



ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT

CT aims to build disability workforce 'pipeline'

Advocates say businesses that claim 'labor shortage' have overlooked thousands of potential employees

by Erica E. Phillips

March 8, 2022



Latasha Jones packs a product to ship out Monday morning at Kennedy Center warehouse in Bridgeport.

YEHYUN KIM / CTMIRROR.ORG

On any given day at the Palm & Able warehouse in Bridgeport, Latasha “LJ” Jones might be assembling retail displays, conducting quality checks or picking and packing shipments of medical supplies.

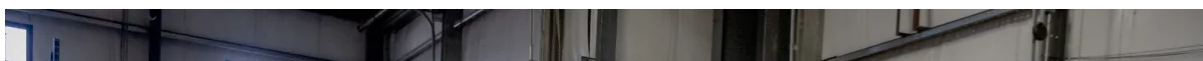
Jones has an intellectual disability, but she has tackled myriad assignments at the warehouse; she's currently training to fulfill orders using e-commerce software.

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"I like this job because we're doing different things," Jones said.

But leaders and advocates in the disability community say capable workers like Jones, who have a wide range of skills and abilities, are being overlooked by companies that have open jobs to fill — even as many business groups raise concerns about a labor shortage.

"When we consider the vast number of people with disabilities ... and other vulnerable populations in our communities, we are losing out on valuable labor resources for all business," said Rick Sebastian, chief executive of The Kennedy Center, the social services organization that operates the Palm & Able warehouse. The Kennedy Center provides day services as well as employment support and coaching to people with disabilities, and it runs seven businesses that employ people with and without disabilities.





Employees for the Kennedy Center work in the warehouse in Bridgeport. They work on a variety of assignments after training, including light assembly and quality checks. YEHYUN KIM

In Connecticut, according to 2017 Census data, there were nearly 390,000 non-institutionalized persons with reported disabilities aged 16 or older. Less than 25% of that population were employed, according to the state Bureau of Rehabilitation Services, and many of those individuals were considered underemployed – meaning they didn't have enough paid work or they weren't fully using their skills.

The 2014 federal **Workforce Innovation and Opportunity Act** and state-level efforts in recent years to implement an **“Employment First” policy** for disabled individuals have led to new programs and opportunities for many in the community. In 2021, the BRS reported assisting **more than 5,000 people** with various disabilities in finding work.

There's still work to be done. While exact numbers are unclear, advocates say potentially thousands more Connecticut residents with disabilities – whether they report them or not – could be missing out on work

opportunities at a time when business groups have declared a labor shortage. According to a study by business consultancy Accenture, if 1% more of the disabled population were working, that could **drive up the national GDP** by \$25 billion.

This “untapped labor force can add value to any sector,” Sebastian said, but they’re “essentially invisible.”

“Companies lack an understanding”

And they’re particularly vulnerable to economic downturns. During the first year of the pandemic, **employment declined among people with disabilities**, in part because retail and hospitality businesses — which employ many disabled workers — shuttered or downsized operations. Numbers are rising this year, alongside employment in the broader population: Among the 60 million individuals who identify as disabled nationally, **19.1% were employed in 2021**, up from 17.9% in 2020.



“I’m passionate about helping the public. I want to create a place for people to feel welcomed.”

— JAMES LAHIFF

Connecticut officials and the state’s disability community are trying to tap into that momentum.

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Last year, following broader national trends aimed at rooting out systemic discrimination, the Governor’s Workforce Council – a collaborative body of business leaders, educators, state agencies and nonprofits – created a Diversity, Equity and Inclusion committee tasked with closing employment gaps and providing support for vulnerable populations. That includes the formerly incarcerated, veterans, youth, people of color and individuals with disabilities.

Also last year, **Connecticut passed a law** calling on the Department of Economic and Community Development to establish a workforce

development program that would “incentivize businesses to provide training programs, offer modified interviews and reserve market-rate, full-time jobs for persons with disabilities.” A draft of that plan was completed last month and is currently being circulated among lawmakers and advocates for feedback.

Among the findings included in the plan: “Companies lack an understanding of the scope of available talent and potential benefits associated with employing persons with disabilities.” One such benefit is the preference assigned in federal contracts to companies whose workforce includes at least 7% individuals with disabilities. Accommodations for such workers, the plan points out, typically cost \$500 or less per employee – and most cost nothing.

The plan included goals such as improving coordination among state agencies serving people with disabilities; offering training services; boosting recruiting support for businesses; and improving data-gathering to better track outcomes.

Anthony Barrett, who leads the DEI committee, said recent trends in remote work have also presented “major opportunities” for the disability community.

“That’s a really great market to get more people tapped into jobs that are in tech and health care and some of the jobs that can be done from home,” Barrett said. “I think there’s opportunities for really upward mobility for job placement for persons with disabilities.”

‘Just having a work group isn’t going to be enough’

Advocates say their ultimate goal is what’s known as “competitive integrated employment” – jobs that pay at or above minimum wage, come with competitive benefits, provide opportunities for advancement and take place in locations where the employee interacts with people who do not have disabilities.

It's not an easy path to get there.

“We're particularly concerned that, although the state has a number of initiatives, and those are certainly necessary initiatives, they're not sufficient to address the problems,” said Debbie Dorfman, executive director of Disability Rights Connecticut.

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Despite perceived momentum at the national level, quarterly reporting from Connecticut's Department of Developmental Services shows **the number of individuals in employment service programs** has been declining for the last several years, while those in non-employment day programs has risen. Many jobs for individuals with disabilities take place in segregated workshops, removed from settings where they might interact with people who do not have disabilities. And many of those jobs pay below minimum wage, **a concession granted to certain businesses** by the U.S. Department of Labor.

The lack of data is another big problem, Dorfman said, which makes it hard to understand the scope and scale of need among the disability community and businesses.

“There needs to be much, much better integration between the systems, and they need to talk to each other,” she said. “Just having the work group isn’t going to be enough.”

Some members of the disability community pointed out that several components of the state’s new workforce pipeline plan have already been tried and weren't successful. Some are already codified in the Americans with Disabilities Act, such as recommended changes to make hiring practices more “inclusive.”

From left, Shantel Gilbert, Jamie Jarzynski, Alisa Cino and Tiffany Truini are participating in a three-year program at the Kennedy Center called Transition to Employment, or T2E for short. Gilbert, Jarzynski and Cino are hoping to get a job at a retail store, hotel and grocery store, where they are likely to interact with people who do not have disabilities.

There were others who chafed at the concept of “incentives” for employers who hire persons with disabilities.

Andrew Komarow, founder of a financial planning firm assisting people with autism spectrum disorder and their families, said there’s already a built-in incentive in Connecticut that many businesses don’t understand. Komarow, who is autistic, said this state has one of the most supportive benefits programs for working people with disabilities.

“If you hire somebody with a disability, they probably won't participate in a 401(k) plan if they're on benefits, and they probably won't participate in health insurance because they have Medicaid,” Komarow said. “Financially, the incentives are already there for business.”

Reframing the conversation

Broadly, advocates say there needs to be a shift in our understanding of the “workforce pipeline” concept. It’s as much about working with businesses to attract and support disabled workers as it is about working with disabled individuals to develop their skills and find a good fit for employment.

“Previous administrations have had workforce councils for people with disabilities, but the problem with those councils was there were no businesses on them,” said Sharon Denson, executive director at Disability:IN Connecticut. She said she’s “totally impressed” with Gov. Ned Lamont's workforce council because it includes leaders from the business community.

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Denson's organization works with many large companies — including Travelers, Sikorsky and Walgreens — to tap what she calls the “invisible talent pool” of persons with disabilities. They've implemented best practices like refining job descriptions, conducting interviews in different formats and offering more flexible work schedules. And the results have been very successful, Denson said.

“It's so important that companies keep up with those trends if they want to have a full workforce,” she said.

Over the last two years, many companies learned that in real-time. With each surge of the pandemic, businesses had to adjust and accommodate their individual employees' needs. Colleagues took turns stepping in to help each other out. And many workers who felt unappreciated or whose jobs couldn't flex the way they needed them to simply decided to move on.

Win Evarts, executive director of advocacy group The Arc of Connecticut, said he hopes the state's new labor force initiatives will drive workplace practices that are more inclusive.

"Connecticut, for an awful long time, seemed to be sort of tone-deaf to being inclusive," Evarts said. "The more that we can move towards inclusive communities, in general, the better the state of Connecticut is going to do."

Evarts said one way the workforce pipeline initiative would work well is by providing an avenue for employers to "broadcast" their needs to folks who might be looking for work.

"It would be very good for families and service providers for people inside the safety net to understand what kind of skills are in demand in certain regions of the state," Evarts said. That could help direct programming for individuals in employment support programs, leading to the best possible matches between companies and prospective employees, he said.

Liz Crouch packs products after quality checks at the Kennedy Center warehouse in Bridgeport. YEHYUN KIM / CTMIRROR.ORG

Shantel Gilbert, Jamie Jarzynski, Alisa Cino and Tiffany Truini are currently participating in a three-year program at the Kennedy Center called Transition to Employment, or T2E for short. They learn job skills like customer service or taking inventory, and they train for interviews and gain work experience in internships. Cino, 26, said one of the most important things they go over is, "what to do, and what *not* to do."

Gilbert, 33, who is interning at the Palm & Able retail shop, said she likes having a job to get ready for each morning.

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"It keeps me on my toes," she said.

James Lahiff is working with one of the Kennedy Center's career counselors after he was laid off from a restaurant job early in the pandemic. He said he's eager to return to customer service.

"I'm passionate about helping the public," Lahiff said. "I want to create a place for people to feel welcomed."

The current labor market offers a lot of potential for vulnerable populations, particularly folks in the disability community, to find good jobs they will thrive in for years to come, the Kennedy Center's Rick Sebastian said. The "Great Resignation" should be reframed as a "Great Entrance" into the workforce, he said.

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Erica is CT Mirror's first-ever Economic Development Reporter. Before joining CT Mirror in August 2021 Erica was a writer / producer for public radio's Marketplace, and was a reporter for the Wall Street Journal for seven years, first as a general assignment / regional economy reporter and then as a supply chain reporter covering freight, trade, and e-commerce. She grew up in Minneapolis, MN, graduated from Haverford College in Pennsylvania with a degree in economics and a concentration in Latin American studies, and received a master's in specialized journalism from the University of Southern California.

More by Erica E. Phillips

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