and Developmental Disability portion on the is really pushing for they call it a bag hag the big hairy audacious goal of getting you know 48.9% of Georgians with an intellectual developmental disability into employment by 2025. And right now, we're sitting overall at about 26%. So it's it's going to take a lot of work and we're going to be doing a lot of advocacy around that, figuring out funding around that how we can, you know, pay for those individualized community services. And so, we've got a lot on our plate at the same time with a developing something that really is enticing to membership. In the state of Georgia. One of the areas we're focusing on for the upcoming year is bringing on more self advocates making trying to get them more involved in their board activities. or coming up with special projects and you're really getting their voices heard in the state of Georgia.

Kari Tietjen

That is a big goal, double almost That's almost double what it currently is. So that takes a huge investment. of people money time. I'm curious, you know, what expertise or advice you may be given to other states that are looking to set a goal like that you're maybe a little further ahead in the process than other states, right?

Christine Gudgin

Well, I think it once again is to try to figure out why the why of it, you know, with any sort of branding they always have, you know, is it you want the style of it to you want this for in order to achieve that goal. You know, why do people need to work you know, what is important about it and stick to that, that it's about people some rights, it's about people contributing to their communities. We have to get away from this notion that it's somehow charity or isn't that cute? And it's an activity because as long as it's not seen for what it truly is, then it's not going to get paid for and no one's going to take it seriously. But when we can start really representing people have this is their like they have bills to they have lives. They have goals. And dreams just like you do, and that they deserve the same opportunities and respect that you have. It shifts people all you know, at first are uncomfortable. And then they start realizing, hey, wait a minute, you know, you're right. You know, they just, they just there's so many assumptions and I would have to hope that they're well meaning in their assumptions. The feeling of they can kind of keep us all going is not the thing that there's so many people who are, you know,

intentionally restricting people's rights but we have to educate and we have to encourage people to see the why this is important. And hopefully it'll happen, you know?

Kari Tietjen

Yes, I agree. It's powerful when you frame it in that way. And I know at least for me, you know, that when I share what I do the advocacy work that I get to work around with other people. They often don't realize like the 14 C sub minimum wage, people with disabilities are being paid less than people without disabilities and all the intersections of disability that touched so many people, they get on board with it, the why becomes very clear, very quickly. So kudos to you know, Georgia APSE for doing that work. You are strong leaders that are in your in your field.

Christine Gudgin

We are not quiet.

Kari Tietjen

It's important to get loud about issues that matter.

Erica Belois-Pacer

You gave some great advice for listeners. Sometimes I asked people you know, what, are there any closing thoughts or advice you would give our listeners? I think you provided lots of things for folks to think about and encouraging words. I don't know if there's a final sentiment that you would like to share. If not, that's okay, too.

Christine Gudgin

What I put out when we first started coming together with was we were each asked to like kick off a session with you know, some sort of story or vision on something and I think one of the thing that probably I know it plagues Georgia so I'm sure it plagues everyone else is this weird interaction between providers sometimes, right like there's a there's there's terms and I as you can tell, I'm a baker. I like to cook. I you know, I love to do pies and cakes and whatever. And you know, it's important that everyone has a choice. I mean, I may make a killer cheesecake, but someone else may make a killer cherry pie. And if you like pie over cheesecake and you should be able to choose that. It doesn't make the cheesecake any less. Brilliant. You know and every it's so important that we are matching that we all get along and provide an A smorgasbord of opportunity for people to choose from and it shouldn't be a competition. There is we know there are more than enough people that need support. There is not enough funding to support everyone out there that really truly needs support. And so stop fighting each other and start a buffet right you know, just lay it out there. And you're going to be able to provide people you best serve, and they can choose what they want to eat. And it'll you know, everyone can get along so much better and pull those resources better. And then everyone said no, and I think given right for the week before Thanksgiving, I think that's a good sentiment. Let's all come to the table and, you know, let's not have a food fight.

Erica Belois-Pacer

No, I agree. And thank you. I think I've mentioned that many times. We're going to be more successful. If we were together. It shouldn't be a competition. So thanks for sharing that. We'll have a great Thanksgiving or Hanukkah, depending on what people are doing next weekend, and week but thanks for joining us.

Kari Tietjen

We appreciate it. We encourage people to, if they're enjoying the podcast, so make sure that they share it and subscribe so or share with your friends the APSE podcast.

Christine Gudgin

Thank you.

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