

National Disability Employment Awareness Month: Dismantling Stereotypes, Building Inclusive Workforces

By Jessica Price

As a society, we often speak of inclusivity and equality, but actions speak louder than words. National Disability Employment Awareness Month (NDEAM) serves as a reminder that we have a long way to go in ensuring that adults with disabilities are not only granted the right to work for fair wages but are also given equal opportunities for employment. Virginia's relatively recent move to abolish 14(c) certificates, a special provision under the Fair Labor Standards Act that authorizes employers to pay subminimum wages to workers with disabilities, is a step in the right direction, but more must be done to create equitable workplaces and eliminate employment barriers.

Despite more than 1 in 4 adults in the United States having some type of disability, the employment rate for people with disabilities in 2022 stood at a mere 21%. As a mother to a child with Down Syndrome, a special education teacher, and an advocate for the Down syndrome community, I find it appalling that more people with disabilities are not a larger part of our workforce.

People with disabilities, sadly, face a number of employment barriers that either dissuade or prevent them from actively seeking employment opportunities. Most notably, antiquated, and erroneous disability stereotypes. These harmful stereotypes are still pervasive in our society and have spilled over into the workplace.

Stereotypes and biases, whether unconscious or overt, play a substantial role in excluding qualified candidates with disabilities from the job market. Employers don't feel as if these workers can do the job or will not be as productive as their peers without disabilities. Yet, these stereotypes can't be further from the truth.

Companies who hire disabled workers improve their company's bottom line, discover an untapped potential among employees who have had to find solutions their entire lives, have higher productivity, lower absenteeism, lower turnover rates, improved morale, the overall culture of the workplace, and higher creativity. These companies expanded their consumer market as people flocked to support them because they hired people within the disabled communities. Not only that, but these employers also qualified for financial incentives and met federal contractor requirements.

People with disabilities are capable and eager to work. They possess a wide range of skills and talents, and their potential should never be underestimated. Rather than relegating them to token jobs, employers should create meaningful opportunities for them to showcase their abilities and contribute to the workforce. When given the chance, individuals with disabilities can excel in various fields, bringing fresh perspectives and valuable insights to the table. It is everyone's responsibility to promote inclusivity and diversity in the workplace, ensuring that everyone has the chance to pursue fulfilling careers and reach their full potential.

They also deserve the same competitive pay as their non-disabled counterparts; however, the persistence of subminimum wages for workers with disabilities in many states undermines progress. The Government Accountability Office revealed that nearly 120,000 workers were employed under these certificates and half earned less than \$3.50 an hour. This is an amount clearly insufficient for sustaining

any standard of living in our society and further diminishes the values people with disabilities bring to the workforce.

NDEAM serves as a yearly reminder, but our commitment to progress and inclusivity must be unwavering every day of the year. Both employers and society must elevate their expectations, recognizing the immense potential that individuals with disabilities bring to the workforce. It is also incumbent upon the disability community to advocate and take action in our daily lives to intentionally support companies that offer inclusive work environments and competitive wages to workers with disabilities.