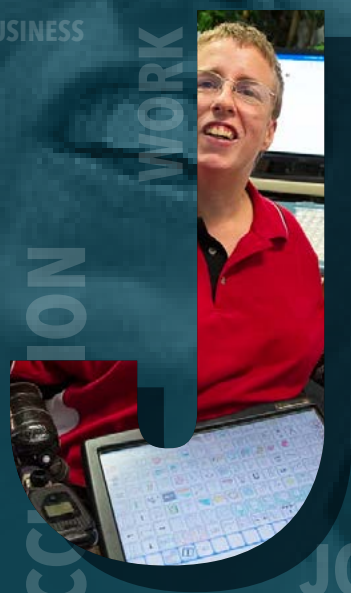


Making a Difference

Fall
2021



State of Employment: How Shifts in the Economy Impacted Job Seekers with Disabilities

gcdd.org



The Blossoming of
Real Communities
into the Welcoming
Community Movement



The Georgia Council on Developmental Disabilities (GCDD) is driven by its Five Year Plan (2017-2021) goals of education; employment; self-advocacy; Real Communities; and formal and informal supports. The Council, charged with creating systems change for individuals with developmental disabilities and family members, will work through various advocacy and capacity building activities to build a more interdependent, self-sufficient, and integrated and included disability community across Georgia.

FEATURES



4

PUBLIC POLICY FOR THE PEOPLE

Preparing for the 2022 Legislative Session

by Charlie Miller

With the session on its summer break, GCDD left the Capitol and started visiting legislators in their home districts. See what they had to say about how we can better advocate for the disability community in their areas. Learn more about the special session for redistricting being called for by Governor Brian Kemp.



8

LIVING INDEPENDENTLY

A Desire for Independence

by Adrienne Murchison

A 2019 National Inventory of Self-Direction Programs identified over 260 programs in the United States with over 1.2 million individuals self-directing. Learn about the four programs in Georgia and the benefits of self-direction.



10

State of Employment: How Shifts in the Economy Impacted Job Seekers with Disabilities

by H. M. Cauley

While the pandemic has played a key role in every aspect of life for the last 20 months, employment has been one of the most severely impacted elements. In a shifting economy, some workers with disabilities have thrived, others pivoted, and many found themselves shut out of opportunities entirely.

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FALL
2021

VIEWPOINT

On a Personal Note

by Eric E. Jacobson 3

INCLUDE COLLEGE CORNER

Students Soar at the EAGLE Academy at Georgia Southern

by Clay Voytek 7

WHAT'S HAPPENING IN WASHINGTON?

by Serena Lowe 14

SELF-ADVOCACY SPOTLIGHT

My Journey to One of My Dreams

by Laura Owen 17

EXPERT UPDATE

Making Competitive, Integrated Employment a Reality

featuring Amy Gonzalez, from the Disability Employment Technical Assistance Center 18

GCDD STORYTELLING

Telling their Own

Stories 20

WELCOMING COMMUNITY

The Blossoming of Real Communities

by Jennifer Bosk 22

CALENDAR 25

On the cover: As October marks National Disability Employment Awareness Month, the complexity of finding or keeping a job in the tumultuous COVID world has brought new challenges to those with developmental disabilities.



DEPARTMENTS

ON A PERSONAL NOTE

On October 16, 1992, I began working at what was then called the Governor’s Council on Developmental Disabilities. Since then, I have had the honor and privilege of meeting people with developmental disabilities and their families all over this state. I have spent the last almost 30 years fighting for equity and the rights of all people including those with developmental disabilities.

We have made great strides in creating a state that is prepared to offer long-term services and supports in the most integrated setting. Are we where we want or should be? NO. There is still a lot to be done.

However, this work will continue without me at the Georgia Council on Developmental Disabilities (GCDD). On Thursday October 14, 2021, I announced to the Council that I will retire on May 1, 2022.

I want to thank you for your support and collaboration over these years, but it is time for new blood to take over. There are lots of stories to share and issues to discuss. Maybe in the few remaining issues of *Making a Difference*, I will explore these.

October is National Disability Employment Month and Georgia lags behind in getting people into jobs. This is partially because we still have legacy providers who are holding on to sheltered work facilities where individuals are paid pennies for their work. It is time that we end the use of sheltered facilities and make employment the first option for people with

disabilities. We had hoped that the establishment of an Employment First Council would lead to this outcome. However, that group has not met in almost a year and it appears its work will be considered a failure. We must not let this end the goal of increased employment for people with disabilities.

You can help GCDD with this message by talking with your elected officials NOW. Don’t wait until the legislative session starts in January. Instead, let’s all take the time to reach out to our state representatives and senators. Remind them that there are over 7,000 people waiting for home and community-based services. Remind them that people want to go to work. Remind them that there is a budget surplus and some of that money should be used to pay direct support professionals a living wage. Now is the time for the legislature to make a serious attempt to meet the needs of people with developmental disabilities and their families.

I have written these same words many times in this column and we continue to fight. We have an opportunity, but it rests with the



Eric E. Jacobson

readers of this magazine to do the hard work. GCDD is a small but mighty organization that relies on people across the state. I hope you will do your part.

I want to thank you for the last 30 years. It has been my pleasure working for you.

OCTOBER IS NATIONAL DISABILITY EMPLOYMENT MONTH AND GEORGIA LAGS BEHIND IN GETTING PEOPLE INTO JOBS. IT IS TIME THAT WE END THE USE OF SHELTERED FACILITIES AND MAKE EMPLOYMENT THE FIRST OPTION FOR PEOPLE WITH DISABILITIES. ”

Let us know your thoughts and comments about the magazine by writing to Tianna.Faulkner@gcdd.ga.gov.

Eric E. Jacobson

Eric E. Jacobson
GCDD Executive Director



Preparing for the 2022 Legislative Session

by Charlie Miller, GCDD Legislative Advocacy Director

Georgia’s hot and sticky summer is finally coming to a close. The leaves are changing, the weather is starting to get that nice cool and crisp feeling, and now it’s time to get ready for fall. Here at the Georgia Council on Developmental Disabilities (GCDD), we are getting the pumpkins out, changing the wreaths, and preparing for the upcoming legislative session.

Hometown Visits

With the session on its summer break and the Gold Dome almost completely empty, GCDD left the Capitol and started visiting our legislators in their home districts. We traveled over 500 miles of our beautiful state and met with four key legislators. We started our travels by going down south to visit East Georgia State's CHOICE Program for Inclusive Learning. While there we invited Senator Billy Hickman who

represents Georgia’s 4th District to have a chat with the students.

The students were excited to hear from Senator Hickman and get to know what he does within the General Assembly. Senator Hickman was able to explain that he represents the school and surrounding area and how his work at the Capitol makes a difference to the community he serves. Afterwards, GCDD had an opportunity to speak with him one on one and discuss issues that are affecting the disability community in his area. He was interested in the transportation issues that the disability community has been facing and was eager to hear how he can help move the needle in the right direction.

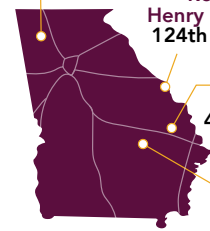
Legislative Visits Across GA

Representative
Katie Dempsey
13th District, Rome

Representative
Henry “Wayne” Howard
124th District, Augusta

Senator
Billy Hickman
4th District, Statesboro

Senator Blake Tillery
19th District, Vidalia



After the fruitful conversation we had with Senator Hickman, we decided it was best to stay on the Senate side and keep making our way through south Georgia. Our next stop was Vidalia, Georgia, home to Georgia’s sweet Vidalia onions and State Senator Blake

YOUR LOCAL STATE SENATORS AND REPRESENTATIVES ARE ALWAYS WANTING TO TALK TO THEIR COMMUNITY AND MAKE SURE THEY ARE ADVOCATING ON BEHALF OF THE COMMUNITY THEY SERVE. ”



Charlie Miller and State Senator Blake Tillery



Charlie Miller with State Representative Katie Dempsey

Tillery. Senator Tillery represents Georgia's 19th District and is the Senate's appropriations chair.

As chair of the Appropriations Committee, he has a lot of influence over the budget process. He is also a great advocate for Inclusive Post-Secondary Education (IPSE) and the home and community-based services (HCBS) waiver budget. He was able to give us some tips about what he thinks is the best way to move forward in advocating for our budgets.

Our next visit was Rome, Georgia, to visit Representative Katie Dempsey. Representative Dempsey serves the 13th District in Georgia. She has been a long-time supporter

of disability issues in the state, and she is the chair of our Appropriations Subcommittee in the State House of Representatives. In this position, she has the opportunity to make a big impact on the budgets of the

Department of Behavioral Health and Developmental Disabilities, Georgia Vocational Rehab, and a few others related to healthcare in Georgia. We were able to sit down with her and strategize how to push disability issues in the state.

Our final visit this summer was with Representative Henry "Wayne" Howard, who represents the 124th District in Georgia. Representative Howard has been working on issues for people with physical disabilities for a long time. Recently, he filed a bill that would help people with physical disabilities pump gas when they are at a gas station and they can't get to the pump. Currently, the bill is on the Senate side waiting to be heard in committee. But Representative

Howard did not want that to stop him; he teamed up with Agricultural Commissioner Gary Black. They made sure every gas pump in Georgia has a sign with the phone number of the store to make sure there was a way people with disabilities can request help when filling their cars with gas.

Summer is a great opportunity for constituents to have some really deep and meaningful conversations with their legislators before the legislative session begins in January. GCDD encourages you to do the same!

Your local state senators and representatives are always wanting to talk to their community and make sure they are advocating on behalf of the community they serve. If you are interested in finding out who represents you, look at the website [openstates](https://openstates.org). Here you can type in your zip code and instantly find out who represents you on the state and federal levels.

Special Session for Redistricting

Like always, we are excited to see the session get rolling so we can start solving some of Georgia's toughest issues. This year, before the regular legislative session starts, we are going to have to work through a special session for redistricting. Special sessions can be called any time Governor Brian Kemp feels like it is needed – the last time one

GCDD'S PUBLIC POLICY TEAM



ALYSSA MILLER, PsyD,
GCDD Public Policy
Research &
Development Director



CHARLIE MILLER,
GCDD Legislative
Advocacy Director



Charlie Miller with State Representative Henry "Wayne" Howard

What Is Redistricting?



Redistricting is the regular process of adjusting the lines of voting districts in accordance with population shifts. For many states, this means redrawing congressional and state legislative district lines every 10 years following the decennial census. In the modern era of redistricting, all district lines must be reviewed after the census to meet strict requirements for population equality and voting rights protections.

Source: [The Rose Institute of State and Local Government](#)

was called was at the beginning of the COVID-19 outbreak.

This time, the Governor is calling a special session for the redistricting process. Every 10 years, the United States embarks on a monumental task around getting people to fill out the United States Census. The census helps us understand how to use federal funding to help support states and local communities. It also helps calculate how many people live in each area of the country.

State legislatures can also use this data to start the redistricting process. Redistricting only happens every 10 years after the census data is released. The data that will be used will help determine who your state legislators will be. At the time of writing this article, we do not know when

Special Session will be called but as soon as we know, we will make sure the disability community knows and how to advocate.

With all of the legislative visits over with for the summer, we are ready for the session to get here.

We are excited to see the session get rolling so we can start solving some of Georgia's toughest issues.

Until then, make sure to reach out to your legislator and let them know you vote in their district. If you have a meeting with your legislator, please take a picture with them and send it to GCDD at info@gcdd.org, for a chance to be featured on our social media channels.

We look forward to calling on each and every one of you to help us push disability issues in the right way in Georgia.

How to Connect with Your Legislator:



Visit openstates.org and type in your zip code.



Find out the email or phone numbers of your state senators and representatives.



Follow these **four easy steps** on connecting with your lawmaker.



Write to them using this [Legislative Advocacy Letter](#) template.



Build a relationship and work with them to make your community a better place for people with disabilities!

**Join GCDD's
Advocacy
Network
Today!**



Students Soar at the EAGLE Academy at Georgia Southern

by Clay Voytek



**INCLUDE
COLLEGE
CORNER**

For his first year of college last fall, Max Champion took half his classes online. This semester, he's happy to be taking them all in person.

Champion, 20, is a student at the [Equal Access to Gainful Learning and Employment \(EAGLE\) Academy at Georgia Southern University](#) in Statesboro. EAGLE Academy is a two-year, [Inclusive Post-Secondary Education \(IPSE\)](#) program for students with intellectual/developmental disabilities (I/DD) interested in pursuing a college education while learning self-advocacy, independent living and career skills.

Champion now resides in an off-campus house with a friend he met through his fraternity. Champion said moving from the dorms into a house was another transition. "I had to put together pieces of furniture and stuff; it was a good experience," he said.

There are eight [IPSE programs in Georgia](#), and EAGLE Academy is one with a residential component. Following an [application and interview process](#), students live on campus their first year.

There are currently six students in the program. They typically take [12 credit hours per semester](#). Peer mentors and graduate assistants work with them throughout their courses, and students leave with a certificate in an area of study they selected.

"We don't have tracks for our students," says [Stephanie Devine](#), the executive director of EAGLE Academy. "We actually sit down with each person and set up an individual program of study."

Students can choose a specialization from any college at Georgia Southern. In the past, students have been certified in child and family development, physiology and personal training, and graphic design and multimedia.

EAGLE Academy's inaugural class started in fall 2017. This May, five students graduated. [Julie Pickens](#), EAGLE Academy's program director, said every student in the most recent class is now either employed or pursuing technical education.

"Their last semester in the program, they do an internship that is about 20-25 hours a week," said Pickens, who oversees day-to-day operations. "They're spending a majority of their time out in the community doing an internship in their focus area."

To cover costs, students can apply for financial aid in the form of Pell grants and federal work studies. This is possible because EAGLE is a [Comprehensive Transition Program \(CTP\)](#), a [federal designation that also involves program rigor requirements](#). Additional funding support might be provided by the [Georgia Vocational Rehabilitation](#)

[Agency](#) if students have an approved case with them.

Devine said her biggest focus at the moment is working to provide enough financial support for EAGLE students, and the program is looking into further grants, fundraising and scholarship opportunities.

Pickens said that COVID and [statewide funding cuts](#) in the last year have forced the EAGLE Academy [to adapt](#), but the program and students have adjusted together.

"EAGLE Academy is an integral part of Georgia Southern," said Pickens. "Our students are Georgia Southern students. Advocating for Georgia Southern is advocating for EAGLE Academy because they really are one and the same."

Champion is excited to be back on campus this fall. He's interested in marketing as a career, but he loves sports. This semester, he's taking a class on supply chain management in sports organizations, a class on advanced living and an internship with the athletics department.

Champion said he would tell a new student, "Have a good time ... If you need help, just let me know. We'll go study together in the library."

Celebrating the 2021 graduates of the EAGLE Academy at Georgia Southern



A Desire for Independence

by Adrienne Murchison

Living Independently is an article series by the Georgia Council on Developmental Disabilities (GCDD). The series will cover self-determination and self-direction.

Jenny Pryor lives an active life working in a Kroger supermarket, hiking on her off days or sometimes catching a movie. Her developmental disability hasn't hindered Jenny's desire for independence or her ability to live on her own, her mother Carol Pryor said.

Jenny receives services to support her needs through an option in a Medicaid waiver program called participant direction. The services empower Jenny to live a vibrant life, Carol said.

“As Jenny grew up and matured her needs became different,” Carol said. “In her early 30s, she said she wanted to live in her own home.



Jenny has been employed in the Kroger bakery for 12 years.

We transferred from (traditional) services to participant direction. It was a good change for Jenny. It matched where she was in her maturation.”

A [2019 National Inventory of Self-Direction Programs](#) identified over 260 self-direction programs in the United States with over 1.2 million individuals self-directing. In Georgia, there are four programs.

The Georgia Department of Behavioral Health and Developmental Disabilities (DBHDD) facilitates funding for traditional and participant-directed methods of services through the New Options and Comprehensive Supports Waiver program of Medicaid, known as the NOW/COMP Waivers.

Jenny receives her services through the NOW/COMP Waivers.

The waivers are federally funded through Medicaid and the state for services carried out in the home or the community for people with intellectual or developmental disabilities.

The New Options Waiver is for people who can live independently and would also benefit from support. The Comprehensive Supports Waiver is for people who need a great deal of support at home and out in the community.

Participant direction is a delivery option for services in which Jenny and Carol, who is her advocate and representative, hired a staff of workers and vendor companies to provide the support Jenny needs. The mother and daughter choose the services, manage the budget, and decide on pay and hours.

SHE STARTED TO SEE HER DECISIONS REALLY WERE HER DECISIONS. IT EMPOWERED HER.



Carol said, “Jenny’s participant direction services include supportive employment in which her staff person is a liaison on her behalf as work needs arise at Kroger. She’s been employed in the Kroger bakery department for 12 years.”

Utilizing the community access individual service, a person accompanies Jenny to outings and activities that she enjoys. If she wants to go on a hike or to a water park, she and the staff person plan the event. Through community living skills she learns about cooking, grocery shopping, budgeting and more.

In all, there are 23 services provided through participant direction.

What is Self-Direction?

Self-direction is a model of long-term care service delivery that helps people of all ages, with all types of disabilities, maintain their independence at home. When a person self-directs, they decide how, when and from whom their services and supports will be delivered. As a model, self-direction prioritizes participant choice, control and flexibility.

With the traditional delivery of services, the recipient or their representative select a company that manages services and the budget provided. The company hires caregivers, support staff, and decides on the pay rate and schedule hours.

“When I was with a traditional service, I felt like it would only go so far, and when I switched over to participant (directed services), I felt like I could grow,” Jenny said. “You kind of feel like you can spread your own wings.”

According to Parent to Parent (P2P) of Georgia, 13,000 individuals received services from the NOW/COMP Waivers in 2019, and about 2,400 of that number received services through participant direction.

P2P is a nonprofit organization that supports healthcare needs of families with children including training on participant-directed services. Carol said Jenny experienced a shift after she started receiving services through participant direction.

“She started to see her decisions really were her decisions,” Carol said. “It empowered her. It wasn’t that she didn’t have that with (traditional) services, but the landscape was different. (Participant direction) was set up to have options. It just seemed later she realized ‘I can do this’ when her needs were changing.”

Karen Addams, vice president of Innovation at P2P of Georgia, adds that with the benefit of choices in participant-directed services comes a lot of responsibility in having to train staff and organize the schedule of needs for their services.

“The person managing the services can be the individual or a representative, but most often it’s a parent,” Addams said.

A financial support services provider, also called a fiscal agent, is required for participant-directed services. “They handle the payroll and make sure everything is done according to the law,” she added.

She managed participant-directed services for her late daughter after using traditional services.

“We had a company that provided everything she needed,” Addams continued. “One of the problems ... (was) if I wanted someone on Saturday, maybe they would send ‘Jane’ one weekend or ‘Sally’ the next. They are filling the slot, but maybe not with someone well-fit for a family.”

Melvin Smith, chair of the Georgia Participant-Direction Advisory Group, said his son receives adult speech therapy, language therapy and adult dental among other services in the participant direction delivery system, as well as services through traditional delivery.

Members in the advisory group are all volunteers who advocate for participants and representatives using participant-directed services and advise the state on issues. The group meets with state officials once per quarter. “We’re boots on the ground,” Melvin said.

About three years ago, the advisory group was able to make a difference with the grouping of a few services, he explained.

Physical therapy, in addition to speech and occupational therapies, were offered together with a total of \$1,800 in Medicaid funding available annually for the services. The advisory group explained to representatives from the state that in some cases only one of those services might be needed by a person and the cost could be greater than \$1,800.

“Now each (of those services) stand alone and the amount of funding for each has increased up to \$5,400 annually,” Melvin said. “We had an integral part in making the state aware of the issue.”

[For more information on services, download the Participant Direction Handbook here.](#) The book was created by the Georgia Council on Developmental Disabilities and P2P of Georgia.

SELF-DIRECTION PROGRAMS IN GEORGIA

- ◀ [Comprehensive Supports Waiver \(COMP\)](#)
- ◀ [Georgia Community Care Services Program \(CCSP\) Medicaid Waiver](#)
- ◀ [Independent Care Waiver](#)
- ◀ [New Options Waiver \(NOW\)](#)

State of Employment: How Shifts in the Economy Impacted Job Seekers with Disabilities

by H. M. Cauley

While the pandemic has played a key role in every aspect of life for the last 20 months, employment has been one of the most severely impacted elements. In a shifting economy, some workers have thrived, others pivoted, and many found themselves shut out of opportunities entirely.

The complexity of finding or keeping a job in the tumultuous COVID world has brought new challenges to those with developmental disabilities. Access to technology, fears of being infected and companies closing down have created considerable hurdles to stable employment.

For some reason, we've defined boundaries for people with disabilities. But as they slowly gain confidence, we're seeing some cool things that come from someone believing you can do anything.

Employment Before & During COVID

As October marks National Disability Employment Awareness Month, these issues are in the spotlight. But many of them aren't new, says Doug Crandell, a nationally recognized expert in the area of employment for individuals with severe mental illness and developmental disabilities. He's also the director of the Advancing Employment Technical Assistance (TA) Center at the Institute on Human Development and

Disability (IHDD) at the University of Georgia (UGA).

"In some ways, we're kind of in the same place as we were pre-pandemic," he says. "The unemployment rate for people with disabilities in the U.S. is still pretty high – around 70%. In terms of people who are self-employed, only 2% are people with disabilities versus 30% for the rest of the population. So the hard thing to say here is the pandemic hasn't made much of a difference."

But those numbers themselves can be problematic, says Crandell. "Folks with developmental disabilities, brain injuries, physical disabilities and mental health and behavioral issues get left behind in the way we count. And if you don't know how bad a problem is, it's hard to fix it."

Crandell points to several employment barriers that many workers with disabilities still face. Transportation is a major hurdle, particularly in rural areas of the state. Many organizations and companies aren't incentivized to hire these workers,

but many families want real job opportunities, not just day programs, for their youth. "There's really a lack of opportunity and support, not a lack of desire."

As the pandemic continues to shift jobs from the real world to the virtual one, those with disabilities face new hurdles that limit their abilities to find or continue employment, Crandell says.

"When we first went into lockdown, a lot of work had to be reconfigured, and I was so surprised that folks with developmental disabilities had no access to a tablet or to the internet," he says. "It's still a big divide, especially for people who don't live with their families. It doesn't take an economist to figure out why folks in a group home don't have access to a \$1,200 iPad or \$100 a month for internet access."



People with disabilities make up 70% of the unemployed in the U.S.



People with disabilities make up only 2% of the self-employed, while people without disabilities make up 30%.



Employed People with Developmental Disabilities:

That limited access doesn't bode well for the future, when experts predict the virtual work world will remain a viable alternative to in-person, onsite jobs.

"If someone has been largely kept away from technology, then remote work may not fit their skill set because they haven't had time to develop those skills," says Crandell. "I regularly meet people who don't even have an email account. This group could capitalize on home-based or remote work, but we've done such a poor job developing those skills they can't take those opportunities. And especially for youth, we're seeing the need for a bigger focus on those skills."

There hasn't been much progress in Georgia from the 2015 federal Workforce Opportunity and Innovation Act, designed to encourage job training and restrict subminimum wages for young workers. "Is it working? Anecdotally, we don't think it has been," Crandell observes.

Changing the Landscape

A number of organizations and initiatives across the state are tackling the problem head-on. UGA's Advancing Employment TA Center, funded by the Georgia Council on Developmental Disabilities (GCDD), is one of them. Now in its fourth year, its mission is to provide training and technical assistance to communities in order to remove barriers to employment and to help workers with disabilities find jobs.

GCDD is also spearheading programs across the state to give people with and without disabilities opportunities to contribute to their communities – like Project SEARCH. Of its 18 sites, nine

have been recognized for their 100% placement rates.

The program has a nine-year track record of success as a business-led, high school-to-work transition initiative for students with intellectual and developmental disabilities. Training is done onsite to prepare students to work year-round for at least 16 hours a week in minimum wage or higher jobs that place them in integrated settings alongside coworkers without disabilities.

Those are precisely the sorts of opportunities that contribute substantially to a community's success, says Crandell. "Every time somebody goes to work where they have a job coach to provide support and help them, it returns over \$3,000 per person per year to the community. People with developmental disabilities represent \$66 billion in purchasing power."

The future employment outlook for workers with disabilities has a few positive aspects, Crandell noted, particularly as industries hard-hit by pandemic losses begin to look at this segment of the workforce in a new light. "For instance, the service industries are trying to figure out who can fill the vacancies, and employers are looking at folks they might not have considered in the past," he says.

Entrepreneurs Take the Stage

The entrepreneurial sector is another slice of the workforce that's beginning to open for those with disabilities. While it often hinges on those technical skills Crandell says are in need

contribute
\$3,000
per person, per year
to the community



represent
\$66B
in purchasing
power



of sharpening, one Georgia program is getting potential business owners up to speed on all aspects of being their own boss.

Synergies Work was founded four years ago by Aarti Sahgal with the goal of finding gainful employment for individuals with disabilities. Motivated by her own son, Angad, who was diagnosed with Down syndrome, Sahgal partnered with companies such as Pfizer and Coca-Cola to offer participants support and training.

"The premise is everybody has a gift to offer to the world, be it head, hand or heart," says Sahgal. "But when COVID happened, everything came to a standstill. The ones who needed support were being overlooked; they lost jobs and couldn't go out because of health concerns."



Advancing Employment

Building a community for inclusive employment in Georgia

Advancing Employment is dedicated to building a community for inclusive employment in Georgia and providing a space where people with disabilities, their families, service providers, and others interested in employment can learn and connect with one another.

Read about their [Employment Policy Imperatives for Georgians with Disabilities here.](#)



Sahgal said her program had two options: “Jump in and fail or succeed.” The move to an all-virtual operation turned out to be a game changer.

WE KNOW THERE HAS TO BE GREATER EDUCATION AND ENGAGEMENT, AND THAT REMOTE OR SELF-EMPLOYMENT ARE GOOD OPTIONS. MAYBE THE PANDEMIC BRINGS TO THE FOREFRONT PEOPLE LIVING IN OUR COMMUNITIES WHO CAN BECOME TAXPAYERS. AND THAT'S THE GOOD NEWS. ”

“I saw a renewed interest in doing things on your own,” she says. “In the last 10 years, the U.S. economy has shifted significantly, with rising self-employment, entrepreneurs and microbusinesses. My oldest son worked for a year with a bank then quit and started his own start up; he had the privilege of making that choice with access to technical knowledge, a network and money. But for folks with disabilities, those options aren’t available. They are more likely to start a business because it offers accessibility and flexibility, but the failure rate for them is higher than average.”

Sahgal created the eight-week i2i Entrepreneurship Program that gives individuals with disabilities with a business idea the chance to establish themselves. The online program provides technical education around social media, managing accounts and bootstrapping a business; guidelines on setting up a business plan and

managing accounts; and learning labs, breakout sessions designed to foster strong mentor-mentee relationships. Volunteers also work one-on-one with participants to help them execute their plans and offer support and advice.

“We wanted to provide those resources from business leaders themselves so participants have the opportunity to learn from the best and build a network,” Sahgal says. “When you have a small group discussion with someone interested in solving your problem, it’s a different level of experience.”

Funded by GCDD, the first cohort of 14 i2i graduates completed the program last spring. A second cohort of nine began training this fall. “I see a lot of good synergy within the group,” Sahgal says. “And the people who graduated in the spring are supporting the fall cohort, and they’ll support the next.”

Sahgal also found many would-be entrepreneurs have poor access to the internet and social media, and that led to the creation of microgrants, funded by private and corporate donations, so participants can purchase the tools they needed to get online.

“Last year we used the money to pay their rent,” says Sahgal. “This year, we’re giving out four \$500 grants so people can update their technology, build a website, get connected and take good pictures they can put online.”

So far, the i2i grads are putting together gift baskets, selling T-shirts and crocheted items, and working on voiceover skills.

“To be seen as a person who has no talent to being someone who has set up a business is a big step,” says Sahgal. “We hold their hands to get them to believe in themselves. Sometimes, they only believe they can do one thing or that it’s a hobby they can’t make money from. For some reason, we’ve defined boundaries for people with disabilities. But as they slowly gain confidence, we’re seeing some cool things that come from someone believing you can do anything.”

Crandell sees programs such as Synergies Work as important to improving employment opportunities for people with disabilities who want to work.

“I think we’ll have more innovative agencies working with these folks,” he says. “We know there has to be greater education and engagement, and that remote or self-employment are good options. Maybe the pandemic brings to the forefront people living in our communities who can become taxpayers. And that’s the good news.”



Project | SEARCH®

Project SEARCH a business-led, high school-to-work transition program, serving students with significant intellectual and developmental disabilities (I/DD). It takes place entirely at the workplace and the goal for each student participant is competitive employment.

To learn more, visit projectsearch.us

i2i ENTREPRENEURSHIP PROGRAM

The Synergies Work Idea to Incubation (i2i) Business Incubator offers mentorship, access to resources, and an ongoing support structure designed specifically for entrepreneurs with disabilities. i2i's mission is to empower people with disabilities to become financially independent and build their own futures.

To learn more, visit synergieswork.org/i2i

ENTREPRENEURS ON THE RISE

As a new work order has emerged, growing numbers of people have opted to become their own bosses. After finishing the i2i Entrepreneurship Program through Synergies Work, these three grads are putting their skills to work in their own businesses.

DANIEL ABADIE



VOICEOVER ARTIST

“I’ve been told I have a voice that resonates very well and booms through the house when I’m not in my soundproof studio,” says 22-year-old Cumming resident **Daniel Abadie**. But turning that talent into a business seemed like a tall order.

“When I first went to Synergies in the spring, I didn’t have any idea of where to begin,” he says. “They gave me the necessary steps to establish myself.”

Abadie was paired with a mentor who happened to have a relative in the industry, and that relationship opened the door to professional connections. He found support for building a website and a LinkedIn page, and marketing tips to help him sell his skills. He’s now able to work from home in a room he’s outfitted with soundproofing, a microphone and a computer.

For years, Clayton County resident **Brandon Cantrell** was doing what he calls “philanthropic work,” or as he now describes it, “Not working; I was giving it away.”

Cantrell’s talent is for crocheting marketable items from pot holders and ponchos to scarves, shawls and hats that sell from \$14.99 to \$74.99. He learned the art from his grandmother when he was a child, but he signed up for the i2i program to learn about selling his creations online.

Today, the *Crochet by Brandon* website highlights his creations. And with a recent Synergies Work grant, he’s buying a new iPhone that will take better photos.

“They helped me find my purpose,” says the 37-year-old. “I found platforms to sell my products and had one under the Synergies Work umbrella. Without them, I would still be giving my stuff away.”

BRANDON CANTRELL



CROCHET ARTIST

NOAH SEBACK



PEER MENTOR

Mountain Park resident **Noah Seback** learned about the i2i program from a friend who knew the 22-year-old wanted to start a business. “I just didn’t have the knowhow,” he admits.

Seback also knew his idea was a bit unusual. “My passion is to connect with other non-speaking autistics who share the same struggles, and my idea was to offer a service in which I could partner with them as a peer mentor,” he writes.

Through the spring and summer, Seback worked on designing a small business.

“I realized it was doable, even for someone like me with no business savvy. What I saw as an intimidating process was just like any other process: It could be implemented given the right know how, guidance, support and encouragement.

Today, through his qUirk company, Seback offers peer support and mentoring to nonspeaking autistics and their family members. “I offer a neurodiverse and lived-experience perspective for non-speakers who want to go beyond just surviving to thriving.”



What's Happening in Washington?

Federal Disability Policy Updates

By Serena Lowe, consultant
at the Center for Public
Representation

As we round out the end of the fiscal year, action in the nation's capital is both frenetic and action-packed. Congress is super-focused on passing a historic multi-trillion-dollar reconciliation bill that includes major investments in COVID recovery, infrastructure development, and expansion of Medicaid-funded home and community-based services. If successful, the legislation could create a new era of investments in improving the social determinants of health and quality of life outcomes for individuals with disabilities and their families.

Meanwhile, the Biden Administration has moved ahead with several initiatives aimed at improving access to supports for people with disabilities during COVID-19, provided relief to student loan borrowers who have permanent disabilities and made preparations for launching the National Disability Employment Awareness Month.

Healthcare: CDC Launches COVID-19 Resources for People with Intellectual and Developmental Disabilities

The coronavirus disease 2019 (COVID-19) pandemic has created unique challenges for people with intellectual and developmental disabilities (I/DD). To address them, the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) created a COVID-19 [toolkit](#)

with communication resources explaining in plain language how people with I/DD and caregivers can protect themselves from the virus. The [toolkit](#) contains social stories, videos, posters and interactive activities that focus on five topics: getting a COVID-19 vaccine; wearing a mask; social distancing; hand washing; and getting a COVID-19 test. There is also a [tip sheet](#) for caregivers that offers suggestions for things they can do to ease their loved one's worries about the virus.

[See COVID-19 Materials for People with Intellectual and Developmental Disabilities and Care Providers for more information.](#)



Guidance on "Long COVID" as a Disability under the ADA, Section 504 and Section 1557

Although many people with COVID-19 get better within weeks, some people continue to experience symptoms that can last months after first being infected or may have new or recurring symptoms at a later time. This condition is known as "long COVID." In light of the rise of long COVID as a persistent and significant health issue, the Office for Civil Rights of the Department of Health and Human Services (DHHS) and the Civil Rights Division of the Department of Justice co-issued guidance on the 31st anniversary of the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) that affirms that long COVID can be a disability under Titles II (state and local government) and III (public accommodations) of the ADA, Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act of 1973, and Section 1557 of the Patient Protection and Affordable Care Act. The [guidance](#) also provides resources for additional information and best practices. This document focuses solely on long COVID, and does not address when COVID-19 may meet the legal definition of disability.



Build Back Better Act Includes Major Reforms to Expand Eligibility and Strengthen Medicaid & CHIP

Economic recovery legislation under consideration by the U.S. House of Representatives would create a permanent pathway to coverage for more than 2 million people in the Medicaid coverage gap, as well as strengthen Medicaid and Children's Health Insurance Program (CHIP) coverage for parents and children, people returning to their communities from prisons, and people with disabilities and older Americans who need home- and community-based services (HCBS).

Economic recovery legislation under consideration by the U.S. House of Representatives would create a permanent pathway to coverage for more than 2 million people ...

The Build Back Better Act, as approved by the House Energy and Commerce Committee, would ensure all pregnant people enrolled in Medicaid and CHIP can maintain coverage for 12 months after the end of their pregnancy; provide 12 months of continuous coverage to children and youth enrolled in Medicaid and CHIP; provide Medicaid coverage of healthcare services for people within 30 days of leaving prison, which could connect them to the care they need in the community;

and make CHIP permanent. These policies would narrow racial and ethnic inequities in coverage and access to health services and promote long-term health and well-being among Medicaid enrollees at all stages of life.

Community Living: Build Back Better Act Includes Increased Federal Funding that Would Improve Quality of and Access to Home- and Community-Based Services, Support Transitions to Community

The Build Back Better Act of 2021 also makes historic investments to allow more seniors and individuals with disabilities to receive the services they need in their homes, alongside their friends and family. The House version of the Act includes \$190 billion for expanding access to quality home-based services and care for millions of older adults and people with disabilities. It will also strengthen the direct care workforce by improving provider payment rates and giving states the resources to improve their care infrastructure. The legislation also makes permanent the Money Follows the Person and the spousal impoverishment program, both successful Medicaid programs that help low-income older adults and individuals with disabilities receive home-based services.

The Build Back Better Act creates a financial incentive for states to improve quality of and access to Medicaid HCBS. First, states will apply to receive planning grants from DHHS to develop robust HCBS improvement plans. After the Secretary of Health and

Human Services approves a state's plan, the state would get a seven percentage-point increase in its federal matching rate (FMAP) for Medicaid HCBS. In addition, states would get an 80 percent FMAP for administrative costs associated with implementing the plan, significantly greater than the regular 50 percent FMAP states receive for administrative costs. These financial incentives would be available as long as states meet certain requirements to maintain eligibility levels, amount, duration and scope of Medicaid HCBS. States must also adopt policies to reduce barriers to accessing HCBS; provide coverage for personal care services; adopt "no wrong door" and other policies to streamline HCBS eligibility and enrollment; expand access to behavioral health services; improve coordination between Medicaid HCBS and programs focused on employment, housing and transportation; provide supports to family caregivers; and take steps to expand Medicaid HCBS eligibility or benefits. Finally, states must update qualifications and training opportunities for direct care workers and family caregivers; and update (as appropriate) payment rates for HCBS providers to support workforce recruitment and retention and to ensure that rate increases are appropriately passed through to direct care workers.

It is anticipated the legislative package will advance through both chambers of Congress in early-mid October but has been stalled due to internal disagreements among moderate and progressive Democrats regarding how much the package should include. The original package included \$3.5 trillion in new federal investments,

but moderate Democrats in the House and Senate are pushing for a significantly smaller bill capped at \$1.5 trillion in spending. In the meantime, disability advocates are pushing hard for the funding set aside for HCBS expansion efforts to increase beyond the \$190 billion (as previously reported during our last quarterly publication, the initial proposal called for \$400 billion toward the HCBS components of the legislation).

Education: Federal Student Loan Borrowers to Receive Automatic Total and Permanent Disability Discharges (TPD)

Over 323,000 borrowers who have a TPD will receive more than \$5.8 billion in automatic student loan discharges due to a new regulation announced today by the U.S. Department of Education. The change will apply to borrowers who are identified through an existing data match with the Social Security Administration (SSA). The policy change went into effect with the Department's quarterly data match with SSA in September 2021. Borrowers will receive notices of their approval for a discharge in the weeks after the match and all discharges should occur by the end of the year.

Disability Employment: Build Back Better

In addition to work completed by the House Energy & Commerce Committee, the House Education & Labor Committee also marked up key sections of the Build Back Better Act that include \$1.48 billion in competitive grants

addressing direct care workforce development issues. The legislation also includes \$300 million for transformation grants to states to collaborate with providers who hold 14(c) certificates, and funding for a national center to provide technical assistance to state grantees. It remains to be foreseen whether these provisions will be preserved in the final consensus Build Back Better Act package.



National Disability Employment Awareness Month (October 2021)

The theme for the 2021 National Disability Employment Awareness Month (NDEAM), "America's Recovery: Powered by Inclusion," reflects the importance of ensuring

that people with disabilities have full access to employment and community involvement during the national recovery from the COVID-19 pandemic.

NDEAM is held each October to commemorate the many contributions of people with disabilities to America's workplaces and economy. Browse their [website](#) for ideas and resources for employers, community organizations, state and local governments, advocacy groups and schools to participate in celebrating NDEAM through events and activities centered around the theme. The U.S. Department of Labor's Office of Disability Employment Policy (ODEP) offers a range of resources to help employers and other organizations plan NDEAM observances, including not only the official poster, but also sample articles, a press release, proclamation and social media content.

Note: information current as of 9/30/2021

What You Should Know

- If successfully passed and enacted, the Build Back Better Act could create a new chapter in the provision of Medicaid HCBS, and propel efforts forward to better help people with disabilities and older adults access services to live, work and thrive in the community.
- Policy guidance was released that affirms protections under existing civil rights statutes for individuals experiencing long COVID.
- Additional policy guidance has relinquished student loan borrowers with permanent disabilities from paying back their student loans.
- October is **National Disability Employment Awareness Month (NDEAM)**! There are numerous ways you and your organization can get involved - check out ODEP's resources and get engaged!

My Journey to One of My Dreams

by Laura Owen

Uniting for Change is a grassroots network of self-advocates that is growing the self-advocacy movement in Georgia. Along with family members, allies and supporters, self-advocates work on “uniting Georgians and influencing change by speaking up and taking control of our lives.”



Below is an article from Laura Owen, a member of the Uniting for Change Leadership Collective, about what having an inclusive job means to her as a person with disabilities and a self-advocate.

My name is Laura Owen and I am 44 years old. I am happily employed at Big Lots in Athens, Georgia. I have always wanted a job where I was able to help people because I am a people-person. I also wanted to work somewhere where people would treat me as an equal. For the past several years I tried to find a

I have always wanted a job where I was able to help people because I am a people-person.

job with a job coach and had no luck. It seemed that I was not qualified for most jobs and there were few part-time positions. Full-time jobs would be too hard on me because of my physical challenges.

Then, in November my friend (and Direct Support Professional), Delores, and I were in Big Lots. They had a “Now Hiring” sign up, so my job coach and I went back to see if they had a paper application. We learned that the way to apply to Big Lots is online, so my job coach and I immediately went to his phone and completed the application. The application was not hard to complete. I filled it out on a Monday and the next Friday the manager called me for an interview for next Tuesday. I was very excited, and a little nervous.

I went to the interview and we sat down and we talked about me and he wanted to learn more about me and understand my disability. We had a good time and cut up and we both told some jokes. After we were done before I left he asked me if I wanted a job putting stuff back on the shelves and keeping the store clean. I accepted because I wanted the job.

I started my job in January 2021. The people at Big Lots are very understanding and treat me as an equal. They help me when they see I need help, so I really don’t need my job coach anymore. They also treat me as though I am a part of the Big Lots family.

Since I have been working, I feel like I am accomplishing a goal I set for myself and I am a lot happier. I want to make sure people know to not give up and to know that a job is out there for them. I am a self-advocate for people with disabilities and a member of Uniting for Change.



Laura started working at Big Lots in January 2021.



EMPLOYMENT

People with disabilities should earn equal pay for their work.

Uniting for Change promotes all people to work for a living wage in their communities.



Uniting Georgians and influencing change by speaking up and taking control of our lives

uniting for change



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Making Competitive, Integrated Employment a Reality

Featuring Amy Gonzalez, Project Manager for the [Administration on Disabilities \(AoD\) Disability Employment Technical Assistance Center](#)

GCDD interviewed Amy Gonzalez to discuss the ways competitive, integrated employment is becoming a reality for people with disabilities across the country, why employers need to get on board, and what individuals and family members can do to make sure employment comes first.



The true goal is to make sure that we are moving the needle on competitive, integrated employment (CIE). When we talk about CIE we are talking about an individual with a disability who is working for an employer where they have the opportunity to interact with people who do not have disabilities. We're talking about one person and one job where there's opportunity for career mobility, upward mobility, increased hours and job flexibility.

not only address that issue, but take it to scale and focus on sustainability.

I think that it's important for stakeholders and the grantee community to understand that we are very approachable, and we are eager to work with them. We are all about collaboration and partnerships, in fact, we have three themes that we focus on in this technical assistance (TA) center. It's systems change, collaboration and innovation. We really focus on empowering, engaging and educating grantees to help them develop the necessary partnerships and take to scale effective practices for employment.

Unfortunately, there is still a dilemma in the field. The fact is that people with intellectual and developmental disabilities or other disabilities aren't able to achieve employment. It's either due to lack of resources, lack of policy development or lack of understanding and belief by employers in the community in general, that people with disabilities are able to contribute at a job and have meaningful employment.

I think that these trends and lack of transportation really impede the ability for people with disabilities to obtain employment. Transportation hands down is a nationwide issue. Maybe county or state governments don't offer reliable transportation options, or there aren't enough resources so they're late for work. We need to do better in identifying

reliable, economical transportation options for people with disabilities to get to and from work.

So we've seen the unemployment rate for people with disabilities substantially higher than the rate for people without disabilities who are seeking employment. I know that Employment First is a national movement and there is a strong push to get people to work and shift out of segregated types of services to CIE.

But overall employment remains low. Individuals with disabilities are still marginalized and considered a liability to employers, so there's a lot of work we need to do shifting perspectives and moving the needle in that area.

We have seen such a dramatic shift since the pandemic hit the country. I think this gives people with disabilities and employers, an opportunity to tap into an untapped pool of people who are willing, talented and ready to work.

I think this pandemic has really forced businesses to dig deep and identify innovative ways to support employees through this now virtual world. This gives great opportunities for people with disabilities who aren't sure about working in the community or want to work, but are reserved and need more supports at home. I think the pandemic has definitely caused employers to restructure in ways they never thought of, which gives people with disabilities more opportunities to work from home and have creative

Individuals with disabilities are still marginalized and considered a liability to employers, so there's a lot of work we need to do shifting perspectives and moving the needle in that area.



What we mean by technical assistance is help. It is working with a [grantee](#) who has a specific need or a gap to fill and meeting them where they are; working with them hand in hand to tackle a policy issue or a programmatic issue; or maybe there has been a data analysis about employment trends in the state and the grantee doesn't know how to utilize that data.

That's just an example of some of the forms of technical assistance that we offer, but basically it's just supporting a specific need that the grantee has and how we can work with them to

work schedules, which potentially may align more with their goals.

I think that the pandemic has caused a big shift in a good way because now that so many people are working virtually, individuals with disabilities have new opportunities to obtain employment at the virtual level.

The most important thing that I'd like the audience to understand is that if there's any reluctance about hiring a person with a disability, I would suggest that you give that person a chance. I understand that there are concerns, maybe with safety or liability, but there's data out there to show us that people with disabilities enhance productivity. People with disabilities learn their job correctly and understand safety protocols. I think it's important to dispel any fears about hiring someone with a disability.

In response to the perception that there are extremely high costs to accommodate someone with a disability in a job opportunity, the [Job Accommodation Network \(JAN\)](#) provides free training and resources to employers who are working to accommodate people with disabilities.

So, the fact that there is skepticism about hiring people with disabilities shouldn't be there, because employers can get support for passionate, dependable workers and meet some of their productivity goals. There are a few barriers that come to mind, but I definitely want to reiterate the misconceptions and the confusion about what it would take to support a person with a disability on the job.

In addition, I think there is fear of the unknown, not only on behalf of employers, but family members and rightfully so.

Family members don't want their son or daughter to be mistreated in a job or aren't sure what that's going to look like because of the unique support needs that person may have. The other barrier is the fear of the loss of benefits. There are times when that disability check is the only

source of revenue for a household and that family is not going to lose that check they depend on.

So, we need more benefits counseling to educate people and their families about what that check is going to look like when they're working and they're getting benefits. We need to work closer with employers hand in hand so that we're broadcasting success stories to show people with disabilities who are successful in CIE.

Then I think that just like we're doing today, we're advocating, we're marketing, and we're spreading the word about people with disabilities and how they are an asset to employers. It's going to take that collective effort to break these barriers.

We also need a shift in funding. We need a shift in state policymaking, and just like other grantees at GCDD, they are working hand-in-hand with employers. We have started to see a shift, but it takes a village, it really does. When we start to address these barriers on an individual basis and work together with partners, we'll see the changes needed to help support people with disabilities in CIE.

It is so important to keep families and people with disabilities at the forefront of everything that we do in our work to advance systems change in employment for people with disabilities. Some advice that I have to give is that I know this process is daunting; it's scary because state systems are complex and their policies aren't easy to interpret.



The Disability Employment TA Center is a national organization that provides evidence-based training and technical assistance (TA) to the Administration on Disabilities (AoD) grantees aimed at improving competitive, integrated employment (CIE) and economic outcomes for individuals with disabilities across the nation.

My recommendation is to reach out and stay connected to councils, centers for independent living and other grantees who have a wealth of expertise in this area. When you connect with them, you become educated about the options for your family members and how to pursue that path for employment. Don't be scared, reach out to state systems and grantees so that you're educated at an early age. Depending on your child's age, you have this information, so you're prepared to work on the next steps.

The last tip that I have is that I understand that sometimes all families have heard for years is that their family member can't do this, they can't do that, they won't be able to achieve these goals. My recommendation is to look past that and focus on what your family member can do, focus on their abilities.

This interview was summarized due to limited space. Watch the entire video and read the extended version here.



Telling their Own Stories

Treasure Maps showcased the stories of 10 people from across the state with developmental disabilities. The stories are expressions of the storytellers themselves. They chose the stories they wanted to tell, what was most important to them as individuals, as a result of an iterative process called "life maps." Here are excerpts of their stories.



[Watch the full video here!](#)

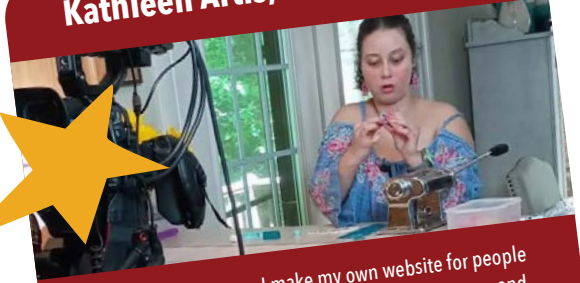
This show is proudly presented by the Georgia Council on Developmental Disabilities and L'Arche Atlanta, in partnership with Resurgens Impact Consulting and StoryMuse. The film was made by Xerophile.

Ronald Bovell, 23, Stockbridge



(reading his own story "The First and Tragic Haircut") Let me take you back to when I was just a little kid. I lived in the Bronx with my family and Auntie Lucy. Auntie Lucy took care of us, but she didn't really understand my autism and thought I was just being plain naughty. Food had a strange feeling about it. I always wanted to wipe it off my hands as quickly as possible. So I rubbed my hands on my dreadlocks. Auntie Lucy was not amused. All I wanted to do was scrape it off my palms and my hair seemed like an easy, safe place to put it.

Kathleen Artis, 22, Dawsonville



With my Etsy business, I make my own website for people to order clay earrings. After I've put them in the oven, and they come out, I like to just look at them up close and see, wow, I just did this. And how amazing it is to be able to do this. I learned to make jewelry from Taylor, my caregiver. Took me a little bit of time. I got upset at first because I didn't understand why it was messing up. But Taylor told me it's just the learning curve. You'll learn it and be able to do it by yourself. Just keep practicing, practice makes perfect.

Faith Hill, 21, Lawrenceville



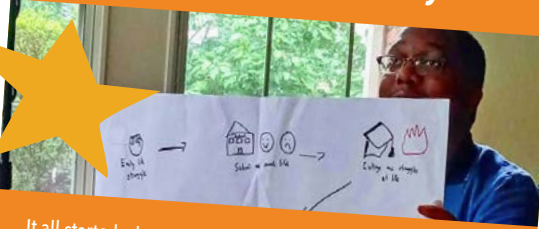
I have a passion for life and bring joy into every space I enter, but this was not always the conversation. When I was a baby, I wasn't developing as I should. Doctors were not optimistic that I would ever walk independently. In 2003, my dad was deployed to the Middle East. Before he left, he said the best gift he could receive if he returned home was for me to walk to him. Over the course of that year, I worked hard to become ambulatory. When my daddy returned, I walked to him on my walker without help. There were tears everywhere.

Jessica Winnowich, 37, Columbus



The first play I was in was in church. I was so ready to do it. But we left and never went back. I joined the drama club in high school and I wanted to go to New York to study theater. Mom very much did not want me to go. So we got in a fight and I said, I don't think you've ever wanted me to be on stage. You wouldn't even let me stay at that church when they had the play. And she said, oh baby, we didn't go back because they didn't want us to go back. I just think it's kind of funny really, because I bet I'm the only kid that became a theater major. And I loved it.

Ryan Lee, 29, Dunwoody



It all started when I was trying out this improv class because I wanted to try something new and go someplace that wasn't home. It was run by a woman whose grandson was also on the spectrum. She really knew how to get energy going. I met Steve and we shared things in common like animals and games. So he invited me to play Dungeons and Dragons at his house. I went over to Steve's house and Steve's friend Dave was also there. And we had a great time playing D&D.

Michael Holton, 27, Guyton



My favorite memory of elementary school was making new friends and the opportunities they gave me. My teacher in elementary school told the class that there was a student who was differently abled. The teacher just talked about how to communicate with me effectively, and then I had a lot of friends in elementary school. I now work at Ebenezer Elementary School as a Special Education teacher.

Adnan Curry, 30, Athens



I've liked Elvis since I was five years old. I like his moves and I like his singing. I like his jumpsuit. Elvis was born January 8, 1935 in Tupelo, Mississippi. He made "Jailhouse Rock" in 1957. I sang Elvis in camp, at the talent show every year. I was on "Athens Got Talent." I won the trophy. And I had an open heart surgery when I was 23. I listen to Elvis every time I wake up.

Gabby Dollar, 31, Lawrenceville



When COVID hit, Gabby moved in with her family. Gabby has people that help her live her best life, 24 hours a day. On the video, Gabby is playing dreidel with the top attached to a mixer so she can spin it by turning on the power. Her caregiver says, "Can you show them how you spin the dreidel? There you go, okay, wanna stop it? So Gabby got a shin." On the family Zoom chat, Gabby says, "Hey everybody! I love you."

Blair Usher, 14, Sugar Hill



I have Alstrom syndrome. It affects my hunger and many organ systems. What makes me happy would be my dogs and my friends. Alstrom causes constant hunger, weight gain and health issues. I've gotten bullied before, just because you look different doesn't mean it's okay. And I just really want people to know it's okay to be different. One way I've overcome the bullying is my friend Hunter. We met in middle school. We talked and I felt like we had a lot in common. We've been buddies ever since.

Angad Sahgal, 21, Atlanta



I live in Sandy Springs with my family, but I'm from New Delhi, India. I lived there for five years, and one of my favorite memories is eating good food in India. I learned to cook from my friend, Bhadur, and his favorite things to cook were butter chicken, shish kabob, dal and roti. I am happy and excited to be going to college at Georgia State's IDEAL program. I hope to one day open my own restaurant.

The Blossoming of Real Communities by Jennifer Bosk

When a Georgia Council on Developmental Disabilities (GCDD) initiative ends, the celebration continues. The work has planted a seed, sown results, and now all can watch the fruits and impact of the initiative multiply as time goes on.

So it is with the recently completed initiative that began 10 years ago as Real Communities. The objective at the start of this initiative was to equip community members at the local, grassroots level to work together toward common goals to improve their community using person-centered supports, community-centered connections, and persistent and reflective learning. Purposefully involving people with and without developmental disabilities in collaborative projects was pivotal to the framework of Real Communities.

GCDD tapped Sumaya Karimi as the Real Communities organizing director. Karimi is the founder and co-director of Global Ubuntu, an organization that has helped Georgia residents discover and use their individual and collective power to change their communities for good.

With Karimi's guidance, GCDD supported Real Communities in several ways, including technical assistance, training, popular education, and at times, financial support. Projects were determined by individual communities, as opposed to GCDD staff, and varied according to local needs and desires.

The initiative partnered with various organizations throughout the state of Georgia. Each Real Communities partner had a community builder whose role was to create the group, support implementation of the work, and create sustainability and accountability. Successful community builders worked toward the goals of empowerment – helping people mobilize, obtain resources, and develop strategies that promoted their interests or causes specific to their community. Looking back at the early years of the initiative, GCDD's Executive Director Eric Jacobson said, "I believe that many of the outcomes were achieved as we brought people together and changes occurred locally such as new transportation opportunities in Fitzgerald, greater food access in Savannah and Clarkston, and the identification of gifts and how to use them in Macon."

Other Real Communities achievements included:

The goal of **Open Studio for All at the Colquitt County Arts Center** in Moultrie was to create a more inclusive art community by shifting people's perceptions about individuals with disabilities through gatherings to create artwork, share experiences and talents, and share stories as the community members get to know one another.

Mixed Greens Community Builders and The Little Green Wagon at the Forsyth Farmers' Market aimed to build increasingly diverse relationships through shared experiences of caring for a place and all its people. They had individuals plant a seed, watch it grow from one week to the next, and take their plant home when it was ready to transplant.

Re-Cycle Macon provided adults of varying abilities in need of transportation the opportunity to earn a bicycle as means of stopgap transportation and to repair bicycles together.

About four years ago, the Real Communities initiative morphed into [Welcoming Communities](#).

PURPOSEFULLY INVOLVING PEOPLE WITH AND WITHOUT DEVELOPMENTAL DISABILITIES IN COLLABORATIVE PROJECTS WAS PIVOTAL TO REAL COMMUNITIES.



“The purpose of this change was to focus on the idea of how we create places that welcome all people and engage them in not only developing projects but involvement in creating an atmosphere of social justice.



This means engaging in trying to change the political environment in local communities. I think that we are beginning to see the achievements of these projects as each community works with a coach to identify issues and tactics,” Jacobson explained.

Dialogues and advocacy are poised to shift culture and attitudes so that everyone can regard others with empathy and compassion, and people feel welcome and develop a sense of belonging.

The change to Welcoming Communities allowed the initiative to address the urgent issues many individuals with and without disabilities are now facing in society and across Georgia. Neighborhood groups and towns began hosting Welcoming Community Dialogues to create space for community members of differing backgrounds, races and abilities to discuss and dream of a society where everyone is treated with dignity and justice.

Coming out of the initiative were offerings such as:

Filling in the GAPS in Augusta organized a series of community dialogues covering “Life in the Time of Corona,” “Mental Health: Reducing the Stigma,” “Finding Healing in Daily Lives,” and “The Power of Empathy.” They offered a safe place to have authentic, real dialogue around these topics in a judgment-free environment.

Georgia Research Environment Economic Network focused on documenting the social justice concerns of marginalized groups in the Savannah community and established a Community Action Team to come up with measurable solutions.

Inspire Positivity created a program that includes Welcoming Community Dialogues that specifically address the social issues and concerns of persons of color with disabilities, as well as the creation of public gatherings that encourage better community involvement and support of persons with disabilities in disenfranchised communities in LaGrange and Troup County.

Within the past year, the initiative grew into what is now called the Welcoming Community Movement (WCM). Its goal is to pave the way toward an equitable and just society - foundational of welcoming communities - where people across race, ability, ethnicity, culture, class, socioeconomic background, educational status, gender and religion are treated with dignity and respect. Dialogues and advocacy are poised to shift culture and attitudes so that everyone can regard others with empathy and compassion, and people feel welcome and develop a sense of belonging.

REAL COMMUNITIES LAUNCHED IN 2011



Clarkston Community Garden - Clarkston, GA



Mixed Greens Community Builders - Savannah, GA



Centenary UMC Macon Roving Listeners - Macon, GA



Open Studio for All at the Colquitt County Arts Center - Moultrie, GA



Re-Cycle Macon
- Macon, GA



ConnectAbility/Meet Your
Neighbor - Dahlonega, GA



Abilities Discovered -
Warner Robins, GA



Filling in the GAPS -
Hephzibah, GA

The WCM is a journey through disabilities and racial justice.

WCM aims to make choice real for more people with developmental disabilities so they can exercise the responsibility to act as contributing citizens to make their community better for everyone.

The community builders make four commitments through their groups' work:

1. People with developmental disabilities are active members.
2. Action focuses on making the community better for everyone.
3. Over time, the initiative builds up local capacity for collective action.
4. Participants take responsibility for sharing what they are learning.

The initiative is not about single victories, but about building communities where people have a growing capacity to act together.

With this change, Mixed Greens in Savannah expanded their work and joined forces with the Episcopal Church Diocese of Georgia in a dialogue to help all community members learn how to end discrimination against people with disabilities, end racism, and create different pathways to economic and resource access.

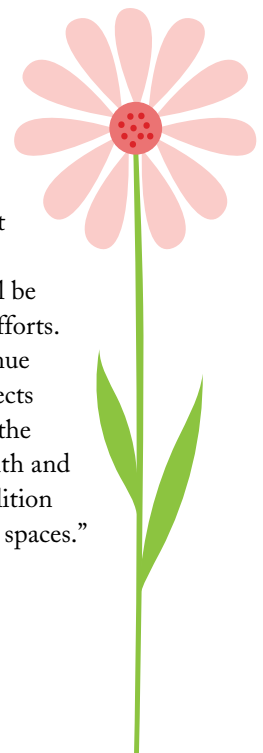
ConnectAbility in Dahlonega brought together 10 teams of people with and without disabilities who share a common love of photography with a goal of building relationships and making friendships during their annual "Thousand Words Photography" project.

And the Georgia Research Environment Economic Network in Savannah is working with people, with and without disabilities, who have been released from incarceration and want to return to their community as contributing members.

WCM AIMS TO MAKE CHOICE REAL FOR MORE PEOPLE WITH DEVELOPMENTAL DISABILITIES SO THEY CAN EXERCISE THE RESPONSIBILITY TO ACT AS CONTRIBUTING CITIZENS TO MAKE THEIR COMMUNITY BETTER FOR EVERYONE. ”

When looking back at all the accomplishments through this initiative, Jacobson sees how it tied directly to GCDD's current [Five-Year Strategic Plan](#) and will serve constituents in years to come.

"We have significantly reduced the scope of the Welcoming Communities efforts. Instead, we are using the learning and values of Welcoming Communities in most of our projects," he explained. "Concepts such as Collective Impact, Asset Based Community Development and [Theory U](#) (a change management method) will be foundational to GCDD efforts. In addition, we will continue to fund smaller, local projects that continue to promote the idea of bringing people with and without disabilities in coalition to create more welcoming spaces."



**REAL COMMUNITIES
BECAME WCM IN 2021**



COMMUNITY CALENDAR

OCTOBER

October 18, 1 - 2 PM

**NDEAM Webinar Series:
What Does it Take to Exit
School Employed?**

[Register FREE online.](#)

October 25, 1 - 2 PM

**NDEAM Webinar Series:
Poppin' Joe's & the Business
of Being Self-Employed!**

[Register FREE online.](#)

October 26, 2 - 5 PM

**The Southern Museum
Sensory Friendly Afternoon**
Kennesaw, GA

[For more information, click here.](#)

October 29, 8 AM - 4 PM

**6th Annual North Georgia
Autism Conference**
Dalton, GA

[More info and registration here.](#)

NOVEMBER

November 11-12

**6th Annual World Disability
and Rehabilitation
Conference 2021**

[Virtual registration here.](#)

November 14, 1 PM or 3 PM

**Rudolph the Red Nosed
Reindeer - Sensory Friendly
Sunday**, Atlanta, GA

[Details and tickets here.](#)

November 15-17

**AUCD 2021 - Learning
Together: Connecting
Research & Lived Experience**

[Virtual registration here.](#)

November 16-19

**OCALICON 2021
The Premier Autism and
Disabilities Conference**

[Virtual registration here.](#)

November 19, 6:30 - 10 PM

**Champion of the Year:
Georgia Best Buddies**
Atlanta, GA

[Find information here.](#)

November 20, 10 AM - 3 PM

**The Atlanta Family Caregiver
Expo 2021**

[Register FREE here.](#)

DECEMBER

December 1-5

2021 TASH Conference
New Orleans, LA

[Virtual registration here.](#)

December 3

**International Day of Persons
with Disabilities 2021**

[More information here.](#)

December 8-9

**Georgia Association for
Positive Behavior Supports
Conference - Virtual**

[Virtual registration here.](#)

December 11, 9 AM

FODAC's Breakfast with Santa
Tucker, GA

[Find the details here.](#)

December 11, 10 AM - 12 Noon

Lekotek Holiday Party

[Registration details not yet
available. Check the Lekotek
calendar for updates.](#)

**Talk About
It Tuesday**

WEEKLY ZOOM SERIES
AROUND COVID-19
12 PM - 1 PM

Register
Now!



TALK ABOUT IT TUESDAY

Every Tuesday starting in
September, from 12 Noon to 1 PM,
GCDD will host weekly listening
sessions for people to share their
COVID-19 vaccination feelings.

[Register in advance on Zoom.](#)

December 11, 12 - 1 PM

Lunch with Santa
Johns Creek, GA

[Register FREE by
November 29 here.](#)

JANUARY

Jan 6 - Feb 3, 8 AM - 5 PM

**Georgia Artists with
Disabilities**
Carrollton, GA

[Find more information here.](#)

January 13-14

**GCDD Quarterly Council
Meeting** - Atlanta, GA

[Find more information online.](#)

For more events across
the state, [visit GCDD's
Calendar of Events.](#)