

National Disability Employment Awareness Month

My disability is one part of who I am.

On September 30, 2015, President Obama released a Presidential Proclamation in regards to October being National Disability Employment Awareness Month. In the proclamation, the president supported a culture of acceptance without fear of discrimination and of utilizing the talents of people with disabilities, rather than letting them go to waste. Whether you are an Obama supporter or not-this is a message we all need to hear and embrace-the culture of acceptance and utilizing the talents of all Americans. October 2015 is the 70th National Disability Employment Awareness Month and this year's theme is "My disability is one part of who I am".

Nationally, the promotion of employing people with disabilities started in 1945 when Congress enacted a law declaring the first week of October to be National Employ the Physically Handicapped Week. In 1962, Congress took another step forward in removing the word "physically", recognizing that all people should be welcomed into the workforce. In 1988, Congress again stepped up and expanded employment awareness to the entire month of October. Additional efforts by the federal government include the Americans with Disabilities Act of 1990, the creation of the Office of Disability Employment Policy and programs such as Ticket to Work, to name a few.

In 2014, Wyoming developed the Wyoming Employment First Task Force and passed Employment First legislation. The Task Force purpose is to enhance partnerships and collaboration between public and private sectors to assist people with disabilities in becoming employed. Wyoming is currently ranked second highest among all states in employing people with disabilities (50.7%) according to the September 29, 2015 press release by Respect Ability. Additionally, in employing people with hearing disabilities (70%), visual disabilities (58.6%) and ambulatory disabilities (38%), Wyoming is ranked highest in the nation. Certainly, in ranking so high nationally and the development of the Employment First Task Force and Employment First legislation, Wyoming should be proud of our efforts in promoting employment of all who wants to be employed.

Unfortunately, according to the same September 29 news release, Wyoming returned \$858,951 to the federal government that was intended to help people with disabilities find employment. This loss of funds was due to the ending of programs such as the support previously provided to the Wyoming Business Leadership Network. WBLN was once assisting businesses in nine Wyoming communities navigate the employment of people with disabilities. Now only one community is supported by WBLN. Wyoming's higher rankings in employment for people with disabilities was largely related to the support provided businesses through education and training. WBLN was active in Wyoming for 11 years, with the funding being eliminated in 2012. Additional reasons for the loss of funds included the money was just not utilized, so it had to be returned.

Wyoming's Department of Vocational Rehabilitation is active in pursuing the intent of the Employment First initiative, however, it is an overloaded system that takes a great deal of time and patience to navigate. Other Wyoming systems providing support to persons seeking or needing on-the-job support are similar in that the time it takes to navigate does not support the need for employment right away or continued support after becoming employed. There are changes to the system taking place, but people with disabilities cannot wait for the system to adapt. For a person with a disability, finding work is already a difficult challenge. It becomes more complicated when trying to navigate a system of paper trails in a "hurry and wait" system. As with non-disabled people, when searching for a job, it is normally because you need one now and do not have months to wait to support yourself or your family.

Seventy nine percent of non-disabled Wyoming citizens are employed compared to 50.2 percent of the disabled population. Nationally, 70% of people with disabilities are out of the workforce. These numbers do show the commitment of Wyoming businesses and government in hiring people with disabilities. Wyoming is well ahead of the rest of the country and our Employment First legislation gives us the opportunity to pull further ahead. Wyoming should not throw this opportunity away. October is National Disability Employment Awareness Month. The theme; "My disability is one part of who I am". Let's not let that one part of a person stop us from hiring people who want to work, who have the skills and talent to work and the motivation to be the best employee a business has. It's good for the individual, the community and the economy.

Carol Busbee

Mayor's Council for People with Disabilities

Mission

The MCPD's mission is to serve as a network, catalyst, and referral organization that will enhance equality and self-advocacy for people regardless of their disability.

For more information, view the [Mayor's Council for People with Disabilities Website](http://www.cheyennesmcpd.org) at www.cheyennesmcpd.org