

APSE Conversations: Meet Suad (CA)!

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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

Before we jump in just a few key things for our listeners to make sure that they subscribe to the podcast and share it with friends, especially other app see members or people who you know, find disability and employment important but maybe aren't APSE members yet. So I really hope we can share that and the story more. So, with that, I'm so excited to talk to you today and I know you're in California. We'll be talking a little bit about your involvement with the California APSE chapter but I'm just going to jump right in with you Suad and ask you to introduce yourself. Welcome.

Suad Bisogno

Hi. Thank you. Hi, my name is Suad Bisogno. I am the Vice President of the California APSE chapter and I'm also the Executive Director at Integrated Resources Institute. We are a nonprofit that supports adults with intellectual and developmental disabilities to find meaningful employment in their communities, competitive and integrated employment so everything is above minimum wage and everything is integrated in their communities. There's no group placements no site, you know, everything is like mimics what society would look like there isn't like 20 people working in a building together but with disabilities working with in a building together we we strive to move away from that and ensure that we don't accidentally create those types of environments. We also because of the work that we did, through employment first and our person centered services We've also, Integrated Resources Institute has also started independent and supported living. We saw that people were receiving this really beautiful meaningful supports during the day but needed that throughout life and throughout the days so we've been also doing that. I joined how APSE through a recommendation of a board member to about a year and a half almost two years ago, and I but had been in employment for many, many years. Back in 2014. I helped facilitate a I think one of the first of its kind it was a conference called Abilities Not Disabilities in Southern California where we release highlighted spotlighted employment for people with disabilities and really pushing for that was a really challenging time. As you know, we're like going through like a session and unemployment was really high during that time. So we're we were doing our best to to get that moving and I actually did that alongside a Cal app see present at the time, Sherry

Beamer. So small world health that's all like my first event that I helped facilitate was also with an APSE member. So I've been a part of employment and working on employment and also just overall quality of life services since 2014. And we it's been a journey. It's been beautiful. It's been challenging. It's been sad, it's been uplifting. It's but the work never ends and we just continue.

Our APSE chapter is really pushing towards, you know, right now in California, it's, it's like a prime time to really make a focus on employment. Because our budget is, you know, there's a huge budget available for that. So there's a lot of work that's being done. Right now by California APSE. To make sure that we don't lose steam, specifically, Kari I'm sure you're familiar with and many of the people listening our our Senate Bill 639 just passed ending- (claps)

Kari Tietjen
Woo hoo

Suad Bisogno

Ending sub minimum wage here in California which is i What a time to be alive. What a time to be part of Cal APSE. What a time to be a part of this movement. You know, I was at the nonprofit I work for Integrated Resource since two our volunteer CEO and treasurer who happened to be husband wife had been in this fight since the 80s. Trying to end sub minimum wage practice. And so to tell them, like it was one of the most beautiful honors I could have done was to tell them that their work back in the 80s and 90s is finally coming to fruition was really beautiful. But that means that work late, you know lies ahead. Ending sub minimum wage doesn't fix a problem. And I like to use the statement that institutions are not a place they're a state of mind. So these places that facilitate sub minimum wage contracts, 14 C contracts there if they don't change the way they think, not necessarily the way they operate their business, but the way they think they're just going to create those models in integrated sites. So Cal APSE is really focusing on how do we support those entities were doing the right thing with really believing in people, empowering people listening to people. And and that's, I think, the hardest work that's going to be ahead of us Yeah, so I've been part of CA APSE now for two years, and it's been really exciting. I feel privileged.

I helped us create and streamline some like communication systems so we're able to communicate and just get things through quicker where we use like a platform called Slack and so now we vote on there, get get our letters out, and you know, you know, just do things just so you know, technology and COVID has really been like a blessing. You know, we would have to meet in person and figure out how to do that. And now we were just like forced to pivot and and we definitely took advantage of that pivot and just like we're able to move things along quicker and it really needed it because you know, SB 639 was so quick and those hearings were so quick and just making sure we can we can be in the forefront of that instead of behind it. So yeah, so I've been in employment since you know, 2014 and I've seen the evolution I've seen agencies in that transformation. I was very lucky I was part of I supported three agencies to make that transition from, you know, these day programs to more of an integrated employment focused service. But it's been really wonderful. And you know, I sit alongside of

some really wonderful people at Cal APSE and you meet some really wonderful people being a part of app seeing people that have the same belief as you that you know, this could this could look better or this could be better for people with disabilities when it comes to employment. And we're very fortunate we have a member of Disability Rights California that sits on the board we have members of the regional center. We have other service providers that are doing phenomenal work. We have people that are receiving supports and we you know, we're continuing to look at expanding our board so that it encompasses a wide of a wide array of different stakeholders that benefit the mission. Yeah, that's where that's where we're at today.

Kari Tietjen

Those are really cool updates. And I think especially to hear what has happened in California over the last two years. That's a lot. That's a lot of quick movement. So to see California absi be so responsive and like you said the front part of that process instead of after the fact where you can be advocating and pushing for how do we make this transition thoughtfully, not just coming from the top down? I'm curious to hear what California APSE has been doing to support some of those providers like you say that the transition is big. The work ahead requires significant investment. How is California APSE been supporting that?

Suad Bisogno

So we are working? We're going to be collaborating with State Council. Soon, they're actually doing they're responsible for the report out for SB 6391 of the first things we're doing is we're actually working with Julie at National (APSE) to connect with other local chapters to schedule a meeting to connect with other local chapters, some that haven't passed, like 14 and abolishing 14 c sub contracts and others that have to see what what has worked well what hasn't. So that we can see that for our rollout our we just had our strategic planning meeting an all day meeting last week, where we highlighted that we wanted to devote time to work towards connecting with our members and outside of that outside of our member group, because sometimes our members are you know, preaching to the choir, we really need to connect with those entities. And we might be able to do that through absi or through our connections through APSE. So again, State Council's going to be holding some roundtables and so how does APSE partner with them so we can provide those supports. We've also been reached out to by entities just interested in what we do, that are not other nonprofits or for profits that realize that they need to pivot and it's really wonderful that they're reaching out to us because that shows a true intent of trying to do it the right way. We have seen before you know the ending of seven on wage hearing in California, which is a five year plan, it's not immediate so you know, we have time to like make sure we do this right. But we don't have time to send out the proposals to the state. So they're rushing to make sure we get this done and documented. So we have exactly how we're going to be doing this rollout and this process and what everybody all these stakeholders should be expected.

So SB 639, it's it's great that it's happening. But we have this other thing at her which was, you know, the HCBS ruling and the CMS ruling in the HCBS waiver where people needed to pivot, you know, agencies providers, needed to pivot to make sure that they were in compliance with the federal government that met you know, the waiver. And we saw actually a couple

nonprofits are for profits. You don't have to be nonprofit to work in this field. But we saw a couple of them close their sheltered workshops or modify their sheltered workshop settings. So they were in compliance with the ruling. But again, institutions or state are not a place or a state of mind. And what we saw is that they just recreated them, you know, they did the absolute minimum to be in compliance with the law. People's quality of lives look the same. There was the same glass ceiling there. People were still being treated like children, you know, with their cubbies at the building and then they go up in the community for an hour and then it come back to the sheltered workshop setting.

Kari Tietjen

That sounds like a Slack message, was that California APSE?

Suad Bisogno

actually it's Teams but we'll be getting I have two alerts on Slack right now that I need to get to but it's actually on that note, transitioning but yeah, let me just finalize with that. It's, you know, we want to make sure we we already saw what happened with HCBS. Ruling and how agencies just pivoted and now to be in compliance with the law really haven't changed their way of thinking and how do we make sure that doesn't happen again. And so, obviously, it's California, really highlighting to all stakeholders that are involved in implementation that we need to consider quality of services and what that looks like, and how we can measure that. And, you know, ironically, DDS Department of Developmental Services did a, like a quality assessment audit of providers that are doing this, you know, trying to be in compliance with HCBS. And ironically, we were audited. Our our nonprofit and the questions that were being asked were geared towards site based state programs, and they're like, is the consumer does the consumer have access to the restroom whenever they want? And it was like, if they're working, I don't like it depends on the employment site. I don't know how to answer these questions. Is there cameras, you know, everywhere? And I was like, yeah, if they're working at a retailer, there are cameras everywhere. And I was like, they like the system doesn't even recognize employment being an option for the HCBS questions. So would you also dealing with an archaic system that needs to evolution and evolving and what a time to be alive because they are being forced to change? You know, there's funding in the budget, allowing them to change and giving them the funds that are needed for them. To change. They're having workgroups and stakeholder meetings and figuring out how to make those changes. So it's, it's it's really exciting. It's just making sure that the people that are facilitating and engaging in those workgroups, some of them are APSE members, which are exciting because we know that that we can make sure that employment stays at the forefront. But but there's, you know, we attended, we listened to the SB 639 hearings, and it was awful. You know, there was legislators that were talking about how there's a program in this area that provides this service and it's meaningful and those poor kids sounds like those aren't kids, those are adults. But those sites, these programs have lobbyists. They have connections, they have relationships with the funder, and so we'll still end up sitting on those meetings. And those agencies are making sure that they're, they have enough strength and enough pull legislatively through the DDS system to make sure that their service stays status quo, that change doesn't happen. So, so, you know, it's actually taking, you know, our strategic planning meeting, we just talked about the amount of

time we're devoting towards this and it's a lot like, you know, we tell our, you know, our board members, it takes us, you know, average about eight hours per week that you're devoting to being - I mean, not eight hours, eight hours a month - that you're devoting to being an... I know your eyes lit up!

Eight hours in a month to be at Cal APSE board member, but it's feeling much more than that. Um, I fortunately, you know, the work that I do lives and breathes Cal APSE's missions. So it, it works, but, but that's where we're seeing that we need to expand our board. We just don't have enough people to manage the amount of work that's needed right now. Yeah, and so one of the ways that we've, you know, to transition into you know, communication, how we keep the board running is we used to just like email each other back and forth when I first started and how exhausting that was trying to like keep track of the email chains and to, to just make sure we didn't miss anything and waiting for everybody to respond. To prove a vote or having a wait till a meeting occurs. So we can approve this like letter that needs to go out. And so, we, we had a, we decided in 2020.

When I joined the board, to we needed to break this down, like we couldn't just rely on the one month meeting, we needed to have groups that really focus and emphasize specific areas of need for Cal APSE and one of them was like this project management like structural committee that I was part of. And so we moved from email chains to Slack, which is all inclusive. It's free for chapters, you know, unless you're adding 15 different integrations, it's available for free and, and then we created like these channels. So we had, you know, a policy, a policy channel and a communications channel and so we were able to just capture that those items in those channels and then when things got really you know, the needs of policies so expensive, and that was still too much. So we had to create a channel specifically for Senate Bill 639. So we can just keep our hands on that and, you know, make sure we didn't lose sight of that.

Unknown Speaker

There's a huge thing happening in California that is implementation of the Burns and Associate Rates study, and a couple states have gone through this rate study. But employment services are not necessarily recognized. In this rate study, supported employment model is but employment is provided across all different services. And so we're working with the state of California to make sure it treats employment services with equity, and funds it with equity because right now some, like some service models for employment are paid \$20 less than our then supportive employment. And it's becoming more and more of a challenge. And you know, agencies don't pivot to that employment service, because why would they go from getting paid? You know, and if we need to go into breakdown, so why would they go from getting paid? \$40 an hour for one staff for for clients to \$27 an hour for one staff to one clients, when now their overhead is so much more they have to manage that much more staff they have to hire on that much more managers and it's less per hour. So if we treated employment services with equity in the state, I think we would see a lot more agencies pivot towards providing customized and integrated employment.

Unknown Speaker

So Cal APSE's got a channel for that, we have a channel for it on Slack ... That's why we have it for Slack. And then we also have voting on there that the voting process between all the board members can sometimes take time. And so now when we have something we need a vote on our channel, once you know the channel, I call them channels now but if we have a group that you know creates a policy statement or you know, needs to do something, they present that information, attach it to that voting channel, give people 48 hours to vote on it and we can get things done. So that's been really wonderful just knowing we can get things done.

Kari Tietjen

And especially when it's moving so fast.

Suad Bisogno

Yeah

Kari Tietjen

You have to be responsive. It sounds like there's so much going on that that really helps support that.

Suad Bisogno

Yeah

Kari Tietjen

I totally applaud Cal lapsi for taking up that charge and figuring out some ways of task and board management that work and that are quick.

Suad Bisogno

Yeah, it really, I think we we had a meeting and in all these channels didn't necessarily come to fruition without like, us coming back as a board. It's like this isn't working and I was like okay, so how do we fix it? Let's talk about how we fix it and that was like, the creation of the voting channel. And so it's it's really important to really look at like, what's not working or what could we do better? Or like, you know, think thinking smarter, not harder, like man that took too long. You know, why do we have to wait a month to vote until the next board meeting? We that doesn't seem like that doesn't seem good. Like I think there was a position that was being requested from us early on when I joined the board and it took us a month and by the time we got to me to vote on it. They'd already submitted their position. So we lost the opportunity to be a part of something that was really beautiful.

Kari Tietjen

Thanks for sharing that. You know that other chapters are always looking for how they can do that more effectively. So to hear like Cal APSE is like yeah, doing it. I think it's just such a good example to share with other chapters that there are ways to do this work like you said smarter and not work harder and miss out on opportunities to weigh in on employment when that voice is needed your state chapters such as strong voice for it, but to miss out on that simply because of like bureaucracy. That stinks. Like that's missing huge opportunities.

Suad Bisogno
Yeah, absolutely.

Kari Tietjen

Cool. Well, thanks for sharing about what's going on in California. Obviously, I think we need to do follow up and hear more later on once those workgroups get going and the five years so that's over the next five years until...

Suad Bisogno

...over the next five years, well effective immediately. There will be no new sub minimum wage contracts. So we know that's great. Nobody is moving from transition programs or high schools and into these, okay, you know, you know, forever. I mean, the data showed like when people get put in the sheltered workshop settings, they never make it out. Like there was no, it was not never stepping stone. And so, so that's the five year plan is fading out current providers, and there's a lot of people I think at the hearing that have done emphasizing 11,000 people are going to be left jobless and I was like, those aren't jobs! Stop calling them jobs. I think we're all like, you know, and that was really wonderful with Slack too is it was like live commentary. We'd all be at the like listening to the hearing and like doing crying emojis because we just heard somebody talk about somebody with a disability as a child. Like, who is this legislator who's in their catchment area who could meet with him to educate him. But it's, you know, it's unfortunate, you know, they have lobbyists. You know, SB the opposition for SB 639 have lobbyists to like, persuade. These legislators tend to vote against the bill. But what was really beautiful is we had some really powerful statements from legislators that really made it a civil rights issue, really presented as such an is an it has been, you know, I went to the dentist before this and I'd share them shared with my dental hygenist a little bit about like, what was happening and how people were being paid \$2 an hour. And I think when we work with outside or tell people outside of our bubble, that that's happening. They're like, I can't believe that that's that should be illegal. But it's this little within our bubble that like it's acceptable, like somehow the disability community or the disability providers, like Yeah, that's what we do, but anybody outside of that bubble is just like, That's atrocious. That's disgusting. How can we let this happen? And funny story is my sister went in for treatment and she works in the field didn't tell her we were related. And my sister tells the dental hygienists like oh yeah, I work with people with disabilities in the dental hygenist Oh, my God, one of my patients just told me this horrible story about how people with disabilities are being paid \$2 an hour. And my sister's just laughing. She's like, that's probably my sister. But to me, that's how like, impactful that information is. It's like we need an edit for dealing with any chapters that are, you know, battling SB or, you know, similar SB 6397. Minimum wage 14 seats like, stop trying to work within our bubble expand beyond that as soon as the general population hears about what's happening, they are outraged. So use them to be your support and your alliance as well.

Kari Tietjen

I'm glad that you can, you know, essentially evangelize your dentist to become an Employment First advocate. I totally get it. I'm the same way like I talked to my dentist last week about it.

You know, I understand that I agree. Once you start talking to people outside the field, it's like why are people with disabilities just like consigned to accept less? That's not the way the system should work for anyone. So I totally agree and hear that. And really cool to hear that legislators were willing to take up the mantle of this as a civil rights issue and what happens next in the plan fullness of of moving away from that, but I hope that people listening to the podcast took away some great nuggets of advice and stories. I've loved talking to you and hope that you'll join us again on the podcast, but again, Cal APSE is doing some cool things. So I hope people check it out. You guys have anything else coming up soon that people should make sure they're aware of?

Suad Bisogno

We're doing these like social hours, like Happy Hour events where we're inviting people to attend. I think there's one coming up. I don't have the exact date, but we'll be updating our website shortly with some of those details.

Kari Tietjen

Perfect.

Suad Bisogno

Follow us on Instagram, Twitter. We you know we have somebody that loves TikTok, and all of that so she's posting these events on there as well.

Kari Tietjen

Very cool. We were talking in Iowa about we need to recruit some of our board members's children to do TikTok for us. (Laughing) That's great. All right. Well, very good to talk to you and hope people will subscribe share the podcast and yeah, keep sharing that Employment First word, appreciate it.

Suad Bisogno

Thank you, Kari.

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