Coronavirus creates extra hardship for workers with disabilities

By Jill Nolin - May 5, 2020

A year ago, Brian was celebrating a milestone at work: He had tallied five years at a Savannah Publix, an achievement that came with a certificate, a watch and a special trip ceremony.

Now, the 33-year-old has found himself on the frontlines of the fight against COVID-19, as he rings up groceries, restocks produce and helps customers – who have christened the outgoing employee with the nickname “Buddy” – with their queries.

“Somebody’s got to do it,” he said.
Brian is part of a supported employment program at EmployAbility, which is a Savannah-based nonprofit that prepares adults with intellectual and developmental disabilities to enter the workforce. The organization, which serves about 400 adults, asked that Brian’s last name not be published.

For Brian, it took a few jobs for him to find the right fit, including a brief stint within the center’s in-house pre-vocational program.

“I just want to say congratulations,” his job coach, Kama Malcolm, said to Brian with a reporter. “A lot of people don’t stay at a job that long, and you have been plus, six years – that’s a good accomplishment.”

“Thank you,” he said.

But Brian, who lives with his aunt and chips in some of his paycheck for household bills, is also part of a broader community that faces a disproportionately high rate of unemployment even in good economic times. Last year, the national unemployment rate for people with a disability was 7.3% while the unemployment rate for other workers was 3.5%.

The center’s participants who work out in the community now face the same economic distress as everyone else right now: Of the 230 EmployAbility participants toiling in the community, only about 110 of them, like Brian, were still working in essential roles during the shutdown. So when they look for a job, they’ll be in good company. Georgia has seen record unemployment claims since the economy shut down over fears of the virus, with about 1 million people finding themselves suddenly out of work.

But that also means people with disabilities will likely be competing for work with a much larger pool of job candidates.

Laura Lane McKinnon, the center’s director of organizational advancement, said she worries about what this will mean for their job seekers should the economic effects of the pandemic linger.

“Some people tend to think of employing someone with a disability as a pity job when economics are dire, people get into that scarcity mindset,” McKinnon said. “And that people who happen to have (a disability) can be perfectly competent, can be reasonable and amazing assets to their team.
“So, I think when people are fearful, they tend to be more negative and our folks can be forgotten,” McKinnon said.

**Face to face, hand over hand**

The supports, though, that exist to help people with disabilities overcome the own struggles amid restrictions aimed at slowing the spread of the novel coronavirus.

Day programs that usually bring people with disabilities together have been closed for social distancing. And residential programs are vulnerable to the same health risks understood at nursing homes, as tragically seen during an outbreak at Central State Hospital that spread to 68 staff members and 20 individuals. Two of the state hospital employees died, according to the state Department of Behavioral Health and Developmental Disabilities.

EmployAbility, which does not have a residential program, furloughed 132 employees — including 83 people with disabilities in the center’s pre-vocational program — when it closed in mid-March. The closure also leaves the participants without the same access to the routine and supportive network they have come to count on.

It is unclear when the center will reopen its doors again. Gov. Brian Kemp recently extended his shelter-in-place order for the medically fragile to at least mid-June.

“From 1951 till March, most of our services were done in person, face to face and in some cases, hand over hand,” McKinnon said.

“A job coach or an instructor might put their hand over someone else’s hand and say, ‘Do it like this.’ Obviously, we can’t do that now,” McKinnon said. “So, the challenge is how do we translate to a virtual world now? And it’s been challenging.”

Day programs like EmployAbility are particularly vulnerable because they rely so heavily on Medicaid, which funds about half the center’s budget. If they don’t provide services, they don’t get paid — although the federal government has recently, and temporarily, allowed them to receive the funding anyway during the crisis. Private giving has also slowed amid the economic uncertainty.

“It makes situations like these especially fraught and difficult,” McKinnon said.
The Savannah center is exploring ways to still offer their services remotely in the meantime, although the uneven availability of technology at home may still prove a barrier for some of the program’s participants.

‘Back to ground zero’

About one-fifth of Americans with a disability were gainfully employed the last the national economy was booming. Compare that with about two-thirds of people without a disability who held a job.

And Georgia tends to mimic national trends, said Eric Jacobson, executive director of the Georgia Council on Developmental Disabilities.

People with disabilities face a couple of key challenges when job hunting, such whether gaining a paycheck will mean losing their Medicaid health care coverage. But they may also encounter preconceived notions about their abilities.

Jacobson said he thinks the stigma of hiring someone with disabilities is lessen companies and mom-and-pop businesses understand the value of a diverse workforce.

“That’s one of those big barriers that are out there and yet we’re starting to see some real progress,” he said.

It is important, Jacobson said, to ensure the supports, such as services like the paired Brian with a job coach, are in place when a person’s skills match an employer’s needs.

“So I think that if we get over the policy issues, if we can get past the fact that they see the positive benefits of that, then we begin to erase some of those barriers and I think more people will go to work,” Jacobson said.

But the COVID-19 crisis represents a setback for job seekers with disabilities and those who assist them with their job search, said Debbie Conway, who is the president of Georgia’s Service Providers Association for Developmental Disabilities.

Conway is also the executive director of Cross Plains Community Partner in Dalton, which, like EmployAbility, provides day services. Cross Plains has also closed its campus because of the novel coronavirus.
For now, these providers that often operate with small margins are left trying to keep their infrastructure intact during the shutdown so there is a program for people to come back to later.

And when they return, providers will face the challenge of guiding their participants back into the workforce at a time when job opportunities may not be as abundant as they were before the novel coronavirus.

“Even on a good day, when jobs are plentiful, it’s still a difficult road on a number of points, just helping people find that competitive employment within the community,” Conway said. “We definitely see that now as a huge setback as people have lost their jobs. The majority of them are not working anymore.

“So, we’re kind of back to ground zero as far as when we go back out there and try and help them along with thousands of other people who are going to be out there in the job market too.”

Jill Nolin

Jill Nolin has spent nearly 15 years reporting on state and local government focusing on policy and political stories and tracking public spending. She has spent the last five years chasing stories in the halls of Georgia’s Gold Dome, earning recognition for her work showing the impact of rising opioid addiction on the state’s rural communities. She is a graduate of Troy University.