

# Employers turn to people with disabilities to curb labor shortages

**While a labor need exists, employers' misconceptions about hiring people with disabilities exist.**



Sara Fijalkiewicz is a counselor at the outpatient location for the Center for Alcohol Drug Treatment in Duluth. Fijalkiewicz has a rare genetic disorder called Usher Syndrome, which robs people of their hearing and sight. Sara uses a special high contrast keyboard which allows her to use the computer at work. (Clint Austin / [caustin@duluthnews.com](mailto:caustin@duluthnews.com))

By Kelly Busche / Forum News Service

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DULUTH — Sara Fijalkiewicz's path to her career as a therapist at Duluth's Center for Alcohol and Drug Treatment was more difficult than most.

Fijalkiewicz, 30, has Usher Syndrome, a rare genetic disorder that's causing hearing and vision loss. She's considered legally blind, as her vision in both eyes is limited to an area the size of a toilet paper roll.

Because of this, she can't drive — limiting the number and type of jobs she could take.

"I knew getting a job would take me a little bit longer. But I didn't stop, you know; I just kind of just kept going, just kept pushing," she said. "It's just one of my goals, and I was just ... dead set on it."

Difficulty with transportation, like Fijalkiewicz experienced, is one of the numerous reasons people with disabilities face higher unemployment rates and more barriers to landing jobs. But with a tight labor force in northeast Minnesota and across the state, many say they make up an untapped workforce that could ease labor shortages.

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"When unemployment is low, businesses are looking for a valuable trained labor supply — and people with disabilities are out there. They're educated, and they're wanting to work," said Cindy Tarshish, manager for ADA Minnesota, which is run by the nonprofit [Metropolitan Center for Independent Living](#).

But there are numerous barriers to get people with disabilities in these open jobs, many say.

The unemployment rate for northeastern Minnesota is just over 5%. For people with disabilities, that rate is more than doubled, according to data from the 2013-17 American Community Survey's five-year estimates.

If people with disabilities were employed at the same rate of the total workforce, there would be an additional 4,200 workers in the region, according to information from the Minnesota Department of Employment and Economic Development.

Although the gap exists, Bruce Bock, a placement coordinator with [Duluth CareerForce's Vocational Rehabilitation Services](#), said he is seeing more businesses turn to the "untapped workforce" for hires.

"It's a trend — and more so a need and a necessity" as companies try to find workers in the tight labor pool, Bock said.

## Barriers to placement

While some employers are accessing this workforce, the employment gap still exists.

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Numerous factors contribute to lower employment rates for people with disabilities, like transportation issues as well as employer concerns about health insurance costs, accommodations and lawsuits related to [American with Disabilities Act](#) compliance, Tarshish said.

Accommodations are sometimes needed to place the right candidate in an open position. Some employers are still fearful of that, Bock said.

They're concerned they would have to conduct major renovations or buy thousands of dollars in new equipment. But, he said, these are unfounded as accommodations only need to be "reasonable."

In Fijalkiewicz's workplace, she keeps coffee tables and trash cans off to the side, enlarges fonts on her computer and iPad, keeps rooms well-lit and uses a bright yellow keyboard with large black letters.

"I don't look blind ... so to speak. I haven't disclosed it with my clients, my group at all. It just never had come up," she said. "But if it was to come up, I don't think I would shy away from it. Because it's who I am. I don't let it define me. But it's part of who I am."

At a WorkForce panel in mid-August about hiring people with disabilities, local businesses shared how they work with these employees to ensure their accommodations are met and other needs are addressed. Sharon Pettit, a supervisor at Home Depot, told the crowd that clear communication is key.

"It's not as scary as it sounds," Pettit said. "If you communicate the entire job, you can get what you need. And if you're open to communicating with them, most often you figure out what's going on, and it works itself out pretty easily."

Other employers, like T.J. Maxx's Kristen Feighan, said the store will move the person to different positions to see what aligns best with their skills.

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"I have one associate who, when (he) started, didn't talk to anybody ... and just stock, never (looked) up," she said. "He is, now, ... years later, being considered for coordinator position, which is also a full-time position. Because we have been patient, we have given him small things to work on. And he has just blossomed."

## Held misconceptions linger, but many still hopeful

As she continues through her life — raising her 8-year-old daughter and working full time — Fijalkiewicz's sight may continue declining until she is completely blind.

But she uses this to her advantage in her job as she works with people who also face challenges, she said.

“Facing challenges and being able to kind of correlate my challenges and being able to make it relatable to others,” is what she's able to do well as a therapist, she said.

Fijalkiewicz is hopeful people and employers become more open-minded about people with disabilities. “I feel like sometimes, we're not always given that opportunity, when many of us would have been fully capable,” she said. “I'm able to work, I'm still getting these degrees and able to still live a good life.”

More education about employers' concerns — which primarily center around ADA regulations — is needed to help people with disabilities gain access to the workforce, Tarshish said.

Some believe they're required to hire a person with a disability when they apply because of the ADA — regardless of their skills or abilities, she said. Instead, the ADA states workplaces must provide reasonable accommodations when they hire the most qualified candidate.

Bock said employees with disabilities are more dependable, have higher retention rates and perform better. This is because they end up working harder to land a job they want.

“It just makes good business sense … and they're surprised what good employees people with disabilities are,” Bock said.

Sara Fijalkiewicz talks about living with the rare genetic disorder called Usher Syndrome, which robs people of their hearing and sight. (Clint Austin / [caustin@duluthnews.com](mailto:caustin@duluthnews.com))

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