

*[Music 00:00 - 00:14]*

**Bonnie:** Welcome to Included, the disability equity podcast brought to you by the Johns Hopkins University Disability Health Research Center. This podcast challenges stereotypes of disability by sharing stories, data, and news. Each season digs deep into topics offering multiple perspectives and will expand your view of disability. We are your hosts. I'm Bonnielin Swenor, director of the Johns Hopkins Disability Health Research Center.

**Nick:** I'm Nick Reed, assistant professor at Johns Hopkins University Bloomberg School of Public Health. On this episode of Included, we are talking with Taryn Williams, the assistant secretary for disability employment policy at the United States Department of Labor. Assistant Secretary Williams received a bachelor's degree from Brown University in public policy and a master's degree from Harvard University in education with a focus on administration and social policy. Prior to joining the department of labor, she was the managing director of the Poverty to Prosperity program at the Center for American Progress.

She has also worked in numerous positions across the federal government, including as the chief of staff for the office of disability employment policy, associate director of public engagement, and liaison to the disability community for the White House, and as a policy advisor at the U.S. Senate Health, Education, Labor, and Pensions Committee. Prior to joining the federal government, Williams worked as the research coordinator for leadership programs at the Institute for Educational Leadership and as the director of Programs at The National Association of Urban Debate Leagues, headquartered in Chicago.

*[Pause with background noise music 01:57 - 02:05]*

**Nick:** Thank you so much, Assistant Secretary Williams, for being our guest today.

**Taryn Williams:** Thank you for havin' me. I'm so excited to be here.

**Bonnie:** Yeah, I'm so grateful for you spending time with us. I wanna start off by asking you to tell our audience about the office of disability employment policy in the department of labor. What is the mission of this office?

**Taryn Williams:** Right, I'm happy to tell you all about the agency, but, again, I just wanna say thank you and how excited I am to be joining today. I

am a listener of the podcast. Like many, I've started to adopt podcasts into my daily and weekly listening. This is exciting for me. About the office of disability employment policy, or ODEP as we call it. We are a small agency within the department of labor that supports policies and practices to increase workplace success for people with disabilities. We report directly to the secretary when we're doing this work. We were established in 2001—I say that because it is our 20th anniversary this year—in order to create a federal agency dedicated to working across both policies and programs that support disability employment.

Our mission is to develop and promote policies and practices that increase employment opportunities for people with disabilities. We do that in so many different ways, but it includes data collection and analysis. We do program evaluation. We do demonstration projects. We deliver technical assistance. We forge alliances and partnerships, both inside the federal government and outside in the private sector. We really provide leadership and coordination within the department of labor, across federal agencies, among state and local governments, and with employers and other key stakeholders in disability employment.

*Nick:* Wow. That was a mouthful. That was a lot.

*Taryn Williams:* It really is.

*[Laughter]*

*Nick:* We understand that some of the key issues you're currently working on are related to long COVID. Would you be willing to share, with us, the connection between long COVID, disability, and employment?

*Taryn Williams:* Yeah, I am more than happy to talk about long COVID. You're right. They are connected. Long COVID is something that we are giving serious attention to and coordination with other agencies and the White House. For many of the people, the impact of COVID-19 will be felt for a long time. This includes not just those who have lost loved ones, but also people who contracted the virus and are experiencing lingering symptoms.

As you know, this condition is called long COVID. The department of labor, across the entire department, we are committed to supporting workers who are experiencing long COVID so that they can stay in the workforce. For example, we've got an initiative—I was saying earlier that ODEP does

demonstration projects. One of those is our largest initiative, the retaining employee talent after injury or illness network, or we call it Retain. That is a demonstration that's working with five states to implement and evaluate coordinated services to help ill or injured workers stay at work or return quickly. This includes workers who are experiencing long COVID. Retain is really at the cutting edge of studying how best to help workers experiencing long COVID continue working in terms of employment-related support and in coordination between healthcare providers, employers, and the workforce system.

We're also doing a lot of education with people who are experiencing long COVID so that they understand their legal protections. People with long COVID, as for others with chronic health conditions, may be covered under the ADA, as well as other disability nondiscrimination laws and regulations. In addition to prohibiting discrimination on the bases of disability, the ADA requires employers to provide reasonable accommodations to qualify job applicants and employees with disability.

When it comes to long covid—and really, any chronic condition. I say that again and again. The right accommodations depends on someone's symptoms or their individual needs. That means making sure workers know that, if they experience something like extreme fatigue, solutions might be more frequent rest breaks or a more flexible schedule or the ability to telework. Those are the types of accommodations that people with disabilities have been requestin' and receivin' in the workplace for a long time. They're the types of accommodations that might be available for an individual who is experiencing long COVID.

We're providing this education, and one thing that we really want listeners to know is that our job accommodation network, or JAN as we call it—we really like acronyms in the federal government. JAN is the leading source of expert and confidential guidance on workplace accommodations.

If folks have questions about long COVID and what they might want in terms of accommodations in the workplace, then they should go to JAN. If employers have questions, they should go to JAN. Just speakin' for myself, as both an employee and as a manager, I've often used JAN, in the past, when I was seeking information about accommodations in the workplace. I really want folks to take a look at it if they haven't had an opportunity to.

*Bonnie:*

Yeah, thank you. Yes, I, too, have referenced and continue to reference JAN. Thank you for this work and for this discussion. I am assuming that there's, perhaps, many of our audience who don't make that connection between long COVID and employment and disability and accommodation. This is just such an important conversation and will continue to be as we move forward through the pandemic.

Another topic that has risen up during the pandemic is one of mental health. Again, I don't think people are making a connection between mental health and disability and employment, but I know your office is. I'm hoping you can talk to us a little bit about your work, your office's work in that space, connecting mental health and employment, particularly during the pandemic.

*Nick:*

Absolutely. I'm glad that you brought this up. You're right that, oftentimes, people don't consider mental health conditions to be disabilities, but the ADA is clear that a mental health condition may meet the definition of disability. There's no doubt that the past year and a half have been challenging for America's workers and their families. We know, as a result of that, many people are experiencing increased stress and anxiety in response to the pandemic and the changes that it has brought to our daily lives.

These challenges, coupled with increased understanding regarding the prevalence of mental health conditions, is really prompting employers to consider strategies to support their employees' mental health. It's a critical issue, according to the NIH, the National Institute of Mental Health. One in five American adults experience a mental health condition each year. Those can include depression or anxiety disorders or bipolar disorder. For us, at the department of labor, somethin' that we often keep in mind is that the majority of these individuals are of working age.

For many, employment plays a key role in their identity. It can also play a key role in recovery. It can contribute to an individual's sense of purpose and their health and wellbein'. We're just really committed, and have been for a long time, to providin' supports and education around individuals with mental health conditions and accommodations and really working with employers to help them understand how to cultivate a supportive work environment for employees who have mental health conditions. I'll say that the foundation for ODEP's work in this area is a framework that undergirds our mental health toolkit that we created for employers. It stresses what we call the four As of mental health friendly workplace. Those As are awareness, accommodations, assistance,

and access to treatment. That's a toolkit that is available at [askearn.org](http://askearn.org). That's another one of our technical assistance centers, like the job accommodation network. In this case, this one works specifically with employers to help them build disability inclusive workplace. Definitely want your listeners to know about [askearn.org](http://askearn.org) and also know that we have quite an extensive library, both on JAN and also on [askearn](http://askearn.org), of resources around mental health and mental health in the workplace.

*Nick:* Wow. Just as an aside, I really appreciate the comprehensiveness and inclusivity of these responses. Somehow, they always go back to the individual, which I think is key. That's a tall order for your office—

*Taryn Williams:* It is.

*Nick:* - you're answering the call. Shifting gears a little bit, as we start to reimagine life—I know people are saying post-pandemic, but really, we're just post the height of the pandemic, maybe, as we move to endemic. There's no going away. There's a lotta discussion around how work and employment are changing. These are national conversations. We'd love to hear your insight on how these discussions of reimagining work and employment, such as the flexible and remote working arrangements, specifically impact the disability community.

*Taryn Williams:* You are so right. This conversation is happening in so many places. I feel like, in some ways, it really started at the height of the pandemic after we saw these incredible shifts in how we work and the technology that we use to do our work, in addition to the changing environments. What we know is the pandemic has absolutely change the world of work.

It has ushered in the widespread move towards remote work arrangements for occupations where that is available. We know that many companies are now offering more flexible work arrangements. I hear, a lot, folks talkin' about these hybrid environments and thinkin' about what their workplaces of the future will look like.

Certainly, this has the potential to benefit the disability community since it can help overcome some of the longstanding barriers to employment, such as transportation, access to accessible transportation. As employers reassess their employment practices post-pandemic, it presents us an opportunity—that's certainly how our agency is thinkin' about it. It's an opportunity to include

people with disabilities in their organizations. This is partly because it expands the talent pool, overall, by eliminating the barrier of geographical location. It also helps attract qualified employees with disabilities who may need or prefer to telework. It helps to retain—somethin’ we were talkin’ about earlier. It can help to retain the talents of existing employees who may acquire an illness or an injury that leads to the need for flexible work environments.

Again, I’ll use another one of our resources, our employer assistance and resource network, or [askearn.org](http://askearn.org). It focuses on disability inclusion. They actually examine these issues, in part, because we see this conversation happenin’ in so many places right now. They have a new resource entitled leveraging the shift to remote work to increase employment of people with disabilities. It specifically talks about what some of those opportunities are and what considerations an employer might want to address as it’s thinkin’ about, what will its workplace look like in the future?

I will just say one other thing is that we are certainly excited about the opportunities that this might present for a portion of the workforce who works in a role or in a sector where those flexible workin’ environments or remote work arrangements are possible, but we also recognize that there are industries for which the type of flexible workin’ arrangement may not be as common.

There’s still so much work that we’ve left to do, in light of the pandemic and our ongoing mission of really advancing the employment of people with disabilities. We really need to be looking across the comprehensive spectrum of approaches that we can take on to ensure that every individual has that opportunity.

*Bonnie:* Yeah, and, as we are speaking today, another national conversation is about the labor shortage. I think, in light of what you just said, even more impetus, perhaps, to think more about how to include the disability community in the labor force.

*Taryn Williams:* Absolutely.

*Bonnie:* Yeah, and that goes into my next question, which is—the employment and work are really such critical issues. These are always issues on headline news, societal issues. People with disabilities really have, for so long, been excluded from many people’s view of what a “robust” workforce might entail. What is your vision for how we can change that paradigm? Meaning, what do we need to ensure that we do a better job in including people

with disabilities across the workforce? You just spoke about some of that, but I'm curious if you have a little bit more you can give us on what we can do to change this.

*Taryn Williams:*

Yeah, I can probably spend much more time answerin' this question than what we have available. I'll try to give a high-level overview, but again, I will say that this is something that I think about and that I am fortunate enough to work alongside colleagues who have really devoted their entire careers to this very question and to this work. I'll start by just noting that, at the department of labor, our vision really is for a more inclusive workforce, one where everyone who wants to work, can work, and has access to the services and supports they might need to do so.

As you note, achieving this requires change because there's a gap in the labor force participation between people with and without disabilities. Something that we talk about a lot is that that disparity is even larger for people with disabilities from historically marginalized communities. To really work towards a truly inclusive workplace, ODEP is focusin' on four main priorities. I'll just name them and talk a little bit about what each of them are.

The first, which I already talked about, is ensurin' a disability inclusive recovery, so really makin' sure that all of the steps that we're taking to rebuild our economy and to ensure that we recovery from the crisis of the pandemic, those actions are taken with the disability community in mind, that it's truly inclusive.

The second is promoting racial and social equity in disability employment policy and programs. The third is advancing competitive integrated employment. The fourth is helping youth and young adults with disabilities prepare for and succeed in employment. Just to elaborate on some of those, we'll start with the priority around promoting racial and social equity in disability employment policy. One of the first-day-in-the-office actions of President Biden was an executive order entitled Advancing Racial Equity and Support for Underserved Communities through the Federal Government.

All agencies, including the department of labor are really charged with examining the ways to increase racial and social equity in our policies, programs, and actions. ODEP, we are examining our entire portfolio in order to embed principles of equity in our work. That includes equity for people of color with disabilities and others from historically underserved communities. We think this is critical to achieving our mission because these are communities

that experience higher rates of both disability and unemployment, so we've become more intentional in addressing inequity. Disability and inclusion are also central to another executive order that was issued called Diversity, Equity, Inclusion, and Accessibility in the Federal Workforce. I smile as I say the name of that executive order. It's a little wonky, but to have accessibility included in an executive order on diversity and inclusion is just huge for us. ODEP is working closely with other federal agencies to fully implement this executive order.

Really, I have to say that those ELs are unprecedented in their scope and commitment. They provide an unprecedented opportunity to really advance equity and inclusion. So many of the conversations that I have with colleagues not only across the department of labor, but really in what we call our sister agencies, they really do have a focus on equity and what we're doing to ensure that our work is truly inclusive. It really comes from that standard where that came from the top on day one with the executive order and then, again, in June where the EO was issued around diversity, inclusion, equity, and accessibility.

Another priority that we have is around advancing competitive integrated employment. President Biden has been very clear and explicit about his goals here. On the 31st anniversary of the ADA in July, he announced investments to expand access to competitive integrated employment opportunities for workers with disabilities. For anyone unfamiliar, competitive integrated employment, or CIE as we, sometimes, refer to it, is defined as work in community settings where most employees have no disabilities and are paid directly at the greater or the minimum or prevailing wage.

We often talk about CIE in our work because we want workers with disabilities to be receiving wages that are commensurate with their work. We want them to be engaged in work that is integrated in its settings. At ODEP, this has been a priority for us. We have a number of initiatives designed to increase competitive integrated employment. One of our new initiatives is called advancing state policy integration for recovery and employment, or ASPIRE.

Through ASPIRE, ODEP is working with seven states to better align the policy, programs, and funding 'cause, oftentimes, fundin' is so key. It's the lynchpin for really shifting systems to enable states to provide evidence-based supported employment services to individuals with serious mental illness. It's a cross-program, cross-agency, cross-sector collaboration that ODEP can catalyze. It engages leading experts and advocates in this area, so folks who

have been working on this for a long time and who are as committed as we are to really advancing competitive integrated employment for people with disabilities. I'll just say, about that last priority—certainly not least—but the one related to youth and young adults with disabilities transitioning to employment, this has always been an ODEP priority as well.

I got my start—you were sayin' earlier, as you were introducing, that, prior to coming to the federal government, I worked at a place called the Institute for Educational Leadership. My master's is in education, and so issues related to youth and young adults with disabilities has just always been near and dear to my heart. It's especially critical as we help young people navigate the post-pandemic era. We are seein' a nearly 10 percentage point difference in the unemployment rate for youth with disabilities compared to youth without disabilities.

As with adults, the disparity is even larger for youth with disabilities from historically marginalized communities. Our youth work is designed to shrink this gap, this disparity to ensure that tomorrow's adults with disabilities have opportunities to meet their career goals and their dreams. The foundation for this work is what we call the guidepost for success. We are a policy office, and that is a policy framework really reflects extensive review and best practice and research around youth development, education, and workforce development.

Our work there is really forward thinking, and it's about increasin' opportunities for youth with disabilities to explore their interests, to discover their strengths, and to pursue their employment aspirations because we know that is what leads to more opportunities to meet those aspirations as adults. I just highlight those priorities, and that was a lot. Again, I share that this is something that I could talk about, really, all the time. I probably do talk about it all the time not just at work, but in my person life, as well, just because I care so deeply about these issues.

*Nick:*

That was amazing. I'm just blown away by that answer. What do you think the role of academia and higher education—what role do they have to play in advancing disability inclusion in the workforce?

*Taryn Williams:*

Yeah, that's a great question. Colleges and universities really do have a critical role to play here. They are educating tomorrow's workforce, including students with disabilities. I wanna be clear that, when we talk about colleges and universities, we mean two

years, four years, postgraduate programming, and training as really inclusive in a way that we think about postsecondary education. We also think that colleges and universities can be model employers themselves. They have an opportunity to send a clear message not only in the supports that they provide for students and employees with disabilities, but also in thinkin' about their efforts to recruit, hire, retain, and advance talent within their own workforce.

I will say that young people, including students with disabilities, really need to see other people with disabilities working in the jobs they would want to have some day. They need to be inspired to do this and to have opportunities to really set their own high expectations. That, we know, so there's a lot of investment and research and mentorin', and we know that that can have such positive impacts on the lives of young people. I mention that, again, because I think that colleges and universities, not only in their practices to support students both in the classroom and out, but also in their practices to support employees.

It's important that they remember that they really are a key player here. Certainly, ODEP works closely with colleges and universities. Part of the youth team that I mentioned before, that is a focus of their work and has been in the past. We recognize that postsecondary education is an important part of a pipeline of talent with disabilities that goes into our workforce today and in the future. They're just a partner for us.

*Bonnie:*

Thank you for that response. I'm trying not to get emotional because that is certainly my personal area of passion. I just really am grateful for the work you're doing and your office is doing for the entire disability community and, honestly, for society. Thank you so much, Assistant Secretary Williams, for being our guest today and spending time to share more about this important work and the resources.

I want the audience to know, when we share this episode, we'll make sure we link those resources to this episode so you can find them. Thank you, again, for your time. You have been listening to Included, a disability equity podcast brought to you by the Johns Hopkins Disability Health Research Center.

*Nick:*

Thank you to our Included podcast team and everyone that made this podcast possible, especially [*unintelligible* 33:56], Curtis Nishimoto, and our guests. Music is Molly Joyce. This podcast is supported by a Johns Hopkins Ten by Twenty Challenge grant.

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