

Unlocking the Potential: Advocating for Inclusive Employment for People with Disabilities

By Nidia Marrero

As National Disability Employment Awareness Month (NDEAM) approaches this October, it's time for us to not only reflect on the importance of inclusive employment but to take meaningful action. While progress has been made, society continues to underestimate the incredible potential within this community. As a mother and advocate, I've witnessed firsthand both the challenges and opportunities we face in building a future where everyone, regardless of ability, has the chance to contribute and thrive in the workplace.

My son Isaiah was born with Down syndrome. He's 2-1/2 years old now, but already I dream of the future he deserves. One full of opportunities. Isaiah, like so many individuals with disabilities, is fully capable of making meaningful contributions to society. Yet, outdated stereotypes and systemic barriers often limit those opportunities. I want Isaiah to step into a world where his talents and abilities are valued, not questioned.

As both a mother and advocate, I'm here not just for my son Isaiah but for all individuals with disabilities. I'm committed to pushing for the changes needed to ensure that they have the same opportunities to succeed as anyone else. The work we do today isn't just about my family - it's about creating a more inclusive future for all.

While we've seen some positive shifts in how people with disabilities are viewed and treated, we must go further. Too often, individuals with disabilities encounter obstacles - whether in accessing inclusive hiring practices, navigating inaccessible workplaces, or facing unsupportive environments. These barriers aren't just physical; they stem from a mindset that still views people with disabilities as burdens rather than assets.

This mindset needs to change. Studies have shown that inclusive workplaces are more productive, innovative, and engaged. Companies that actively embrace diversity, including disability, consistently outperform their competitors. They report higher retention rates and increased employee satisfaction. These aren't just numbers, they're a reflection of the value that people with disabilities bring when given the opportunity. I've seen this firsthand in my community. At a local café I regularly visit, I'm surrounded by adults with Down syndrome who demonstrate incredible work ethic and commitment. They aren't just filling a role; they are thriving, proving that when people with disabilities are given the right opportunities, they can exceed expectations and contribute in meaningful ways.

For true inclusion to take root, we need local businesses, national corporations, and policymakers to take action. Employers need to step up beyond the basics and take real action in promoting inclusive hiring practices. They should ensure their workplaces are fully accessible

and provide the accommodations that allow individuals with disabilities to succeed. Policymakers, too, have a role to play - strengthening laws that protect the rights of workers with disabilities and offering incentives to businesses that champion inclusivity.

As we mark National Disability Employment Awareness Month, I urge our communities to reflect and more importantly, act. Despite making up 13% of the U.S. population, only 22.5% of people with disabilities are employed, according to the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics. This is far below the 65.8% employment rate of those without disabilities, highlighting the barriers we still need to break down.

As a mother, I'm committed to advocating for a future where Isaiah and others like him are seen for their strengths and given the same opportunities as anyone else. The changes we make today will pave the way for a more inclusive tomorrow - one where people with disabilities are no longer sidelined but celebrated as valuable contributors to the workforce. That's the world I want my son living in.

This October, let's not just start a conversation; let's take concrete steps to unlock the potential that exists in all of us.