

Coronavirus creates extra hardship for workers with disabilities

By **Jill Nolin** - May 5, 2020



Brian rings up groceries, restocks produce and helps customers find what they need at a Savannah Publix, six years. Laura Lane McKinnon/EmployAbility

A year ago, Brian was celebrating a milestone at work: He had tallied five years at 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. He rings up groceries, restocks produce and helps customers – who have christened him an “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 nonprofit that prepares adults with intellectual and developmental disabilities for the workforce. The organization, which serves about 400 adults, asked that Brian's story 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 there for 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 expenses, is part of a broader community that faces a disproportionately high rate of unemployment during these good economic times. Last year, the national unemployment rate for people with disabilities 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 challenges as everyone else right now: Of the 230 EmployAbility participants toiling in the community, 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 job claims since the economy shut down over fears of the virus, with about 1 million people losing their jobs themselves [suddenly out of work](#).

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

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

"Some people tend to think of employing someone with a disability as a pity job, but in tough 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 a valuable and reasonable and amazing assets to their team."

“So, I think when people are fearful, they tend to be more negative and our fo forgotten,” McKinnon said.

Accessibility



Face to face, hand over hand

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

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

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

It is unclear when the center will reopen its doors again. Gov. Brian Kemp rece [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 a 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.”



An instructor with a particip culinary traini COVID-19 shu campus. Cont EmployAbility

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 t although the uneven availability of technology at home may still prove a barrier 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 with a disability who held a job.

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

People with disabilities face a couple of key challenges when job hunting, such as 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 lessened when 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 progress," he said.

It is important, Jacobson said, to ensure the supports, such as services like the one 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 people with disabilities have to lose their benefits, if we get past the fact that businesses want to hire people with disabilities, if they see the positive benefits of that, then we begin to erase some of those barriers that are happening and I think more people will go to work," Jacobson said.

But the COVID-19 crisis represents a setback for job seekers with disabilities as well as how to assist them with their job search, said Debbie Conway, who is the president of the Georgia Providers Association for Developmental Disabilities.

Conway is also the executive director of Cross Plains Community Partner in Dalton. Cross Plains EmployAbility, provides day services. Cross Plains has also closed its campus building due to 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 c



And when they return, providers will face the challenge of guiding their participatory 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 ways of helping people find that competitive employment within the community,” Conway says. She definitely sees that now as a huge setback as people have lost their jobs. The ones that are not working anymore.

“So, we’re kind of back to ground zero as far as when we go back out there and we see them along with thousands of other people who are going to be out there in the

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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 years chasing stories in the halls of Georgia’s Gold Dome, earning recognition for showing the impact of rising opioid addiction on the state’s rural communities. She is a graduate of Troy University.

