

Uncovering New Pathways to Employment through Community Conversations

by Sarah Harvey and Erik W. Carter

A great job can be an important aspect of living a good life. Yet, meaningful work that brings real pay and strong community connections remains elusive for far too many young people with intellectual and developmental disabilities in Tennessee. Since 2005, the employment rate for Tennesseans with disabilities has steadily declined and recent data indicate fewer than 17% of people with cognitive disabilities in the state are working (Butterworth et al., 2012). Substantially changing the employment landscape for young people with disabilities in our state will require us to rethink “business as usual” and to identify new pathways for increasing access to meaningful work. But what are the most pressing barriers standing in our way, and what are the promising directions for making change?



Photos by TNWorks Staff

employment opportunities in local areas. These events are designed as engaging ways of gathering diverse members of a community to generate both ordinary and creative solutions to a key challenge facing their city or county: the limited access people with disabilities have to real work for real pay.



The TennesseeWorks Partnership is a federally funded Project of National Significance charged with spurring systems change and building greater capacity and commitment for supporting competitive employment. One thrust of our efforts during this first year of the five-year project has been to host a series of “community conversations” focused on uncovering the most promising avenues for expanding meaningful

Since June, six community conversations have been held across the state, in Chattanooga, Greeneville, Jackson, Lawrence County, Memphis and Murfreesboro. Each event was organized by a local planning team in collaboration with members of the TennesseeWorks Partnership. Collectively, these teams included people with disabilities, parents, educators, disability agency representatives, civic leaders and other citizens. Each team suggested locations for their event and helped extend invitations broadly throughout the community. One critical feature of these conversations is that they intentionally include both professionals and non-professional community members to ensure both new and familiar perspectives are heard. Too often, discussions about systems change only involve people working within the very systems in need of transformation. Engaging a broader range of voices ensures the many assets existing within every community do not get overlooked.

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Each two-hour community conversation was held in the evening over coffee and desserts. The broad cross-section of each community who attended was asked to share their perspectives on the resources, supports, programs and opportunities in their community that could be drawn upon to expand employment opportunities for young people with disabilities. Using an adaptation of the World Café conversation process (www.theworldcafe.com), we asked attendees to participate in a series of “coffee-house-style” conversations at small tables during which they shared their own ideas related to two questions:

- **What can we do as a community to increase meaningful employment opportunities for people with intellectual disabilities?**
- **How might we work together in compelling ways to make these ideas happen here in this community?**

Throughout each event, facilitators sitting at each table recorded the numerous ideas shared by event participants. One person might share a compelling idea for addressing transportation barriers, another might suggest ways to dispel myths about people with disabilities in the workplace, and a third might recommend ways that schools could strengthen the employment preparation they provide students. As new ideas are generated, others sitting at the same table react to, build upon and refine their suggestions. Throughout any event, hundreds of ideas might be voiced. Toward the end of the evening, the entire group engages in a short time of sharing out the most promising ideas they heard throughout the evening for making meaningful change.

For the TennesseeWorks Partnership, a primary purpose of these six events has been to learn about the challenges and possibilities related to connecting young people with disabilities to competitive employment in the many diverse communities that make up our state. We have collected the notes

taken at each event and have begun developing a series of short briefs providing an overview of each conversation. These briefs can be downloaded at www.tennesseeworks.org. Later this year, we will craft a comprehensive “good practice” guide compiling all of the excellent ideas shared across these events. This guide can be used by educators, families, civic leaders, policy makers and many others to illustrate the many practical steps we can collectively take to radically change the employment landscape for Tennesseans with disabilities.

What are people saying about these events? Tommy Lee Kidd, who served as the host of the Lawrence County conversation, reflects on his experience in the article on page 10. Others have also spoken powerfully about the impact of these events. At the end of each community conversation, we asked everyone who attended to share their perspectives on an anonymous survey. After reviewing findings from the almost 400 Tennesseans who attended these six events, we are encouraged by the possibilities these conversations have spurred. Nearly everyone considered the evening to be a valuable investment of their time, many learned about local resources and supports that they had never heard about, most identified steps they could take to help expand access to employment, and almost everyone felt the evening improved their views of the capacity of their community to improve employment opportunities locally.

The TennesseeWorks Partnership is committed to expanding the opportunities young people with intellectual and developmental disabilities have to contribute their skills within the workplace. We need to make sure we have businesses willing to hire people with disabilities; make sure supports are in place on the job, at home and at school that can help young people find and keep their jobs; and make sure high expectations related to employment are shared with young people from every direction.

We are certain our state has the capacity to transform the employment rates mentioned at the outset of this article. We invite you to partner with us as we work together to support people with disabilities in living a good life in community.

Calling the Community Together in Lawrenceburg to Talk About Employment

by Tommy Lee Kidd

Originally, the Vandy folks called and asked if Lawrence County would be interested in holding a TennesseeWorks meeting. Without even consulting my best and closest advisor (my wife, Lesa), I immediately said, "Shoot yea, we'll do that". But when I told Lesa, the reality sunk in: if this was going to be a success, we had to take ownership in this project and we had a huge task ahead of us.

Lesla and I very carefully chose our planning committee of well-respected people in the community. These folks also served as our table hosts the evening of the event. They included the city mayor, the Chamber of Commerce director, a vice president from our local bank, a county commissioner, an associate pastor, a high school vice principal, and so forth.

We also very carefully - and strategically - composed a targeted list of people to personally invite to this happening, rather than advertise it to the public. While I think meetings with only attendees that work in the field of disability can be great, Lesla and I wanted this to have the potential to get a message across to some folks who could actually hire people with disabilities, and make community decisions to make hiring easier.

So, using Lesla's beauty shop connections and all of our small town knowledge, we set out to get as many key employers there in our county as we could. To that end, we had the WalMart store manager; Walgreens store manager; Kroger assistant store manager; Save-A-Lot food stores regional manager; GoodWill Career Center director; Edwards Oil Company owner (owns all the Quick Mart Stores in the region); McDonald's owner (owns seven restaurants in the region); Wendy's owner; True Value Hardware Owner; Legends Steak House owner; hospital CEO; Modine Manufacturing CEO; county executive; county commissioners; city mayor; city council; director of schools; central office special education staff; school board members; and on and on...

The meeting took place at a fabulous facility on our square called Providence Hall. Our good friend Jeanette Perkins is the manager of Providence Hall and does all of the catering for the events there. So, Lesla and I were able to negotiate an

amazing price for the food and the whole shebang. We had pies, cakes, you name it.... Jeanette did a fantastic job!

Oh my goodness, what a spectacular night for Lawrence County it turned out to be! Lesla and I were in total disbelief and shock as to the attendance at the Lawrence County Community Conversation meeting. The only explanation we have is that this was truly an act of God. Lesla thought about 50% of the people we invited would show up and I was leaning toward 70%.

Oh ye of little faith....

Lesla and I called almost everyone that attended the meeting personally, and invited them to the event. We got their cell numbers and I made a group in my phone of all the numbers we could get. I sent text reminders to everyone too.

It got close to 5:30 that evening and they began arriving.....and they all came.....all 95 people to a two-hour meeting.....unbelievable! I hugged more people that night than I've hugged in a long, long time!

We had table hosts at each table (ten tables with about nine people per table) that led the discussion and took notes. The table hosts didn't change tables between discussion rounds but everyone else did. We had three discussion rounds. I facilitated the meeting with Kennedy Center staff from Vanderbilt giving instructions as to the procedures of the evening.

The positive interaction amongst everyone during the table discussions was truly wonderful to see. Everyone was engaged and involved. I heard the following comment from several folks: "my eyes were opened tonight to something that I had no idea about."

There were many great ideas of how everyone from all areas of the community can work together to employ people with intellectual and developmental disabilities. Both our cell phones were lit up until very late with positive messages about what had just occurred.

Amen!

