

Employment First Conference Highlights

The Wisconsin Board for People with Developmental Disabilities (BPDD) is the state's Developmental Disabilities (DD) Council. DD Councils were established by the federal Developmental Disabilities Act of 1970. All 50 states, 5 territories and District of Columbia have a DD Council that is responsible for bringing people together to solve problems, remove barriers and create statewide change for the developmental disability community.

For the past 8 years, BPDD has partnered with InControl Wisconsin, a non-profit organization that empowers people with disabilities to have control over their own lives, and People First Wisconsin, a statewide self-advocacy organization for people with disabilities, to host the statewide WI Employment First Conference. Employment First is a national movement to prioritize employment, fair wages and career advancement for people with disabilities through legislation and practice.

This year, as the COVID-19 pandemic threatened to cancel the event, BPDD and inControl changed course and partnered with support from the WI Department of Health Services' technology team to provide the conference in a virtual format. In 8 short weeks, almost 40 presenters forged ahead to adapt content to fit unfolding events and learn how to use video conferencing technology for 21 conference sessions. The result was a success: more than 300 people participating virtually on May 19.

The day opened with a state agency update from the WI Department of Health Services, Department of Public Instruction and Department of Workforce Development's Division of Vocational Rehabilitation with their responses to the COVID situation as it relates to employment for people with disabilities. The keynote speaker, national disability expert Genni Sasnett, spoke to human resilience and perseverance in fighting for disability rights as civil rights, recognizing that the economic advantages of employment are a huge part of equity and equality. She urged participants to see the opportunities that arise out of the COVID situation and to keep focused on supporting people with disabilities to fully participate in the workforce as we all remodel and re-envision what the workforce looks like in this era.

National presenters from The Arc of the United States and Cornell University shared their knowledge and expertise, service providers highlighted best practices and self-advocates shared their employment experiences. No employment conference would be complete without sessions on partnering with businesses and the positive impact people with disabilities bring to their workplaces. This year, Disability:IN Wisconsin's Judy Quigley presented with Traci Jones from Kalahari Resorts, a Charter Member of DIW, on perspectives on workplace inclusion.

A highlight of the conference each year is visiting micro-businesses owned by people with disabilities. An innovative take on that this year was the creation of the All Abilities Marketplace, a BPDD seed-funded e-commerce incubator for business owners with disabilities: www.allamarket.org This market isn't ending with the day: BPDD hopes to grow it to more artists and establish a permanent presence for small businesses that want to offer products virtually.

Some other specific silver linings of a virtual conference: some people who typically cannot travel and even participants from out of state were able to attend. This includes busy families who often cannot

take off work or travel for conferences. Also, Zoom allows all sessions to be recorded, so participants didn't have to worry about choosing a breakout and missing other good sessions. They all will be available soon to participants to view and use as trainings, etc. Even a pandemic couldn't derail the annual WI Employment First Conference - a true testament of Wisconsin's commitment to employment for people with disabilities and the flexibility and creativity of the networks that support them!