

Access to Employment as Access to Health:

Revisiting the *Better Bottom Line*

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In 2012, then-Governor Jack Markell was selected to serve as Chair of the National Governor's Association. During this one year tenure, each Chair selects an initiative to focus on with his or her fellow governors. Governor Markell's initiative for 2012-2013, [*A Better Bottom Line: Employing People with Disabilities*](#), focused on the often-overlooked gap – and untapped resource – in employment and economic plans: how to promote the hiring of more individuals with disabilities.

Coming as this did just as the country began to emerge from one of the most challenging economic periods in U.S. history, a focus on expanding employment opportunities for individuals with disabilities may have seemed an odd choice. But, as the resulting “Blueprint” highlights, a focus on expanding access to employment for individuals in this population helps to address multiple issues facing the State, the economy, and individuals with disabilities simultaneously. First, making disability employment part of a state workforce development plan and strategy helps to broaden opportunities across the workforce as accommodations are made to traditional workplace settings that make them universally more accessible (and safer), while spurring growth in entrepreneurial opportunities that can expand traditional economic sectors in a state. Second, a diversified workforce is a diversified economy, which generates innovation and resilience through the establishment of a more inclusive economy. Finally, supporting individuals with disabilities to access meaningful employment helps include them in the communities they live in, and encourages each individual to discover and tap into the unique resources they can share with all of us.

A key result of this work in Delaware was the establishment of the Pathways to Employment program administered by the Division of Developmental Disabilities Services within the Department of Health and Social Services. Building this program within DHSS helps to remind us that access to employment is not only a workforce issue, but also a key factor in the health of an individual. An individual active, involved, and engaged in their community is a healthier individual overall.

Once again, we find ourselves in the midst of an economic crisis that has disproportionately impacted some sectors of our economy – and some populations – more than others. As we begin to imagine what an equitable recovery could look like, it may be worth pausing to think about how we might address recovery in ways that continue to expand opportunities for those still struggling to be included in the workforce.

To examine the history and legacy of *A Better Bottom Line*, I invited former Governor Markell, and former Secretary Rita Landgraf, to discuss the initiative. What follows is a lightly edited transcript of that conversation.

Why was this topic chosen?

Governor Jack Markell: About 20 years ago Rita [Landgraf] and Micki Edelsohn took me to an MBNA facility near Newark [Delaware] where MBNA employed a lot of people with disabilities. I met a 25-year-old man with a cognitive disability. He had a job making T-shirts and was very excited about this opportunity. He told me all about the job, and when I asked him what he did before he got the job, he told me that he had sat at home for six years, watching TV with his parents. And a light bulb went off in my head about the profound improvement in his quality of life because he was able now to have a purpose, every day, a reason to get up, a reason to get dressed, a reason to go to work and spend time with other people, earn a paycheck. I thought about the impact on the quality of life of his parents that they didn't have to stay at home with him watching him make bad choices about diet and watching him get depressed and everything else. I thought to myself at the time that this is such a huge issue and there are so many people who have a loved one with some kind of disability and if I ever had an opportunity to work on an issue on a bigger stage that I would want to choose this issue.

This is long before I was governor, but it was always in the back of my mind. I took office in 2009. The economy was a mess, and I wanted to be the jobs Governor, but I made very clear from the beginning that I wanted to be the jobs Governor for everybody. And that included people with disabilities. I was fortunate that Rita was Secretary of the Department of Health and Social Services. She was so widely respected around the state by all of the advocates because she had been an advocate for people with disabilities for many years, and so they trusted her. She knew this issue inside and out, and so we were a team. So, when I was elected Governor, we started working on it.

When it became clear that I was going to be the Chair of the National Governors Association, I said to Rita that I wanted to make this my issue. There are no particular perks for serving as the National Governors Association Chair, but you do get to choose an issue for all the Governors to focus on for the year that you're the Chair, and so I decided to make this that area of focus.

What did you hope to accomplish?

JM: I wanted to move the needle. There are so many people with disabilities who just want to have a shot, to have somebody give them a chance to show what they can do, and that's what I wanted to accomplish. When I started to talk with some of my advisors about choosing this topic as my area of focus as NGA chair, some of them said, well that's a mistake; you really ought to be choosing an issue like education reform or small businesses, some big issue that's going to be sexier, going to be of more interest to the press. And I said, that's not why I'm doing this. I just I know there are so many families out there for whom this is a major issue.

When I presented this to the other governors the reaction was, over time, really, really, positive. At first, I think some of them thought this must be some kind of niche issue; that I must have somebody in my family with a disability, which I don't. But, as we got into the initiative, we began to travel. We took a trip to Seattle where we met at Microsoft and had presentations from some of their people focused on employment with disabilities; we went to Pittsburgh and visited Highmark and heard similar presentations.

Then some of the other Governors got involved. The other governors were amazing. The Governor of South Dakota at the time, a guy named Dennis Daugaard, said he wanted to be involved. He spoke at one of our conferences, and he talked about growing up with two parents

who were deaf in South Dakota. He just talked about those stories, and it was just so emotional, and you could hear a pin drop.

Some of the governors who were most enthusiastic would not have been, frankly, ones I would have expected. Scott Walker, the very conservative Republican Governor of Wisconsin - he and I didn't agree on a lot - but he really embraced this. He talked about it in at least one of his State of the State speeches.

Secretary Rita Landgraf: He made it a big name. He named you and this work in his State of the State.

JM: Terry Branstad, the Republican Governor of Iowa who went on to become the Ambassador to China also became a champion. So Republicans and Democrats alike joined in. One of the things I feel very fortunate about was that very early on, I had the opportunity to meet with U.S. Senator Tom Harkin from Iowa. He was still in the Senate at the time. And, of course, if you think of any elected official over the last 30 years who was really a champion for the disability community, it was him. He really embraced what I was doing and did what he could to help me. He brought me to meetings of CEOs as well as other political officials.

With Rita's guidance, we pulled together a group of advocates from across the country who could advise our work. And they did a great job and helped us to come to a number of findings. But, basically, the main point was this: when we talk about and focus on the ability, rather than the disability, it's amazing what we can accomplish together.

RL: Senator Harkin, of course, was the author of the ADA [Americans with Disabilities Act] and his engagement was largely due to his brother Frank, who was deaf, and the impact these experiences had on Senator Harkin. Frank was only given three options to investigate for employment, as he was coming into the employment arena, and he didn't like any of them. You know how we do this with people with disabilities: food, filth, flowers used to be the saying. And that rang true for Frank.

Tony Coelho, Congressman from California also, on the House side, was a champion of the ADA. I bring that up because Tony Coelho now lives in Rehoboth.

Regarding Senator Harkin, I believe it would be fair to say he took us to the next level in terms of engagement nationally when our journey and his collided. Governor Markel's work with the Governors and Senator Harkin's with our Congress and policymakers together really worked to open things up.

JM: We had a big gathering in Delaware toward the end of our efforts: Senator Harkin came up, and Cathy McMorris Rodgers, a Republican Congressional leader from Washington State came up, and Judy Woodruff came up to moderate the event. It has an amazing effect to hear Senator Harkin tell a story about his brother, as Rita said. He was pushed into these different jobs he didn't want to do, and he ended up getting a job in a factory that made components of aircraft, and it was a very loud factory; but, of course, it didn't really bother him and it turns out that he ended up making components that went into the aircraft that Senator Harkin, I believe, flew in while he served in the military. It was very, very powerful.

RL: You also had Walgreens at the table.

JM: Yes. When Senator Harkin brought me to this original meeting, it was at a Walgreens facility near Hartford, Connecticut. Walgreens has been a very good employer for people with

disabilities, starting in the warehouses, and then extending after that to their stores. Pete Sessions, a Republican, very conservative Republican member of Congress, had twins, one of whom was super intellectually gifted and the other one has an intellectual disability. And he said, look, I just want both of my kids to go as far as their potential will take them. Isn't that what we all want?

Why should those with disabilities be part of a State's workforce plan? Or, why did this even need to be said?

JM: Maybe it shouldn't need to be said, but it does need to be said: we're just so much stronger when we recognize that everybody brings something different to the workforce. I think that's incredibly important, including people with neuro abilities that are non-traditional. One of the things we had to do during this journey is we had to listen to employers.

Every business that I know of competes on the basis of talent, and talent comes in every shape and size. You as an employer have a responsibility to your shareholders to tap into talent, wherever it comes from. As Governor, I had the same two conversations virtually every day: one was with employers who said they can't find people with the relevant skills; and the other was with job seekers who said, all I want is for somebody to give me a shot. As long as that discrepancy existed, my job was to do everything I could, so that the people who didn't have the skills could develop the skills they needed so they can satisfy the employers' need for people with the right skills.

What was the response from the business community?

JM: The response from the business community is ongoing. The reason I was invited to this meeting at the Walgreens facility was because they invited CEOs from other big businesses. As you can imagine, Walgreen has warehouses all over the country, and they chose to have them pilot significant employment of people with disabilities in two of them: one in Connecticut and another one down in South Carolina. Walgreens measures everything when it comes to the performance of their facilities, and what they found was that those two warehouses outperformed their other warehouses. When you take the time to figure out how to embrace and integrate a diverse workforce into your broader workforce, you can have real success, and that is exactly what they found. So, I think the response from the business community has been positive.

One specific example related to Delaware is The Precisionists. Maybe ten years ago now, I read an article in The New York Times, a blog entry about a guy in Denmark [Thorkil Sonne], who was on the fast track in the IT industry. He had a son with autism. The more he learned about autism, the more concerned he got about his son's future. He decided to leave his fast track employment and to dedicate his life to creating tech jobs for people with disabilities. So, I read about him, and I called Rita and I said, take a look at this and give the guy a call. She did and we agreed we ought to invite him to Delaware.

Basically, we agreed that if he came to Delaware, that we would fill up my conference room - probably 15 seats - with employers in the tech industry so that he could explain his vision and to see if anybody would bite. So we did exactly that.

Ernie Dianastasis was one of the people who attended. Ernie, he's probably in his early 60s now, but for a couple of decades had run the regional operation of a company called CAI, which is a

big technology employer. He was very good at his job, really successful, and he was there that day when the guy from Denmark, Thorkil Sonne, came and explained his vision.

Ernie was intrigued; without me even knowing it, he flew to Denmark to do his own due diligence. And Ernie came back and said, this is for real and we are going to integrate this into CAI. So we said to Thorkil, now you've got to move to Delaware because this is going to be something. So Thorkil and his wife and their youngest son, Lars, the one with autism, moved to Delaware. And they probably lived here, what do you think, Rita, five years?

RL: Yes

JM: So, they got this going and, in fact, the New York Times Magazine did a big story, I think it was maybe the cover story, on him about seven or eight years ago. They had probably 40 or 50 employees in Delaware, and then Ernie decided to start his own business, whose entire focus is on creating employment opportunities for people with cognitive disabilities, mainly for individuals with autism, in the tech industry. They're based in Delaware, but they have offices in Nashville, they have offices in Phoenix, and they're doing work for clients in Ohio. It's been really just amazing.

So, when you think, what has the business response been? It's amazing. And they're in this business not out of charity. They have to be at a very high quality and at a competitive cost, and that's what they do. If it's charity, it's not going to be sustainable, because you know businesses need to succeed; they need to make a profit. It's not to say they won't be charitable, but it won't be sustainable if it's only charity.

This became one of our key findings. Historically, divisions of vocational rehabilitation would go to an employer and essentially say, please do us a favor and find jobs for these five people. We need to change the orientation; and the new orientation is: I'm part of the Department of Labor and one of my responsibilities is to figure out how we can add the most value to our employers, so that you as an employer can be successful. So my job is to know your business well enough to understand the kinds of skills that you are looking for, and to bring you people who embody those skills and talents. Some of the talent may be traditionally abled, some of them may be differently abled. That's the way we're thinking about our role now.

How do we rethink youth engagement and the importance of training for employment opportunities as early as possible?

JM: One of our findings is that far too many young people with disabilities, historically, have been led down a path where there's an expectation of a lifetime on public support. And the earlier that we can change that expectation, the earlier that we can give people a sense of the possibilities of being integrated into the workforce, the more successful we're going to be.

We've got some fantastic employers who have really embraced this and it makes a massive difference. I mean, imagine if you're a teenager, you know 14, 15, 16 years old, you get to go into the workforce, while you're in school, you get to learn what the expectations are, as you work with other people, you have to show up, you have to do the job well, you have to follow through. The difference between that and somebody who's maybe 23 and has never, never had that exposure when they were a teenager is massive. Figuring out ways to work with young people in the schools as a bridge to the community is really, really important.

RL: That finding translated back into Delaware when we created the Pathways to Employment, that starts at age 14, and which is housed at DDDS [Division of Developmental Disabilities Services].

What are the obstacles to trying to get some of that set up? Realistically, what were your expectations in terms of what would have to be done to make something like this work?

JM: I do think it was mainly a mindset; this is one of those areas where people think, well, this isn't how we've done it before; so anytime you're talking about change, going from one way to a different way, it takes a while. And so celebrating the small successes, celebrating the early successes, giving people a sense of what's possible; that's why I say this is going to evolve over time.

RL: I'll say the public policy around it was also coming together. At this same time, Delaware was becoming an "Employment First" state. As the governor said, traditionally people were following this path that wasn't leading to any career. So, to put in place a policy that says we're going to be an employment first state was great, but then we had to ask, what does that mean in practice; how do we look at the system and really retrofit our system so that it will reinforce employment first? And, then, how do we start inserting that into the education process?

How did you create public private partnerships to maximize resources and opportunities?

JM: I was fortunate that governors have the ability to convene different stakeholders. I don't know that we really understood at the beginning exactly how these meetings should play out, so I think you learn as you go. So, for example, I mentioned this thing between Ernie Dianastasis and Thorkil Sonne. They took it upon themselves. The State of Delaware was an early client of this project. That was very helpful, because it let them get going, and then build up a little bit, and then recruit private sector clients. Separately, the University of Delaware got involved. Rita, what was that program where you had young students involved?

RL: Disability Mentoring Day; it's a program where you bring employers in, as well as the students with intellectual disabilities that are looking at career opportunities, and you match them up for a day. We did it all throughout the state.

JM: A key question is, how do you make these efforts sustainable? You build and maintain demand from employers because they recognize that this is good for them and for the community. For parents and the young people themselves, you provide many opportunities. The more people see what is possible, you're more likely to have it ongoing.

RL: I think the Governor's absolutely right; when it comes from the top, then people really will all come to the table. There was a momentum that was created. Even when we were hiring within State government, there was a positive momentum.

When you think about who has the highest rate of unemployment, individuals with disabilities always came up to the top overall as a population. As the Governor said, a lot of that had to do with the fact that people did not think of this issue from a talent pool perspective.

How was the report and the project greeted by other states?

JM: Very well, a lot of endorsement, a lot of changes in policy. What you aim for is for this to be just embedded in the work of the State, so that it continues on, and no longer has to be a special initiative. Some of the groups who look on from the outside have followed the numbers, and we're seeing some very good improvements in terms of employment of people with disabilities.

Our efforts are probably one contributing factor. It was one of the reasons I chose this initiative. You know, people are so skeptical about government being able to work, people are so skeptical because of the partisan split, on virtually every issue. This was an issue that I was very confident there should be no partisan split because disabilities respect no boundary; they don't respect race, they don't respect geographic boundary or anything else. So I was really struck when I was going around the country how many people came up to me to say, "I'm so glad you're doing this because I have a daughter..., I have a son..., I have a nephew..., I have a niece..." whatever it is, "and it's about time people really took this issue on." So, I was very pleased by the response from other states.

What barriers were identified that were not previously obvious or visible?

JM: I think I mentioned a couple of them already, specifically around the way that the Division of Vocational Rehabilitation interacts with employers. I think that was a pretty important insight: that they needed to move away from thinking about it as asking for a favor, charity, to really try to integrate their efforts with a broader approach of being a value added service to the employers. Also, this idea of helping young people migrate to an expectation of a lifetime of employment as opposed to a lifetime of public support.

RL: And I think if you look at the report, it's not necessarily time limited. I believe the Governor really wanted to focus on: How do we build a toolkit? And how do we listen first? And then figure out how to match those things up. Because, sometimes in the system we get so ingrained in the system that we're not listening to, for example, what is business saying to us relative to searching for a talent pool? So, by having the Governor convene people around that topic, he was able to really provide that opportunity for the system. To hear, for example, what does the market look for, what did they want? It's not that they don't want to hire people. So I know that it was very important to be able to create some type of a toolkit that would address, systemically, what we needed to do to change. And I would say that *The Better Bottom Line* also added intel for when the Workforce Investment Opportunity Act was being created and passed because, again, that was through the efforts of Senator Harkin.

The Governor was really connecting all these dots because sometimes states would say, "well, that's federal policy, and that hampers us here stateside to really advance competitive integrated employment."

And as you know, that work continues. It was kind of laying a little quiet under the Trump Administration, but now it is starting to return under the Biden Administration. I think that work lives on because it was setting a tone. And as that evolution continues, when all those things start coming together, I believe we're going to get momentum around this issue once again.

What new partnerships emerged from this work?

JM: Well, certainly the work that The Precisionists is doing, and that's just one I know about. I think, though, that these examples are very tangible, these are not theoretical partnerships. These are real people, you know, with autism being employed in communities where they never had that chance before.

RL: I think another area that really started gaining traction, and is gaining more today, is the alignment between all of these things like the Employment First states, and their initiatives with proposed changes to 14(c).ⁱ And really looking at the whole idea of how to enhance integrated, competitive employment. This was very intentionally worded in the initiative. So really looking at that transformation, as you said in the beginning of our meeting, and how does the system behave today that actually limits integrated, competitive employment? And how do we look at what are the barriers to that? And how do you advance talent? So this is a continuous evolution.

Because of the governor's efforts, I was invited, while I was still serving [as Secretary], to Maryland, where they have effectively, as a state, transitioned from sheltered workshops into integrated, competitive employment. And they were utilizing the better bottom line work in that process. So it was about taking that mindset, which is sometimes the easiest part, and then figuring out how to translate that into practice, and advance that transformation into integrated, competitive employment.

And that's just one state right, but that was through the governor's work. The blueprint helped them to see the issue differently, and they were like, well, now we've got to think about this; and then the workforce investment opportunity helped to highlight the same issues. They said, how do we build that? What does that look like? Who do we talk to? The way the governor had set it up with the listening campaigns and the convening and hearing all sides - other states were doing that in their own states.

What role can employment services play in the future of support services for individuals with disabilities?

JM: Let me just say that I don't think we have any choice but for employment to play an important role in the future of support services, because if people are working, it tends to solve virtually every other problem that we have.

ⁱ Section 14(c) of the Fair Labor Standards Act of 1938, which allows for employees with disabilities to be paid below the minimum wage.

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