October 19, 2020, Putting Texas Back to Work.

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>> Turner: Good morning, everyone. And welcome to the Accessibility and Disability Policy Webinar series. My name is Randi Turner and I'm the accessibility and disability rights coordinator here at the Governor's Committee on People with Disabilities. This month we celebrate the 75th anniversary of national disability employment awareness month. We are hosting a series of webinars with the Texas Workforce Commission called putting Texas back to work.

Today's focus is how vocational rehabilitation helped me stay employed. And I'm going to do a little housekeeping, and then I'm going to turn it over to Melinda.

So your microphones will be off during the session. Please make note of the webinar tool bar where you will see a Q&A icon. This is where you will submit questions. Questions will be answered during the presentation, so feel free to submit your questions at any time.

I'll be monitoring the questions.

The chatbox is used for things that we want to send out to everyone. It could be a link to a website or a PDF document or something like that, but please don't use the chatbox to request questions because in the Q&A box if we don't get to everything, we know who asked the question and we can email you the answer.

The webinar will be recorded and will be posted to our YouTube channel. Training materials and the realtime captioning transcript will be emailed to all participants after the session.

So in a moment I'm going to hit record and repeat a little bit of the information you just heard and then I'll turn it over to Melinda. So give me one second.

>> Turner: Good morning and welcome to the Accessibility and Disability Policy Webinar series. My name is Randi Turner and I'm the accessibility and disability rights coordinator at the Governor's Committee for People with Disabilities. This months we celebrate the 75th anniversary of national disability employment awareness month with a selection of webinars Putting Texas Back to Work. Today's focus is how Vocational Rehabilitation helped me stay employed and is co‑hosted by the Texas Workforce Commission.

So I'm going to turn it over to Melinda Paninski.

>> Good morning, Randi. Can you see me?

>> Turner: Yes, ma'am.

>> Awesome. Thanks so much. And thank you all for being here. As Randi said, we want to welcome everyone for helping all of us to celebrate the 75th anniversary of the National Disability Employment Awareness Month. There's a lot of things going on. This is one of many, but we appreciate you and your time for being here with us today. We think this series will be a great series to highlight various opportunities and programs for individuals, employers of all kinds in the great State of Texas.

Today's topic, as Randi said, is around the Vocational Rehabilitation Program and how their services along with partners have helped many Texans stay or find employment.

In 2016 the Vocational Rehabilitation Program moved from the Texas Department of Assistive and Rehabilitative Services over to the Texas Workforce Commission. It's one of many of the programs within the Workforce Solutions system and it's available for job seekers and businesses throughout the State of Texas.

VR works alongside with the 28 local workforce board and service partners in their local communities. Many of the vocational rehab offices can be found within the Workforce Solution centers in your local communities.

So let's talk about today's topic, what is vocational rehabilitation? Or as we sometimes refer to it as VR.

This program provides services to assist individuals with preparing for, obtaining, retaining or advancing in employment.

And in cases ‑‑ in case you're wondering, just about VR in general, it's in every state so it's not just in Texas. I know we have a lot of great things here, but every state has a vocational rehab program.

So if you are hearing this and think it would be a great opportunity for someone you know in another state, certainly have them contact are vocational rehab in that state.

The VR program is an eligibility‑based program. The eligibility is pretty straightforward. The person needs to have a disability. The disability needs to be preventing them from being employed, and there's an expectation that with the Vocational Rehab Services this individual with maintain employment ‑‑ find and maintain employment.

Services are provided on an individual basis, that's because everyone's needs, skills and interests are individual. And we want to make sure that the plan that's laid out for them reflects that.

The staff person from VR and the individual work together to determine the needs of the services that they will need throughout their VR program and they'll outline those services in what's calls an individual plan for employment or an IPE.

So what are some examples of some of the services we provide? On the screen you will see some of those services listed like medical and psychological services, work experience while in high school, job placement, job coaching, assistive technology, and the list goes on. There are many, many services that are offered.

I think one of the key and important services that individuals can receive from the vocational rehab program is their career counseling and guidance services. So many individuals come to VR maybe not knowing what their employment opportunities are, so the VR counselor can sit down and work with them looking at the labor market in their home area, seeing what careers are out there and looking at how to get that training if they don't already have it and hopefully find employment in those areas.

So the other part is retention. So we are focusing on retaining today. The individuals that you're going to be meeting were employed and they needed VR services to stay employed. Many individuals may not know that once they acquire a disability, they can continue working and this program is certainly one of the opportunities for people to do that.

So let's meet a few of the folks who have received some of these services, so thanks for joining us, Scott.

So first I want to thank you for serving our country in the military and now as a police officer in the great city of Tyler, Texas.

So tell us a little bit about your disability and how it impacted your employment.

>> Yeah. Like I said, I served in the marines for 13 years and lots of big bangs, loud noises and stuff, and I got out of Marines and wanted to be a police officer. So I wanted to get hired on as a police officer, and I've been here with the Tyler police department for 17 years mainly on patrol. I've been on swat. But I've been able to do pretty much anything I wanted to do.

And one of the things from my retirement is joining the community response unit and that's basically a lot of community outreach programs, crime prevention and things like that.

I get into the unit in January of this year and our whole world in T and mission had changed. Our job completely changed with the advent of COVID.

What I didn't realize is how much I was relying on reading lips. My wife wanted to write a book called what I said and what Scott heard.

So if you could imagine people now wearing masks, people are wearing masks, now I really can communicate with people ‑‑ I really can't communicate with people.

So I found that I kind of related to people that maybe back in the day had leprosy and I would get closer and I would say what did you say? And they would recoil back.

And it was really hard to communicate with people and that's kind of our job with what we do. And not only just regular patrol officers, but our unit specifically about communicating with the public.

And I got really frustrated and I had already started the process of getting my hearing aids fixed, again you have COVID everything stops, everything was put on hold.

>> So Scott, I'm going to interrupt you really quick.

So Scott is joining us from an interrogation room at the police office, so Scott, you're a little muffled, a couple of folks have commented that you're a little hard to hear, so I apologize. We're talking about your hearing loss and yet all of us are having trouble hearing you. [Laughter].

>> I promise it was not by design.

>> It's okay!

>> I will get closer to the mic on my iPad.

>> Much better.

>> Turner: That is better.

>>

>> You're great.

>> So really with everybody wearing masks, and we also had our police policy of we always had to wearing masks and we had to social distance and yeah, I was either going to get in trouble because I wasn't social distance or but I had already started the process to get my hearing aids with VR. And then everything stopped. All the workers that were working from home, and I pretty much thought it was a done deal but we would have to wait for this to happen. I didn't know what I was going to do. So finally, I just reached out to the ‑‑ to Javier, my case worker. I said I can't do my job. If I get too close I may catch COVID, I may bring it home. It is an occupational hazard that I cannot hear. It's already a problem that I can't hear on regular patrol, but you add everything else going on and it was near impossible.

I have to hand it to y'all that it was probably about a three week span when they found somebody, they found somebody that was going to see me, they just took the test results and it was in Longview, I had to travel. No big deal. Somebody was going to see me.

And I got them ordered and I think in about 10 days I got the hearing aids back.

You know, I can tell you that my family has really enjoyed the ‑‑

>> But your wife can't write a book now.

>> I know!

It's a win‑win for me, I tell you that.

[Laughter]

But yeah, it's helped in every aspect of it. You know, my situational awareness, everything has been ‑‑ you know, I guess it was a slow diminishing hearing loss so I didn't recognize how bad I was.

Until I went home and I turned on the TV for the first time after I had the hearing aids in, I'm like holy cow, this is what my family has been dealing with, you know.

So I was always kind of a big presence in a room and not because I wanted all of the attention, I was just loud. [Laughter].

>> You were speaking loud, but also needing things to be loud.

>> Absolutely.

>> So things are quieter in the household now.

>> I think the real game changer for me is when people started wearing masks and I was like, I don't know what they're saying, I can't. I had no idea that I was reading lips a lot of ‑‑ hearing the noises and matching with the lipreading was ‑‑ worked well, but with masks it's done. And it's muffled too.

>> So you were hindered before COVID with the hearing loss, but people could speak louder or you could read their lips.

>> Right, I could read their lips.

>> Then things really started to be impacted. As you said as a community resource officer, your job is community engagement.

>> Absolutely.

Speaking engagements or even like on Zoom or things like that, we deal a lot with ‑‑ like I teach the cadets, young kids that want to become police officers, and when you have to social distance and I can't ‑‑ I couldn't communicate with them. And that was really frustrating. It was kind of disheartening, but you guys ‑‑ it's kind of like I imagined when you go to the doctor because you have the flu or something, they give you that steroid shot, it really energized me back and put me back in the saddle again.

>> Nice, nice. Well, that's great. I love it. As I said, Scott is so many things. He's served his community, his sons are serving their country now, he's doing a lot of things and we appreciate it.

So the main service you received from VR was the hearing aids, right?

>> Yes.

>> And you heard about it through word of mouth.

>> I have to commend those guys because they pulled some strings, you know, kind of adapted to their environment to find help for me when they could have said well, you have to wait until this is all over. They didn't sit back. They went in action and I wrote a letter of appreciation for them because they have really changed my life and be sure that I got the help that I needed.

>> That's awesome. Well, we appreciate that and your counselor Javier I'm sure does as well.

So thank you, Scott. I know we appreciate your time this morning and all that you've done in the community and for your country. So thanks for joining us.

>> It's been my pleasure, it really is.

>> Thanks, great.

All right. So we've got the law enforcement out of the way. We can be rowdy now, right? [Laughter].

>> Hey, I don't want to do the paperwork!

[Laughter].

>> I love it, I love it. Good, good.

>> You're not in my jurisdiction.

>> Perfect!

Perfect.

Okay. We're outside of Tyler now.

So we have I am welcoming Ms. Denise to join us from the Houston area.

>> Hi.

>> And I want to thank Denise, who is the director of Connect Ministries. Thanks so much for joining us.

>> Thank you. Thanks for having me.

>> Awesome. So similar to Scott's questions, tell me a little bit about your disability and how it impacted your employment.

>> Well, I am legally blind and I say illegally blind as well.

>> [Laughter]. Love it.

>> I lost my vision about 18 years ago and then about four or five years ago lost some mobility also due to autoimmune disease.

So lost some limbs. And so I've really had to really retrain myself, first with losing the vision and then losing limbs too.

>> Yeah, definitely.

And so tell me how that impacted you at work. I mean, I can think of the obvious, but can you give us a few examples of how it impacted you?

>> Of course. I went from 20/20 vision to absolutely nothing. So that was ‑‑ I lost my job actually because of it. I was in sales and moving around the city, so I couldn't drive, couldn't perform the different tasks that I needed to do. So I needed to reinvent myself. And then once again losing limbs, getting in a wheelchair and having to rehabilitate, that was challenging.

So reinventing myself over and over again is what I say.

>> Yeah, yeah, definitely.

So then you had gotten your job at Connect Ministries, how did you hear about the vocational rehab program?

>> Actually, it was funny, I knew nothing about being blind, neither did my family. And a friend of mine called me and they had heard about a blind camp on the radio. They said you really need to check this out. Maybe they can give you some pointers. So she had written down a phone number. I called the person that was running the blind camp and asked them questions about how do you comb your hair, how do you pick out your clothes, brush your teeth? And she said I think you need ‑‑ at the time it was division for aging and Rehabilitation Services, Blind Services.

So we connected with them and it went from there. I've been a part of the program ever since. And once it became Texas Workforce Commission I just continued in that program. And I think that was like 2008 or 2009, something like that.

>> When you first started, yeah.

>> Yeah, when I first, first started with ‑‑ then it was so‑called DARS at the time, Blind Services.

So that's how we got started there. And I recontacted them in 2018 when yet again after a series of the illness came back and now I have limbs issues and they were really instrumental in getting me back to work, which was so important because what Connect Ministry does is so important to the Houston community.

>> Good. Good. So to summarize a little bit. You had gotten some services related to the vision loss initially and it was part of Blind Services.

>> Right.

>> Past forward, you were working at Connect Ministries, experience some additional disabilities come about beyond the vision and so it came to what was then the Texas Workforce Commission vocational rehab program and asked for assistance related to another area of disability.

>> Exactly. And they got right on it. I mean, it was a blessing to be able to get back on my feet, do what I needed to do.

Getting prosthetics to be able to walk. I use my wheelchair, but I'm able to use a walker now because of the prosthetics, and also typing again, being able to get ‑‑ because my hands have been affected. I lost some fingers. So I got prosthetics for that too not that long ago so I'm practicing.

>> That's good.

>> But I'm able to type faster.

>> Wow.

>> So it was a big project.

>> So some prosthetics to help with work and as well as independent living even as far as ‑‑

>> Yes, yes.

>> But work being the primary focus.

>> And I love cooking so I can cook again!

>> So you had already learned to cook some with your vision loss, but then it got compounded with the additional physical issues that came up.

>> Exactly, exactly. With VR I learned technology, just ‑‑ you know, just getting around the city, everything.

I mean, it really impacted my life.

>> I love it, I love it.

So when you and I talked last week when we were having one of our conversations, you mentioned to me when you had first experienced some of your vision loss early on you had some people just say, go on Social Security, right?

>> Exactly, exactly. People would say just go on Social Security. And I thought ‑‑ at the time I was in my 30s and I thought, I don't want to live my life like that. And I'm too active, you know? I'm thinking this is for the birds. I can't do this.

I can't do this.

So it was good to get back to work. People want to work!

It was so funny, I met a cab driver one time after coming back from technology training and he says, you people make me sick.

I said wait a minute, what did I do? He said, you know, people ‑‑ you would think in my country most people that are blind or deaf, they don't try to work, you said but I've met more people with disabilities trying to work. So I took it as a compliment.

>> Wow. So one of the things we say about you is you're an advocate. So by being out there in the community, working, taking classes, living independently, those are all things, you're proving those folks wrong that said you should just stay on Social Security and not work.

>> Exactly, exactly.

>> I love it. That's awesome.

>> We want to be productive citizens as well. And my eyes may not work, but my brain still does. And what we do in the community is so important. And Scott, you're awesome, you rock. I want to say that.

>> I have to be honest, all four of you, yes, Scott, you're there, we see you, man.

You all have amazing stories and I'm so grateful for all of you. That's why you're here.

So Denise, I want to end by saying you're part after blind professionals group in the Austin area too and you guys are really out ‑‑ in the Houston area too and you guys are really advocates and showing what's out there.

>> Yes. There's a wonderful lady named Sara Freeman Smith who helps coach people who are visually impaired with finding a job and she also has an agency where you help people with ‑‑ that are blind and other disabilities as well, but specifically to blind people, find jobs, let them know that it's just not impossible because it can be very challenging with total blindness or with some visual loss employers thinking you can't do it.

But when you go in with a good positive attitude, with a technology training and say hey, I can do this job just as well as a sighted person, it's really good.

So yeah, the blind professionals group they meet every other Wednesday and anybody can ‑‑ can get on and get some positive feedback, tips, how to work the new technology that's coming out, people can stay up on that.

So it's to keep you working as well.

>> That's awesome.

>> Or getting employed if you need employment.

>> That's awesome.

>> I love it. Thank you for sharing that. And being an advocate for other folks is so essential. Thank you so much. And as you mentioned, the provider that is working with you in the Houston area, that's part of that network of people that we talked about. So vocational rehab is working with ‑‑ one agency, one company does not do it alone. It's a large network of individuals and agencies that work together to really just promote and help this population.

Scott mentioned it earlier. There were doctors willing to get him in for an examination so that he could still be working. If it wasn't for those doctors and the hearing evaluations that were done for him, he would still be waiting.

>> Exactly.

>> So Denise, thank you so much.

>> Thanks for having me. I appreciate this.

>> Yeah, it was great, it was great.

All right. So now to move on to my friend here Nick. I'd like to introduce you to Nick. Nick first came to VR seeking assistance and finding employment several years ago, kind of like Denise, before they were part of another agency, before Texas Workforce Commission.

Nick is a ‑‑ works for Kendra Scott, which I don't think any of us have to tell you what Kendra Scott is about, but he works there in their warehouse and has a crucial role and has been working nonstop even in this large pandemic we've had.

Nick, you shared with me that things didn't always work out when you first came to the vocational rehab program, but you struggled getting to the key services that you needed to help you navigate finding and staying employed.

Let's fast forward to a couple of years ago you got connected to the right staff, the right program who had been trained in working with individuals who are neuro diverse. So things improved then, so tell us a little bit about your disability.

>> I have what used to be called Asperger's syndrome, about a B plus case of it, just what Travis County Integral Care said, along with an inattentive type of ADHD, and general anxiety along with some other junk.

The total diagnosis took a very long time to put together. I had no notion of even my ADHD status until about my mid teens at the beginning of the '90s when my parents heard the condition being discussed on a morning news show. We had no idea it was actually a disability.

Asperger's would not even be proposed to me until 2007 when I was in my early 30s through my mom's independent research and we would not get the diagnosis confirmed for another five years.

So it basically took too long to tell me what I needed to know and a lot of time got lost.

>> Sure.

Yeah. That definitely ‑‑ sounds like it was definitely a journey to get to even knowing what the challenges were you were facing and how ‑‑ a that was well into your adult life. This wasn't you at a young age being diagnosed. You were in the prime of your employment life, right, trying to figure out the diagnosis to try to navigate you to the right programs.

>> Yeah. There were even counselors who chose to disagree with my various dyings praised on ‑‑ diagnosis based on what their opinions were. There was one counselor I worked with during my years at DARS who was convinced that I had skits sew effective disorder rather than ‑‑ schizo effective disorder rather than ADHD and didn't want that to be why I got my disability fare card from Capital Metro.

Some of the people weren't willing to accept my problems for what they were.

>> Is that why getting the correct diagnosis was very important?

>> Yeah, you need the correct information or you're going absolutely nowhere.

>> Okay. That's fair enough.

>> Yeah. Knowing simply that I had ADHD was helpful to a point. Even though it took some time to find treatment, a story unto itself, once I did get it, it proved to be a steady course of improvement.

But things increased even more greatly when we found ‑‑ we not only confirmed Asperger's but discovered the anxiety. So I'm functioning better in some ways than I did a long time ago.

>> That's awesome. That's really good to hear.

So tell me some of the challenges you had working. Even knowing the diagnosis. So you can have a diagnosis, but as I said earlier, everyone is different in their challenges or ways of going about working.

>> There is an overwhelming tendency to judge people on their suitability for work based on personality rather than compatibility.

And to evaluate their successes and failures in that light as well. I found that it could be hard to get my foot in the door with simple entry level work because people just thought I was off in some way or could find some other thing to nitpick. On the job I could find myself nitpicked for minor errors or for social signals that I was totally aware of or even struggling with very hard. I could find myself punished for errors that other people might have gotten away with or treated with greater general hostility by fellow staff and/or customers. For no reason at all.

There was for example an incident in 2017 when I was working a temp job with the state when I asked a question of one of my supervisors ‑‑ this was a simple data entry job. And he pulled me out into the hall to give me a tongue lashing for acting like I didn't want to be there when in fact I was behaving in a very neutral, very polite way, but he had completely misread my social signals and he became one of the few people I had to openly complain about to the temp agency I worked for at the time.

>> Wow.

>> And it was like that and arguably is still like that pervasively throughout life. But it was particularly damaging in the workplace and in the work search.

>> So talk about ‑‑ you and I were sharing about some of the VR services that you're receiving now that are definitely helping in some of those ways. What do you think is ‑‑ talk about those services that you're receiving and how it's helping you.

>> Okay. Well, it's been a little while since my last in‑person meeting with my various counselors.

>> Sure.

>> Because they seem to consider me to be highly enough in functioning that they can take a hands‑off approach pretty much of the time. Occasionally we will have meetings and we email more than enough where we've tried to discuss for one thing future long‑term plans. It isn't just a matter of having gotten me into this stable position at Kendra, but we're also working on some long‑term positions ‑‑ not long‑term positions, but some long‑term strategies for what I'm going to do beyond this.

We're thinking of another line of work I could gradually move into in the form of doing some technical writing. And I've also got a loose plan to go back to school when I can and earn a degree in a subject that I'm interested in.

We're starting to talk about that as well.

And that's important in its own way for the short‑term because it helps me keep an eye on the horizon and helped me avoid feeling trapped or like I'm stuck in a position no matter how good it is.

>> Sure.

>> So that's actually quite important and I don't think it's going to ‑‑ that gets remarked on very often.

On the rare occasions when I've had a serious meltdown at the job or had to walk off the floor, that's almost never, my bosses have been able to call someone like Jennifer Hines and she's been able to talk to me on the phone and we've been able to talk this out, which is a hell of a lot better, if you'll partner my language, than simply being dismissed on the spot for something one‑tenth as serious.

>> So I'm going to interrupt really quick and just say, so part of the assistance you received as you and I talked last week is that some ways of knowing where to go and the supervisors that you're working with, knowing some of your personalities and ways of communicating better, correct? Is that a fair statement?

>> Yes. They're actually putting quite a bit of effort into that.

My direct supervisor in particular has really gone out of the way to make sure that we're on the same length most of the time, even to the point of explaining to me when there are benefits that I'm failing to take advantage of or more things I could do for myself.

>> I think you have a little bit of leave on the books that you're supposed to be using that you haven't been using, is that right, Nick?

>> I've been very slow to use the paid time off that Kendra Scott has provided because I'm so unused to having it. This is to emphasize my very first permanent job with full benefits, ever.

>> That's great.

>> And I'm completely unfamiliar with many aspects of having benefits or even really having an employment which is that stable. You wouldn't believe what a learning experience it was, for example, just over the course of this past year because about a year ago I chose to take advantage of my health insurance benefits to have an abdominal surgery, and boy, was that an eye opener for what it's like dealing with insurance companies and recovering and this sort of thing invoking benefits various and sundry.

>> You were explaining getting used to benefits and having benefits for something like surgical procedures that need to be done.

>> Thank you.

>> Sure.

>> So one side effect of this has been that I've got a lot of leave, whether sick leave or paid time off or so on, that I have not been using. It was quite the milestone. This past Thursday when having suffered a little bit of a home‑based meltdown, I had a couple of very bad weeks, I decided to take a day off for the sake of my nerves and trying to pull some things together like some chores and errands that I needed to do.

That had never been something I would have considered doing before I had this job.

>> Sure. So it sounds like the key service that ‑‑ if I'm having to summarize and please correct me if I'm wrong, is that really having an outlet, someone who understands maybe your medical ‑‑ the Asperger's syndrome, autism in general, who really can help you navigate the support system that you need when you're having those moments of frustration or needing some ‑‑ an outlet, someone to help understand, and also being able to talk to your employer and be able to explain how you someone at times. Is that a fair assessment of what was helpful for you?

>> That's a pretty good summary, thank you.

>> No. That's great.

So Nick, you are so much ‑‑ you know, I have enjoyed getting to know you this last couple of weeks and so for those who can see on the screen, we have some of Nick's many skills and interests on the screen, anywhere from martial arts to cooking, which you made sure to send me pictures of his cooking last night, which I am jealous. At 10:00 at night you should not send me pictures of food!

>> Well, there was enough nice there it would have probably kept you up all night. [Laughter].

>> Well, it looked delicious.

I think, as you know, Nick, this is the first employment you've had that has afforded you to experience benefits and so many things that everyone wants and you know it's not the end for you.

I know Kendra Scott does not want to see you leave, but at the same time you know that there are many other interests and skills that you have that you're going to keep pursuing those. And having those goals is really important.

Great. Anything else before we move on to our next guest?

>> Um, if so, it slipped my mind, I'm afraid. And only that I hope you don't mind that I kind of sign out of the call at this point because I have some things to immediately attend to on my day off here. Not the least of which is getting some food in my stomach.

>> Well, talking about your cooking certainly inspired that. No problem. We do not mind, Nick, and thank you for letting me know. And if we have any follow‑ups with you we'll certainly get in touch with you and let you know.

Thank you so much, Nick, and I really appreciate your time on your day off.

>> Okay then. Enjoy the rest of the meeting.

>> All right. And last but certainly not least, I'd like to introduce Melissa. I met Melissa first online on YouTube. Melissa was accepting an award that she had received for all of her work with her organization in the Dallas‑Fort Worth area. So if you live in the Dallas‑Fort Worth area she's probably no stranger to you. She's well‑known for her work as an advocate and much more. So thanks for joining us, Melissa.

>> Nick, before you go, I realize I'm wearing earrings, necklace and bracelet from Kendra, so thank you. I appreciate it.

>> I have no idea if I picked, wrapped or otherwise helped send along any of those specific items. It's not like we initial them or something.

>> When you said that, I thought I think I'm wearing one. Wait, I'm wearing two, wait, I'm wearing three, four.

>> You have to know how unaware I was of the Kendra Scott enterprise until I started working there and I live around the corner from one of their stores.

>> I'm a huge fan so say thank you to everybody.

>> Yes. So when Nick and I met I did thank him as well for helping be an essential worker during the pandemic to supply all my purchasing needs.

>> Exactly.

>> So anyways, thanks for joining us, Melissa. So like the others, tell us a little bit about your disability and its impact on your employment.

>> Well, when I was 18 I was set to go to college for theater. I actually had a Greer Garson theater scholarship in Santa Fe, New Mexico. And on Christmas break I came back and passed my physical with flying colors. And as I went out the door I said oh, my hip is double jointed. And I showed how my hip went out of socket.

And the doctor said wait a minute, come back. Let me do some tests. And they found out I had muscular dystrophy. And there's evidently 40 neuromuscular diseases under muscular dystrophy and mine was diagnosed as limb girdle, which means my body is week, but it's a degenerative disease so it's kind of like when you work out you build down muscle and it comes back stronger. When I work out it tears down and the recipe to rebuild it is wrong. So it never builds back stronger.

So I have the world's most legitimate excuse to not work out.

Thank God I've been lazy because I haven't worked out and the people in my group who have worked out are worse off for it.

So basically I have to focus on not letting it atrophy, but back then I backpacked around Europe for three months, I rock climbed and white water rafted.

As time has gone on things just get weaker and weaker and weaker. So it's just a constant readjusting to the new form. One day I can do something, maybe another day I can't. It's just a tiny bit worse for the last ‑‑ I'm 52, however since I was 18 this has been going on, probably since I was born.

We just thought I was a little clumsy. One field day my dad said how did field day go? I said I was last, but at least I came in. I was happy as a child to even complete it.

But I changed career paths because being a stage actress is very physical and I didn't see how I could be successful in that field from a wheelchair, which is where I knew I was eventually heading.

So I thought what do I like about theater? And it's like about the study of motivation? So I thought I should go into being a therapist because that's the study of human motivation. So I moved to UT Austin, got my degree and I got my master's degree at north Texas. So basically every job I've ended up in I've become the boss. Just because ‑‑ if I was a man they would say leadership, but since I'm a woman I'm bossy.

It's worked out well for me. I always end up being the boss. So I became ‑‑ I was a therapist and I ended up becoming the executive director of the place I interned at because I guess I just have a lot of confidence, misguided or not. And people buy confidence so what can I say?

>> That's right.

>> But I'm the executive director of Legacy Counseling Center.

So over the years I've had to make a lot of accommodations. At first I just talked like a little wobbly, but like a normal person and I get tired on stairs. So then I walk with one step at a time and then eventually, uh, maybe don't take the stairs, things like that. And then maybe a cane. I had a cane for years.

When I had to get up from my seat at the office I kind of would have to lay on my desk and push off.

Well, the day came where I couldn't even do that. I could see that's not going to really start working.

So ‑‑ then also standing up from a seated position got difficult. Well, you know, let's ‑‑ this is reality so I'm not embarrassed by it, but I look at that toilet and think, I don't think I'm going to be able to get off that toilet. So I found a camping device called a she‑wee that allowed me to pee standing up. And that little 15‑dollar device added another 15 years to my career because you've got to be able to pee. That's just reality.

And peeing is fundamental as they say.

So the she‑wee did the job for me for many years. Then I couldn't get up out of my office chair. And I was trapped sometimes. I would have to call my husband and he would have to drive over just to pick me up. So there really wasn't at the time a chair that did that, just stood you straight up.

Like the lazy boys can throw you forward. Yeah, I don't need to be propelled on to the floor. I do that fine by myself. I have a lot of falls.

We found a place in the north that did accommodations and they picked up a barbershop chair to a remote control and shipped it to me and I put an office chair on the top of it and I was so excited this was stand me up. But then it was a little short so my husband found a trashcan dolly and so my office chair was a barbershop chair on a remote control on a trashcan dolly with an office chair. It was a mess. But again, that added another five, 10 years to my career.

The day came where that wasn't really doing the trick because I was having so many falls. And I fell and broke my ankle at the office more than once. Obviously I fell a lot at home. So I really needed a power wheelchair. So I got a power wheelchair and this is like a Frankenchair. This chair can stand me ‑‑ it can lay me completely flat, it can stand me all the way up. And that was on wonderful and it really did the trick, but how am I going to get that home? It's a 450‑pound chair.

So for awhile I just left it at the office and just used it at work. This didn't really help me at home and it didn't help me in public. And so part of the challenge of my job is as the executive director I have to go pick up checks from people who write me big checks. I have to do appearances, I have to go to events, I have to go to meetings. And some of these are fund‑raisers at bars that I don't get out of it until 2:00 in the morning. Well, I'm not going to be able to call DART handy ride to pick me up on demand from a bar at 2:00 in the morning. They're just not down for that.

So it became a real challenge. I began to say I don't know how I'm going to keep doing my job because people expect the executive director to ‑‑ they don't want me to send an assistance to pick up a 50,000‑dollar check, they want me to do it.

And I have to do TV appearances and all sorts of crazy things. People need to see the face of the organization. So that brings us to how VR services is helped me. When I finally was able through my insurance to get the wheelchair and that took two or three years, I was turned down many, many times, which I found mind blowing because evidently going to the bathroom is not an essential activity.

>> Okay!

[Laughter]

>> Good to know that.

But eventually my falls became so frequent I guess that ended up justifying it.

So I finally got the chair and the doctor there I made a comment like well, this is great, but how am I going to get this monster anywhere? And the doctor mentioned VR services. And I realized I had been reading about that on Facebook. And I tend to be the person who gives that kind of advice, not who needs to receive it, but this was a whole other level of understanding layers of bureaucracy and what I could qualify for and what would work.

So I worked with Paula Price in the Dallas office. She was recommended by the doctor because she said she really gets the job done. And boy, they were right. Paula was way on it.

So we had an honest discussion about what it's going to take to keep me working.

And the van accommodation seemed to be the ticket. Because I have really long days and it wasn't practical for my husband to pick me up. He works too. So we realized if we bought the van we could get all of the different things it takes and people came out and assessed me, the first one, it was like this isn't going to work, but basically I was too jacked up for the basic version. I was becoming weaker in the hands and legs. So now what I have, thanks to VR services, is a van and I drive like this is gas, this is brake, this is steering.

And I thought I can handle the other thing and they could just see the path I was on and say no, you really need this whole thing to have any longevity.

Because I was having difficulty turning the wheel, pushing the gas, pushing the brake so they helped me get a pretty tricked out van that allows me to go to and from meetings and things I need to do.

>> Everything is essential for your job given all that you do.

>> Yes. And prior to this I would be at a bar, for example. I keep bringing up bars but that's because a lot of people do fund‑raisers at bars and give you checks at these bars or they have a celebration at an event place to give me a check. Well, I would have to look around for the strongest, least drunk, strapping guy or gal and talk them into coming and picking up my chair or put me in my car. It was ridiculous. And people dropped me on the ground. And really it had gotten to point where I'm like I don't see how I can keep working since approximate depends on the sobriety of random strangers.

>> Right. And for those who don't know, look up Legacy Counseling Center. They offer some amazing services to folks in the Dallas‑Fort Worth area. You will know more about the things that Melissa is referring to.

So basically they were able ‑‑ not even basically, I mean, it's so much more than that.

The accommodations to your van that you had ‑‑ that you just ‑‑ the modifications in various ways now allow you to get to and from all the essential pieces because you are the face of legacy counseling.

>> Yes. And there's a lot to my job and a lot of things I have to go do. And I just started to get to the point that like someone else said, I have the mental capability. That's never going to be affected. It's purely physical. And while a lot of my job is at the computer, a lot of it is in the public.

And it's just stuff I can't send other people to do.

So it's been great having it. I'm looking forward to ‑‑ subsiding to the point that I feel safe enough to get out and do go do more because it's just been amazing having my freedom back.

And on a side note it's helped me get to a lot of doctors' appointments and things I've had to do on top of that, which before maybe I wouldn't have gotten that medical treatment because it's such an ordeal to go anywhere.

Plus my husband's getting older and let's be honest, he won't be able to pick me up. I'm almost 100 pounds. It's going to be hard for him to keep picking me up forever. So the timing of this couldn't have been more perfect because his back is starting to go out. I was able to get the van ‑‑

>> It's helping everyone, not just you.

>> Absolutely. It's definitely a much more dignified lifestyle I'm allowed to live now why I don't have to not go to the bathroom for four hours. They call it in the disability world pee math. I don't have to say, okay, if I pee now this will happen and then this and that will be four hours and then maybe one more.

Constantly trying to figure out when is the next time I can pee. It takes up a disproportionate amount of my head space. And it's just been a real joy to have my independence back because I am an independent person.

So if I wanting to do something I can just go do it.

>> Yeah. And I can definitely see that and you are the boss. And I'm sure you're the boss of the house too.

[Laughter].

>> Oh, you know, we're a partnership, but ‑‑

>> That's great.

>> Legacy has ‑‑ reserve 1200 clients a year. We're an HIV aides treatment center, we have a 62 person homeless AIDS housing program, AIDS highways and the largest conference in the world for women with HIV.

So I think it's also cool that the ladies in my program and the clients at the counseling center, many of which may have gone on disability for HIV a long time ago, they see me out there still fighting the good fight and still working like Denise and everybody. They see me doing it and they think, wow, she's more jacked up than I am if she can do it. Maybe I can go back to school.

>> I love it.

>> So I don't think any of us with disabilities aim to be inspirational, but I think it is ‑‑ people today on the panel have already inspired me as well to ‑‑ even though it is very difficult, I'm a psychotherapist and obviously I've been working with people with disabilities all these years. It is very challenging to get up, deal with what everybody else deals with and have this added layer of challenge.

Just the smallest thing can be ‑‑ knowing that VR is there is very encouraging and supportive and very hopeful, but just everything from someone who has a better knowledge base than you do of what could help you.

>> Yeah. I love it.

>> That's incredible as well.

>> That's awesome. Melissa, thank you so much for sharing. And I think you're right. Inspiration is exactly the word I had.

You know, I've worked in this field for a long time and every time I get to meet folks like all four of you here today, it makes me want to do what I do better even so.

So thanks for joining us, Melissa! And everyone here. Each of these guests you've heard from are so much more than their disability. I think you've heard them share that story today. I know it will inspire you and many of your loved ones as well as you share and talk about the possibilities.

In closing, I do want to ask Aaron Bangor with AT&T to join us. Can you tell us what Disability IN is and how businesses are retaining their workforce?

>> Thanks, Melinda. Disability IN is a non‑profit whose vision is to make sure that the global economy is inclusive of people with disabilities to be able to work fully in organizations. So it's made up of 200 some on corporations and 27 local affiliates. And Central Texas is one of those affiliates and our goal really within the Central Texas community is to be a business to business networking and education forum for businesses in the Central Texas area.

You said it earlier and I couldn't have said it any better which is one agency, one company doesn't do this alone. And, you know, I think no matter where an organization is on their disability inclusion journey, we all can share something that we've learned along the way, either something that's worked well or something that hasn't worked well. And it would be good to share that learning with others.

But also to learn from each other on how to make sure that our organizations are open, welcoming and supportive of employees with disabilities.

>> Yeah, definitely. You guys are doing a great job. There are many companies a part of Central Texas as well as the greater Houston and the Dallas, north Texas chapter as well. So I just encourage any businesses that want to know more about why, why hire, why retain, to join those partnerships as well.

Is there anything specific you want to talk about even with AT&T, the company you've worked for for many years and the way they support individuals or retain individuals?

>> Yeah. I can think of a few things real quick.

There's an adage in business what gets measured gets done. One of the things that AT&T does is we have a self‑ID program not just for disability, but veteran status and LBGTQ and so forth. So one of the things you can find out is if you go to ATT.jobs we have a section there targeting people with disabilities to apply and we've got our information about new hires with disabilities and our total as well as we can through the self‑ID process a number of people with disabilities.

We have training and awareness campaigns around how to make sure managers are supportive of employees with disabilities. One of the great things about that is it specifically has a lot of videos from employees with disabilities, just like we heard today, the real authentic part is coming from those individuals with disabilities. And last I'll just mention that we have an employee resource group, an affinity group, business resource group, it goes by different names at different companies, but we have one that is specific to people with disabilities. And that is a great way to not only support employees with disabilities, but others that have an interest in advancing people with disabilities in the workplace and the disability inclusion agenda.

So we have a built‑in advocacy network within the company that has access to different parts of the company that an individual wants. So it helps individuals, but it helps with general advocacy within the company and the leadership and HR and those sorts of things, really to help promote the disability inclusion agenda whether it's around hiring and retention of people with disabilities, accessibility in the workplace, job accommodations and so forth.

>> Great. That's awesome, Aaron. Thank you so much for sharing just a few minutes with us about what you guys are doing in Disability-IN as well as AT&T.

So everyone, we've heard some great information from everyone. And thank you to all the guests that were here today. We really appreciate all of you.

I know each of us have walked away with a little information about what the Vocational Rehabilitation Program is, how accommodations are available and how they can assist us at staying employed and also the work that employers are doing to retain quality employs.

We've heard inspiration from everyone today on all aspects.

Statistics show that about 83% of individuals with disabilities, they have those disabilities that are acquired later on in life, so they weren't born with those conditions. And that means that a lot of individuals are going to acquire disability on the workplace and may need access to how to stay employed.

So being aware of programs like the Vocational Rehabilitation Program and all the partners that they work with is really essential to helping workers and businesses have the strong workforce that they need. So we thank you all today for being here. This is the first of the October series of webinars that the Texas Workforce Commission and the Governor's Committee on People with Disabilities is partnering to do for you this month.

We look forward to having you join us for the others. Thank you so much and have a blessed day.