



Congressional Briefing on SUCSESSES OF PEOPLE WITH DISABILITIES TRANSITIONING TO COMPETITIVE INTEGRATED EMPLOYMENT

The Arc of Southside, Virginia

Speakers: Eric Cottrell, Lekisha Logan, Tonya Milling

Presenting: Our Shared Story of The Arc of Southside's Transition to Fully Inclusive Supports



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Who we are

The Arc of Southside, a local chapter of The Arc of United States and The Arc of Virginia. In 2011 we were a Service Provider with a 15 person Group Home, Private Day School and a Sheltered Workshop with 130 people with developmental disabilities.

These services were very traditional and were all SEGREGATED, in fact they were all located together on the same property in one location, on the side of a highway in a rural part of Virginia. The setting was a campus and very institutional like.

We all often talked about how people were living a Side Walk Life. If for instance you lived in the group home, and worked at the workshop or even went to school at White Oak School, you might wake up each day and have breakfast across the table from someone you didn't choose to live with, then walk down a sidewalk where you saw the same people each day, some of whom you lived with, and then finish up the day and take that walk down the sidewalk again.

People were very isolated, despite The Arc of Southside being an excellent provider of those traditional services, with a staff full of well intentioned and caring people. It was time to see a new way to evolve.

So in 2011 we began a journey to transform all of our services from sheltered segregated facilities to community supports that help people to live their lives in their communities with whatever services they need simply following them in their life.

We wanted to help people to live in their own homes, to work in a job where they were valued and paid fairly for their work and to spend time doing the things they enjoyed.....JUST like any of us. We at The Arc of VA often talk about this vision as *A Life Like Yours*, because we all just want the same things in life and we all need varying levels of help, support and guidance along our way.

This transformation was was a long process but a very successful one. We Officially closed the Sheltered Workshop in April 2018. When asked about this experience, there are some core areas that we think helped us to be successful.

[Family Engagement]

It was vital to include families in the planning process as we helped people think about and explore employment options. Most people had never really been asked about what they wanted in their future. We wanted to help parents face their fears and have us find the answers to questions together before they became barriers for people to find work. We did most of this one on one with each person and their family. We learned early that holding group meetings to discuss plans to transition the workshop into community employment really just led to people staying stuck in their own positions and not being able to hear and explore possible solutions to problems and barriers. Every person met with a benefits counselor and had an assessment completed to help ensure that they were able to maintain their benefits while going to work in integrated competitive jobs.

Question to Lekisha: How did your mom first react when you talked about leaving the workshop?

Lekisha's Response: *My mom was worried. She worries about a lot of things. She didn't want me to lose my check, the assistance check I receive through disability. She said she thought I could lose that check if I worked too much or earned too much money.*

Question to Lekisha: How did you change her mind?

Lekisha's Response: *David Gusler (Employment Director) talked to her, I told her he knows more about this stuff and that she could ask him questions. David was overseeing the transitioning of the workshop and he was the one who could teach us about benefit checks and working.*

Question to Lekisha: Were you able to continue getting benefits after you started work?

Lekisha's Response: *Yes, you have to report your earnings, you just fill out paperwork, but you can keep your benefits.*

Question to Lekisha - So tell us about how you found a job and what you do now

Lekisha's Response: *I had a job coach, they helped me look for a job. They helped me to apply, do my resume, prepare for interviews. In 2012 I was hired at Cibo Restaurant and I have been there for 7 years now. In 2013 they changed to Dellano's Pizzeria and the manger said he wanted to do whatever he had to so he could keep me for the new restaurant. It made me feel really valued.*

[Safety Net]

Another thing we ran into with families was the fear of what would happen if someone lost their job. How many of us are in our first or even first couple of job experiences, not many I am sure. The same with people with developmental disabilities, they deserve the opportunity to explore what they like, what they are good at and take the time to find long term jobs or careers that match their own unique skills, interests and abilities.

We recognized that even though we were using thorough assessments and job shadowing and sampling, sometimes people would leave their job for any number of reasons, and we felt the key was to be there and be creative to figure out how to support them while they searched for their next position.

Question to Eric: Tell us about your journey from the workshop to where you are today?

Eric's Response: *I started at the workshop when I was 16 years old as part of my day in high school. I went half day to Chatham High School and half day to the workshop. I was there for 13 years. In 2012 I was hired at Mt. Herman Animal Clinic and worked there for 3 years. I loved that job, I helped take care of the animals and cleaned their cages helped get them fed, and I played with them. After 3 years I was laid off due to financial problems for the clinic.*

Question to Eric: After you were laid off, what happened?

Eric's Response: *I met with David, we talked about options other than me just working production at the workshop. The workshop no longer accepted new production employees, but they needed a 1 on 1 staff to work with a young man named Ben who attended the workshop while he was in High School. Ben needed help, so I was his 1 on 1 and helped him do the things that I did when I was there as a High School student. I also worked with all the high school students by taking them to wait for their school buses and keeping them safe. They were a handful!*

Question to Eric: So you were hired for a staff position, and you did the same documentation paperwork as all the Direct Support Staff did?

Eric's Response: *Yes, I did documentation and kept notes and track of time I worked with Ben or any student. I did this while I was looking for a job with my job coach. My job coach also helped me learn my paperwork for being a staff person.*

Question to Eric: What job did you find next?

Eric's Response: *Wendy's and worked there for about a year, but I didn't like that job. It was not a match for me. But last year, I found my job that does match me, I like jobs where I can help others. Last year I started at Piedmont Regional Feeding Clinic and I love it. I like helping people and I don't think I want to leave. I do cleaning, I prepare food trays and deliver them to the Therapy sessions. We do therapy for people in the clinic, in their homes and at schools for students.*

Question to Eric - What do you like most about your job?

Eric's Response: *Everything, I like the work I do, and the people are really nice, they care about you when you are out sick, and they call and check on you. And I love getting paid weekly.*

[No One Was Left Behind]

As we went through this process to close the workshop, we worked with everyone, regardless of their level of support needs. With the right job and the right supports everyone can work and contribute in the workplace. So anyone who had the interest in working, had the chance.

Ultimately not everyone decided to work, a very small number of people chose not to work, for various reasons, age, health or any number of reasons. Some people had worked at the workshop for 30 years, and were ready to retire and do other things with their days.

But they weren't left behind, if someone didn't want to transition to competitive employment, we were able to provide all the community support options available in our State's waiver. Or we referred people to other providers if they wanted something we didn't offer or wanted to be supported by another agency. These new services were things they had never been offered before and included things like Community Engagement, In Home Supports, Companion services.

What mattered most was that no one was left without support for whatever they chose for their life once the workshop closed.

[How Life Has Changed]

Question to Lekisha: How has your life changed?

Lekisha's Response: It is totally different. I make more money, I meet new people all the time at my job and have my own apartment.

I can spend my money on the things that I want. I have tried new things in the past several years, I have gone to present and talk about my job at conferences and to the college students at Averrett University.

Question to Lekisha: What do you like about living in your apartment?

Lekisha's Response: You can go to bed when you want, it is your choice. You can decorate your way...It is ALL MINE.

Question to Lekisha: What are your goals now?

Lekisha's Response: I would like to get my drivers license and save money to buy a house one day. You just have to keep moving and look forward to the future, and I do.

Question to Eric: What is different about your life?

Eric's Response: I make more money, which meant I was able to afford my own apartment. I meet more people and stay busy all the time. Having my own money and my own apartment **IS FREEDOM** to me. In my apartment I don't have to worry about someone being on top of you all the time.

This past year I got my Pastor's certification. I joined Project Literacy to improve my reading and I was just accepted to take a Religion course at Averret University.

Question to Eric: What are your goals?

Eric's Response: I want to increase to Full time with benefits at work. And I want to one day work for the Life Saving Crew in Danville. I have to start by taking 1st aid and CPR.

[There is more to Life than Work!]

When helping people to work in their community, it was key to link people to services other than those they received for work. In order to live a full life, A Life Like Yours, we have to ensure people have many ways they can get support to access their communities.

So we made sure people had access to support during times when they are not working. Many folks who used to attend the workshop did so for 30 - 40 hours per week. But often might get a job for less hours and therefore needed support to do other things.

As part of the transition we added Community Engagement, In Home, Companion. But all of these are just the name of services that don't matter. What matters is what WE REALLY DO, which is help people to do the things that any of us do when we are not working. Volunteer, go to the gym, see a movie, hangout with friends, go see our favorite band.....live life.

If I had to name one thing that was key to our success, I would say NOT Building a Program to Replace the Workshop. But instead, DEVELOPING an array of supports that can follow someone in their life to live A Life Like Yours. HUMAN IS HUMAN IS HUMAN, KEEPING THAT THE CENTER of OUR PLANNING WAS THE KEY FOR US IN MAKING SURE WE WERE NOT DEVELOPING PROGRAMS BUT **INSTEAD HELPING PEOPLE TO BUILD LIVES.**

For more information on how we transitioned the sheltered workshop or one of our other programs, please reach out to us!

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