

Breaking Through Employment Barriers

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>> Welcome to Disabilities At Work Radio where every week we explore issues, ideas, initiatives and innovations involving the employment of people with disabilities. We feature employers that go beyond compliance in supporting people with disabilities in the workplace and elsewhere. We bring you prominent members of the business community, service providers, government officials, researchers, educators and people who successfully manage their disability and careers. Join us now for Disabilities At Work.

>> DONNA CUSTARD: Hello, I'm Donna Custard sitting in for Ray Zardetto today and welcome to Disabilities At Work Radio here on the VoiceAmerica Business Network.

Each week at noon Eastern Time, Disabilities At Work

explores issues, ideas, initiatives and innovations involving the workplace and people with disabilities and we discuss them with prominent members of the business, government and disability communities.

Disabilities At Work Radio is brought to be this week by two distinguished organizations, both are dedicated to improving the lives of the disabled. One is the Kessler Foundation and the other is the New Jersey Division of Disabilities Services, but we will talk more about them later in the program.

My first guest today is Kisha Thomas who is the lead project coordinator for the State of Louisiana's Disability Program Navigator Initiative. She was previously with the Louisiana House of Representatives for four years where she held positions with the Louisiana Legislative Women's Caucus and the Louisiana Legislative Black Caucus. Welcome to the show, Kisha.

>> KISHA THOMAS: Hello. Thank you so much for having me.

>> DONNA CUSTARD: Oh, we are so glad to have you with us today. Tell us a little bit about Louisiana's Disability Program Navigator Initiative. What is it?

>> KISHA THOMAS: Well, you know, the Navigator Initiative is a national initiative that is funded in part by the U.S. Department of Labor and Social Security Administration, um, the Employment and Training Administration from the Department of

Labor, um, our governing entity, it's a granted program.

Um, many of the initiatives actually ended June 30th, but here in Louisiana we have been very fortunate and we have been able to leverage resources from other agencies and organizations and within our own agency at the Workforce Commission to be able to continue our Navigator Initiative, so we are really excited about being able to provide, um, employment services to persons with disabilities within our business and career solution centers across the state.

>> DONNA CUSTARD: So it's really an employment service type of initiative?

>> KISHA THOMAS: We work within what is nationally known as the one stop centers, uh, within the workforce commission system, to make sure that persons with disabilities get the same services as everyone else when they come into our centers.

They get the opportunity to receive employment training if that's what they desire to do. We help them with everything from resume writing to interview skills and things of that nature. So we try to give them a holistic approach to employment with a wrap-around approach as far as transportation, um, or any basic items that they may need to go to work, such as maybe a uniform or things of that nature.

>> DONNA CUSTARD: It sounds like a terrific service for individuals with disabilities. How do they typically find out about these services?

>> KISHA THOMAS: We do a lot of outreach to agency and other service providers and, of course, the disabilities community as a whole. We go anywhere and everywhere anybody will give us an opportunity to. It could be the faith based community to nonprofits, uh, it could be local basketball or football game, anybody that has a group of people together we feel it's an excellent opportunity to let them know about the services that are provided within our career solutions centers because people with disabilities don't typically know that they can go to work and go to work at a level where they don't have to live in poverty. So that's our message and we go everywhere and anywhere to deliver that.

>> DONNA CUSTARD: What might be some of the other ways that you go out to the community? You said that you do a lot of outreach, you go to basketball games, you go to all these different places, are there any other ways that you advertise your services?

>> KISHA THOMAS: Absolutely. We utilize a lot of the social networking sites such as Facebook and Twitter; we think it's important to be in touch with the digital age. We also have a website that we are in the process of building that will hopefully launch by October, which is Disability Employment Awareness Month. We also use the Workforce Commission website and the Work Pays website to advertise different things that we are doing.

>> DONNA CUSTARD: What is the Work Pays website? Tell me a little about that.

>> KISHA THOMAS: Let me tell you a little bit about Work Pays as a whole, if you don't mind.

>> DONNA CUSTARD: Okay. Sure.

>> KISHA THOMAS: Work Pays is a group of organizations across the state with the objective of helping people with disabilities to not only find but maintain employment. This group consists of everybody from the government's Office of Disability Affairs, to local nonprofits like Catholic Charities and Families Helping Families, all of the state entities like Workforce Commission, Louisiana Rehabilitation Services, the DSS, DHH, um, the Advocacy Center, our CWIC, AWIC, we all work together in this one really big coalition to address the needs of people with disabilities across the state when it comes to employment. It gives us a chance for information sharing as a whole and for working together on different projects like the disability job fairs.

>> DONNA CUSTARD: What are those?

>> KISHA THOMAS: The job fairs are nine events that are held throughout the state during the month of October.

Historically, they have been in, um, the nine regions, Alexandria, Lafayette, Lake Charles, Shreveport, Monroe, Baton Rouge, New Orleans, Lydale and Homotibito (phonetic). They are geared towards persons with disabilities, but they are open to

the public. And these job fairs give us a great opportunity to, first of all, introduce to the business community that persons with disabilities are not only able, but willing to go to work. It gives us a chance to educate the business community as well as actually find jobs for persons with disabilities that are seeking employment.

>> DONNA CUSTARD: And from what I understand, you are actually using the tag line for the National Disability Employment Awareness Month, which I thought was a great tag line, talent has no boundaries, workforce diversity includes workers with disabilities. I really like that.

>> KISHA THOMAS: Absolutely. We thought it was quite catching and it's very fitting for what we try to do on a daily basis. You know, workforce inclusion of all diversities is important because it gives everybody an opportunity to see what that can bring and we can feed off of each other and learn from each other and I think that is important and that's the message that we try to share across the state.

>> DONNA CUSTARD: Now you mentioned that there were going to be nine events during the month of October and you mentioned the various locations where they would be. In these various locations, are they held at convention centers or hotels or is it different in every location?

>> KISHA THOMAS: It's different in every location. Some of the events are being held at hotels, some are being held at

churches, some are being held at some of the technical colleges. So across the state it varies, depends on what resources are available within that region, uh, but we have reached out to everybody, the nonprofits, the, you know, the local governor's office, I'm sorry, the local mayor's offices of Disability Affairs, their counsels and committees, to be a part of these events. So we have had really great success in putting these events where we feel they will be most accessible to the public.

>> DONNA CUSTARD: So are you partnering with other organizations to put these on?

>> KISHA THOMAS: Absolutely.

>> DONNA CUSTARD: Okay.

>> KISHA THOMAS: We are working with, um, self advocates, persons with disabilities in sales who want to be a part of the process. We are working with the different, the different government entities that exist within those regions, all of the non-profits, the faith based communities, all of those groups are coming together, the local chambers, the SHRM, which is a side of human resources managers, they are all coming together to make these job fairs possible across the state.

>> DONNA CUSTARD: That's great. Now, you said that this was open to individuals with disabilities, are there employers involved with this as well, or is this just for the potential employees to come in and learn more about how they can go about

finding a job?

>> KISHA THOMAS: Oh, no, this is an actual job fair. This is a job fair like any other that you may attend. It's not a service and resource fair, it's a job fair. People actually come and maybe get a job that day.

We have actually had the case where that has actually happened. So it's just like any other job fair, employers will be there, they will be accepting resumes, there will actually be some employers doing interviews the day of the different job fairs. But it's geared towards persons with disabilities, but it's open to everyone.

>> DONNA CUSTARD: Hmm. That's terrific. Now are there any other events surrounding these job fairs in the various locations?

>> KISHA THOMAS: Absolutely. The excitement around the job fairs this year has been so great that other events have actually popped up around the job fair.

So we have like some regions that are doing prep rallies, they are allowing people to actually prepare so that they can be ready when the job fairs come about, uh, what to wear, what to say, having their resume in a good format so that businesses can understand what they are trying to say.

Um, we have one region that is actually doing a mixer for employers before the job fair to give them the opportunity to come and be informed about the different services and things

that are provided for persons that are disabled and trying to go to work.

>> DONNA CUSTARD: Now is this the first time that the Louisiana Disability Program Navigator Initiative has held these job fairs?

>> KISHA THOMAS: Well, these job fairs are actually sponsored by the Medicaid purchase plan, the national Medicaid infrastructure grant.

>> DONNA CUSTARD: Okay.

>> KISHA THOMAS: And different years, different organizations and agencies have been the lead for the job fairs and this year the Disability Navigator Initiative is actually the lead, so we are excited about that.

>> DONNA CUSTARD: How many people are you expecting to attend these job fairs?

>> KISHA THOMAS: Last year, there was over 3,000 job seekers that were in attendance at the job fairs. That's not including the visitors, just job seekers, there were over 3,000.

>> KISHA THOMAS: Wow. How many employers did you have last year?

>> KISHA THOMAS: Um, 161 across the state.

>> DONNA CUSTARD: That's terrific, and especially in this economy, it's so necessary. With regard to the job fairs, how can people find out more information if they wanted to attend one of these around Louisiana?

>> KISHA THOMAS: Well, they can go to our Work Pays website, www.work-pays.org.

>> DONNA CUSTARD: Okay. Great. So people can register online to attend and they can see exactly where these are located and what times they start and end?

>> KISHA THOMAS: Yes.

>> DONNA CUSTARD: Great.

>> KISHA THOMAS: Visitors can register online as well as job seekers.

>> DONNA CUSTARD: That's great. We need to take a short break right now, but when we come back, we are going to continue our conversation with Kisha and we will also be bringing Christian Dabdoub who is the community work incentives -- community work incentives coordinator back on board with us. And we will be discussing the Social Security Administration's Ticket to Work Program. Stay with us. I'm Donna Custard sitting in for Ray Zardetto and this is Disabilities At Work Radio.

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>> DONNA CUSTARD: Hello, this is Donna Custard and welcome back to Disabilities At Work Radio here on VoiceAmerica's Business Network. The show this week is brought to you by the Kessler Foundation and New Jersey's Division of Disability Services.

I have been speaking with Kisha Thomas who is the Louisiana lead project coordinator for their Disability Program Navigator Initiative. Kisha and I are now joined by Christian Dabdoub who is the community work incentives coordinator. Welcome Christian.

>> CHRISTIAN DABDOUB: Hi, Donna, how are you doing? Thanks for having me today.

>> DONNA CUSTARD: Oh, thanks so much for joining us. Now I understand that there is this Ticket to Work Program, and that that's a means of assisting the Social Security Administration beneficiary's return to work. Can you explain a little bit more about the program and the various components of it?

>> CHRISTIAN DABDOUB: Absolutely. The Ticket to Work Program was put into effect, I guess about a decade now, and the purpose of the Ticket to Work Program was to help beneficiaries of social security go to work or return to work, um, without having the risk of losing their social security benefits. It used to be the case some time ago that if a person was on a certain type of social security benefit most commonly SSI or supplemental security income or SSDI, social security disability insurance, now if a person receiving those benefits went to work, they were in jeopardy of losing those benefits.

The Ticket to Work Act changed that and has given much more room and flexibility for social security beneficiaries to return to work without having that risk of having their

benefits completely cut off. Part of the way that that works is the Work Incentives Planning and Assistance Program or WIPA for short; it's another program under social security and it was created along with the Ticket to Work Act. Community Work Incentives Coordinators, or CWICs, in that WIPA program will counsel and advise social security beneficiaries on all of the specifics of what may or may not happen if that beneficiary returns to work.

Now social security has a few -- has some rules set in place. Those rules are called work incentives, and work incentives will protect a person's social security benefits while that person goes back to work or tries out a job, tests their ability to work or maintain a certain job.

>> DONNA CUSTARD: Okay. Now you threw out a bunch of acronyms, I'm glad that you explained what they were. Can you tell me a little bit more about WIPA, the Work Incentive's Planning and Assistance, how does an individual with disabilities contact WIPA to receive services?

>> CHRISTIAN DABDOUB: Well, there are a number of different avenues a person may contact WIPA for services. WIPA, in Louisiana, is a partnership of two agencies primarily, the Advocacy Center and LSU, Louisiana State University, both participate in the WIPA program. And there are work incentives coordinators from each agency as part of the state's WIPA program.

We are all active members of Work Pays, the Work Pays coalition. We are all active members on the job fair planning committees. So we are fairly well connected with other community partners and participants in the network of social services and disability rights services in Louisiana.

We also offer training throughout the state where we will meet with groups of beneficiaries or groups of other providers and we will give training sessions on the different work incentive, the different work incentives that social security has in place.

So, I guess a little bit of networking, and a little bit of shameless self-promotion kind of keeps our name out there. We do have a central in-take line where beneficiaries or other providers can contact us directly and based on their region and the state, that person will be transferred to the Community Work Incentive coordinator in his or her area.

>> DONNA CUSTARD: So is WIPA only located in Louisiana?

>> CHRISTIAN DABDOUB: No. WIPA is a nationwide project. It is a federally funded, social security program throughout the state.

>> DONNA CUSTARD: So if an individual wanted to get in touch with WIPA they could just go out online and search for WIPA in their state?

>> CHRISTIAN DABDOUB: Yes. Yes. Social security will have contact information for WIPA programs within a given state.

>> DONNA CUSTARD: Okay. So how does WIPA really incorporate into the Ticket to Work Program and into that whole dynamic?

>> CHRISTIAN DABDOUB: Okay. That's actually a really good question. It's one of the ones that we probably hear most often. Um, the way it works, in general, is that when a person becomes eligible for a social security benefit, whether it's SSI or SSDI, social security will give a ticket to that beneficiary.

>> DONNA CUSTARD: And by ticket you mean what?

>> CHRISTIAN DABDOUB: It's an actual piece of paper. It will have the information on using the ticket. But it is an actual card stock piece of paper that social security will send to the beneficiary.

>> DONNA CUSTARD: Okay.

>> CHRISTIAN DABDOUB: Um, and then what will happen from there, um, social security will also provide that individual with a list of what are called employment networks in that individual's area.

Now, an employment network can be a number of different types of agencies or organizations. Typically a state vocational rehab agency, it's probably the best example of an employment network, but, you know, local grass roots groups can become employment networks, agencies that work with specific disability types can become employment networks, and the role that an employment network plays will be to train the social

security beneficiaries or will provide material, continue education or any other tool that that beneficiary might need to go to work for the first time or to return to work after being absent for some time.

So the beneficiary will assign his or her ticket to an employment network and then that employment network will receive government funding to pay for job training or vocational rehab, additional education, assistive technology or any on the tools that that beneficiary might need in order to return to work or go to work for the first time.

>> DONNA CUSTARD: So there is a whole network of service providers involved in this and they are all looking to continue to provide the services to the individuals with disabilities while still helping them get a job and helping them prevent -- help to prevent them from losing any services that they have typically have been getting?

>> CHRISTIAN DABDOUB: Absolutely. As it kind of used to be the case, there was -- at one point, it was true that if a person receiving social security benefits went back to work, you know, he or she would lose their benefits, and that fear is still very prevalent today.

Part of what WIPA, Work Incentive Planning and Assistance, tries to do is get enough information out there to dispel that myth and get rid of some of the fear. Um, WIPA usually will get involved in the Ticket to Work process after a

client has started working with an employment network, a Community Work Incentives Coordinator will meet with a client one-on-one, look at that client's case specifics, the individual details, and work with that client to see which work incentive might be best for that client to use. And to show the client some different options that he or she may be able to take.

>> DONNA CUSTARD: Okay. So if somebody wanted to learn more about the Ticket to Work or WIPA, do you have a URL that they could go to?

>> CHRISTIAN DABDOUB: Um, yeah.

>> DONNA CUSTARD: I know we talked about Social Security Administration, but I don't know if you have a specific URL.

>> CHRISTIAN DABDOUB: Well the Louisiana WIPA program is very, very closely involved with the Work Pays coalition, and the contact information for the Louisiana WIPA project can be found through the Work Pays website, www.work-pays.org.

>> DONNA CUSTARD: Okay. Terrific. Thanks so much for the information.

We have to take another quick break, but when we come back, um, we will be talking some more with Kisha and Christian about the work that they are doing in Louisiana. And we have been talking all day today about Louisiana's Disability Program Navigator Initiative. We will next talk about some extracurricular activities that are geared toward people,

helping people with disabilities prepare as they seek for employment.

But before we go to the break, let me invite everyone listening to Disabilities At Work Radio to join our tream at DisabilitiesAt and also friend us on Facebook at Disabilities At Work Radio. If any of our listeners have comments or suggestions, we always welcome those and you can e-mail them to us at info@disabilitiesatwork.org. I'm Donna Custard and this is Disabilities At Work Radio.

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>> You are listening to Disabilities At Work Radio. We welcome questions and comments from our listening audience, which you can send to us on Twitter at DisabilitiesAt or on our Facebook site, Disabilities At Work. Also visit disabilitiesatwork.org. Welcome back.

>> DONNA CUSTARD: We are back on VoiceAmerica Business Network. This is Disabilities At Work Radio and I'm Donna Custard sitting in for Ray Zardetto.

Today's show is sponsored by the Kessler Foundation, which is dedicated to improving the lives of the disabled. It does so through the rehabilitation research done by the Kessler Foundation Research Center and through the work of the Kessler Program Center, which prepares the disabled for the demands of

the workplace. For more information, please visit www.kesslerinstitute.org.

Also sponsoring our show today is the New Jersey Division of Disabilities Services, which is part of the State of New Jersey's division of Human Services. The division focuses on helping people who have become disabled as adults so they can live more independently in their communities.

Disabilities At Work Radio thanks both the Kessler Foundation and the New Jersey Division of Disabilities Services for their consideration in sponsoring this week's show.

I have been speaking with Kisha Thomas and Christian Dabdoub from the Louisiana Workforce Commission Disability Program Navigator Initiative. Welcome back to the show Kisha and Christian.

>> KISHA THOMAS: Thanks.

>> DONNA CUSTARD: We have been talking with Kisha and Christian today about the job fairs that are going to be held during Disability Employment Awareness Month, which is in October. And we have also been talking about a variety of other initiatives, such as WIPA and WIS and work incentives. So now we are back and I want to talk a little bit more about some of the extracurricular activities that you are going to be holding surrounding the job fairs.

>> CHRISTIAN DABDOUB: Well, first, let me say that we haven't had anything to do with these events, the excitement in our

state around the job fairs this year has just been so great that other agencies and organizations have volunteered to have these different prep rallies and, um, business mixers and luncheons and things of that nature around the job fairs. Um, so it's exciting to us and it's encouraging that these, these entities are offering their resources to make these different things possible.

But the prep rallies will be, first of all, an opportunity for job seekers to come out and get a resume and get their resume written and typed up and put on resume paper and ready to go for the day of, to learn what they should wear to the actual job fairs. Because, as I said before, interviews will be conducted at the job fairs, so we have organizations like Dress For Success that is coming out to assist clients with what they should actually wear.

We are going to make this fun. We are going to have fashion shows in some of the areas. The dos and don'ts, what do you wear, what don't you wear. Um, the University of Phoenix is going to come out and help us with the resume writing. We are going to have prep interviews, things that you say in an interview, things that you don't.

A lot of people with disabilities think they have to go to an interview and talk about their disability and what they can't do. And we want to encourage them to go to the interview and sell themselves on what they can do and where their

abilities lie and not where they are lacking. So that's what we are going to use our prep rallies to do, to actually to get our job seekers ready to go to work.

>> DONNA CUSTARD: Yeah, that's so important. And I love that you call it prep rallies. Because it sounds like pep rally, but it's in preparation. So obviously these prep rallies would take place prior to the Work Pays job fairs, correct?

>> KISHA THOMAS: Absolutely. Some of them are happening about a week or so before to give the job seekers ready -- time to get ready for the actual job fairs.

>> DONNA CUSTARD: So are they going to be held in the same locations as the job fairs?

>> KISHA THOMAS: No. Some of them will and some of them will not. But all that information, again, will be on the Work Pays website. So anybody can go there and get that information.

>> DONNA CUSTARD: Will they need to register in order to participate in the prep rallies?

>> KISHA THOMAS: No. You do not need to register to participate in the prep rallies. You just need to show up on the day of.

>> DONNA CUSTARD: Oh, that's great. So you said, you mentioned for a second there that it's important that they go in knowing what they can and what they -- well, not can and cannot talk, but what they should and shouldn't be talking about during the job interviews. Why it is so much more

important, do you think, for an individual with a disability to be prepared for these interviews?

>> KISHA THOMAS: I think it's important for anyone going to an interview to be prepared. But so often we find with people with disabilities forget about talking about their strengths and instead talk about their disability. So often persons with disabilities are so capable of doing the job, you know, they just forget to mention their strengths and what they are actually able to do. So we are trying to use the prep rallies as an opportunity to remind them of that. We say that every day as we are meeting with clients, but we want to do this on a larger scale for the prep rallies and I think it will give us an opportunity to do that.

Some of the regions are focusing more on their businesses for their prep rallies and inviting businesses to come out and get information about hiring persons with disabilities because it doesn't matter if we have the clients right to go and willing and able to go to work and we don't have businesses that are ready to hire them, then, you know, it doesn't really work out.

So some of the areas are definitely concentrating on their businesses and making sure to get them the information about the possibilities of hiring persons with disabilities.

>> DONNA CUSTARD: What would the business case be for diversity hiring?

>> KISHA THOMAS: Well, the first thing would be, of course, that people with disabilities are more likely to come to work on time to be invested in that company because they have something to prove. They want to show that they are able to do the job. They are dedicated and motivated and they actually want to go to work. Um, but at the end of the day we all know that businesses are worried about their bottom line.

>> DONNA CUSTARD: Mm-hmm.

>> KISHA THOMAS: Federal contractors are required to hire persons with disabilities, but all businesses have the opportunity to get work opportunity tax credits for hiring persons are disabilities, um, and this could in any way affect anyone's bottom line. I know at -- around tax season I get very nervous, I'm sure many businesses do, because everybody is looking for as many tax deductions as possible. And this is a great way for businesses to get tax credit and at the same time invest in their communities and in the people that live in them.

>> DONNA CUSTARD: Now you mentioned that there were some businesses coming out to help with Dressing For Success, as you mentioned, the University of Phoenix is coming out to help with resume writing. Are there other businesses involved to help with the preparation, because it is a prep rally, with the preparation of the potential employees?

>> KISHA THOMAS: Yes. We have Goodwill Industries that is

coming out. The Society of Human Resources Managers Volunteers for America. We have some sororities and fraternities that are volunteering their time. Different universities are sending some of their students to assist. So it's definitely a community effort and we are so excited to just be a part of it.

>> DONNA CUSTARD: And I'm assuming this is for people of all ages, this isn't just for right out-of-college or young 20s, early 30s, you are talking about individuals of all shapes and sizes, of all ages.

>> KISHA THOMAS: Absolutely. You can be 16, but job ready. That's the important word there, job ready. Um, and if you are willing and able to go to work, we want to you come and be a part of not only the job fairs, but the prep rallies as well.

>> DONNA CUSTARD: Oh, that's great. So with regard to the prep rallies, you mentioned that some of them are going to be in the same location as the actual job fairs, but others are going to be in other locations. And, again, you can get that information specifically from www.work-pays.org, correct?

>> KISHA THOMAS: Exactly.

>> DONNA CUSTARD: And they don't need to register for these.

>> KISHA THOMAS: No, but they can register for the actual job fairs, because it will give us an idea of how many people we are expecting for our WIS events, which is the work --

>> CHRISTIAN DABDOUB: Donna, the WIS events are another component of the job fairs.

>> DONNA CUSTARD: And what are the WIS events?

>> CHRISTIAN DABDOUB: WIS events are Work Incentive Seminars. They are kind of lecture sessions where the WIPA program will have its community work incentives coordinators give about an hour-long presentation on some of the different work incentives available to social security beneficiaries.

Um, if you are a social security beneficiary and you want to know how your benefits could be affected by returning to work, um, if you want to find out what kind of options you have, what your flexibility is, you can come to one of these WIS seminars and hear one of the community work incentives coordinators go through some of the options available.

There is a lot of good information there. Um, some of it pertains to beneficiaries of social security who are receiving SSI, Supplemental Security Income, or SSDI, the Social Security Disability Insurance. Um, we will be able to tell some people how they might be able to keep their healthcare. We can show them what might happen to a social security payment. It really depends on the type, but there is a lot of good information if you are a social security beneficiary returning to work. A lot of stuff that we can use to teach a person how they can make the most of a trial work period, Medicaid purchase plan, extended Medicaid or Medicare options. A lot of good information there. And you can register for the WIS event at the same place that you can

register for the job fair. And, again, that's at the Work Pays website.

>> DONNA CUSTARD: And are the WIS seminars and the prep rallies concurrent?

>> CHRISTIAN DABDOUB: The WIS seminar, they are going to be held the same day at the same location as the job fairs.

>> DONNA CUSTARD: Okay, so they are a little bit later than the prep rallies?

>> CHRISTIAN DABDOUB: Yeah, they will be the day of. There will be, uh, several sessions and we will have a schedule with times for those sessions posted at the job fairs on the day of.

>> DONNA CUSTARD: For the prep rallies, what do people need to bring with them to be prepared to participate in those, anything?

>> KISHA THOMAS: They need to just show up. Just bring themselves and we will help them with everything else.

>> DONNA CUSTARD: Okay. And with the Work Incentives Seminars, the WIS seminars, is there anything they need to bring to that as far as what benefits they are already receiving?

>> CHRISTIAN DABDOUB: Yeah. If a person comes to a WIS seminar knowing the type of benefit that they are receiving, it will certainly help them pay attention to the more relevant parts of the presentation. Not everything that will be discussed is going to apply to everyone that comes.

>> DONNA CUSTARD: But they can pick and choose what is relevant to them?

>> CHRISTIAN DABDOUB: Right. Right. And knowing what kind of benefit they receive will certainly help them. Note pad and pencil is definitely valuable. People will probably have some questions afterwards. And our community work incentives coordinators will be available for a little bit of one-on-one questioning after the seminar. We won't be able to meet with everyone for, you know, a very long period of time, one-on-one, but we will be able to answer a few questions and give the beneficiaries information on how to contact us further and what kind of steps they might want to take from there.

>> DONNA CUSTARD: That's terrific. I have been talking with Kisha Thomas and Christian Dabdoub from the Louisiana Workforce Commission's Disability Program Navigator Initiative today. And we are going to take a quick break, but when we come back we will be talking a little bit more with our guests about how this organization works with and engages the business community. We touched a little bit upon that with regard to the prep rallies, but we will delve into that a little bit deeper.

Stay with us. I'm Donna Custard, and this is Disabilities At Work Radio.

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Welcome back.

>> DONNA CUSTARD: Welcome back to Disabilities At Work Radio. Remember that Disabilities At Work can be heard each Wednesday at noon Eastern Time on VoiceAmerica's Business Network.

We have been discussing Louisiana's Workforce Commission's Disability Navigator Program Initiative and how it's reaching out to people throughout the state to help people with disabilities obtain employment. And I have been speaking with Kisha Thomas and Christian Dabdoub. Kisha is with Louisiana's Workforce Commission Disability Navigator Program, and Christian is with the Advocacy Center and he works as a work incentives coordinator.

I'd like to ask both of you how you engage the business community. We touched upon it a little bit in the last segment when we were talking about the prep rallies and the work incentives seminars, but what else are you doing with the business community to get them involved in what you are doing?

>> CHRISTIAN DABDOUB: Well, one of the things that we do with businesses is we will invite them to our Work Pays meetings. So, different businesses can come and see the different support groups and the support network that is built around some of our clients. And also just to get an idea of how many of our clients, actually many of our clients are members of Work Pays,

um, how they are able to engage the different parts of the community and kind of showcase some of their abilities.

>> DONNA CUSTARD: Now, are they -- how are you enticing them to be part of the job fairs that you are putting on in October?

>> CHRISTIAN DABDOUB: I don't know really think it's taking too much enticement. As far as the businesses, I think there are several businesses who have historically been involved and want to keep up that tradition. Others have been invited and I don't know if maybe Kisha is blackmailing them on the side, but. . .

>> DONNA CUSTARD: (Laughter).

>> KISHA THOMAS: We are really fortunate this year because we have so many businesses that are reaching out to us to be involved with the job fairs and we are trying to really sweeten the deal and make it enticing for them. We are offering many symposiums this year where we are either going to provide lunch or breakfast for our employers and when I say lunch or breakfast, I mean a real lunch or breakfast and real Louisiana cuisine. We will have some [inaudible] and maybe some gumbo where we are going to entice them to stay and listen to some of the information about the tax credits that are available, about the different accommodations that can be made for hiring persons with disabilities. And while they are there at our mini symposiums, as we are calling it, the lenya [phonetic] where in Louisiana means a little something extra.

>> DONNA CUSTARD: I know that term.

>> KISHA THOMAS: We have great door prizes. I mean, some of the regions have flat screen televisions, iPods, uh, really great stuff to entice our businesses to stay and get educated about the benefits of actually hiring persons with disabilities, because we feel like once they know that this isn't going to adversely affect your bottom line, this may actually do something good for you and your business, the case for hiring persons with disabilities won't even be an issue any more. They won't be worried about whether or not it's going to cost them more for, um, making the accommodations that are necessary to hire these really great willing and able people for positions that they have available.

>> DONNA CUSTARD: Let's talk about that a little bit more. Are you finding that businesses are concerned about the cost of providing accommodations for people with disabilities?

>> KISHA THOMAS: Absolutely. You know, like I said before, at the end of the day, businesses are worried about the bottom line. You know, they want to make sure that hiring this person won't negatively affect their bottom line; they are in business to make money, to make a profit. And we want to make sure that they understand that when they hire this person, these people with disabilities, that their bottom line will go up, like, that they will make more money, they won't have to shell out additional dollars in order to provide these accommodations.

There are so many agencies and organizations across our state that will assist with the accommodations, getting it done, find creative ways in order to make things happen. So, we are out in the community every day saying this to businesses, but the mini symposiums, the lenya [phonetic] will give us the opportunity to definitely drive that point home.

>> DONNA CUSTARD: Now you said that the businesses that hire people with disabilities won't see their bottom line go down, they will see it go up. Explain that to me a little bit more.

>> KISHA THOMAS: You know, persons with disabilities, such as myself, you know, we have - unfortunately, we have something to prove, that we are able to do the job on a daily basis. You know, a lot of people with disabilities that didn't work before, maybe worked and had to stay home for a period of time, are excited about getting back into the business community and into the work community about, you know, having that interaction on a daily basis with individuals that they may have not had before because they weren't able to go to work. You know, I have a lot of people that are calling individuals with disabilities about being involved with the job fairs and they just like the opportunity to be working at doing something. It gives them a sense of purpose, a sense of belonging to that work community.

So it's those things that we bring to the workplace that other people may take for granted. You know, if I don't like

this job I'll quit and get another one. Well, people with disabilities know, it's kind of hard. I like to say that we are in a recession now across the country, but persons with disabilities, we know that feeling firsthand because when the rest of the country catches a cold with this recession, we are -- we have pneumonia because we always have a cold. So it gets really, really bad for us when a recession like this one happens.

>> DONNA CUSTARD: Now, you mentioned also that during these business symposiums you are going to be talking about some of the tax credits that might be available. Can you talk a little bit more about that?

>> KISHA THOMAS: Well, of course, the work action opportunity tax credit, it is available and the disabled access tax credit. You know, we want to make sure that businesses understand that these are actual dollars that the federal government is making available to you through the IRS for giving persons with disabilities an opportunity to go to work.

>> DONNA CUSTARD: Okay. Now are you finding that companies are willing to listen to your message about hiring individuals with disabilities?

>> KISHA THOMAS: Yeah, I think they are. You know, but, you know, I think at first, at first it's kind of hard because they don't see the benefits there. But once we have that captive audience with events like the mini symposiums and we are able

to definitely bring that message home, um, but initially sometimes it's hard, but we don't let that stop us. We continuously -- if we don't get in the first time we will go back again. So we just try to make sure they understand that the benefit is there and we are ready to go to work.

>> DONNA CUSTARD: And I'm sure you are looking at both large and small employers, or do you look more towards one than the other?

>> CHRISTIAN DABDOUB: I think we look at employers of all types and all sizes. Um, there really is no limit to the type of businesses that we will go after to try to get involved.

>> DONNA CUSTARD: And how are you reaching out to these businesses?

>> KISHA THOMAS: We are knocking on their doors. (Laughter). You know, within the Workforce Commission, we have a group of people that their primary job is to go out into the business community and make initial contacts with the employers, they are called our business service representatives. And they have allowed us to tag along at times or be a part of the packets that they present to employers and we go out on our own and just try and meet with anybody that will listen.

>> DONNA CUSTARD: And what's the message?

>> KISHA THOMAS: We are willing and we are able.

>> DONNA CUSTARD: But what's the message that you give to the employers to get them to come on board?

>> KISHA THOMAS: Across the board we try to provide them information about the tax credits. For, um, federal contractors, we try to remind them that this is a part of the actual regulations; the contract that you signed to get this -- to get this contract to provide these services for the federal government says you have to hire persons with disabilities. So we make sure to remind them of that. Um, we educate them again about the accessibility stuff, you know, reasonable accommodations isn't that hard to do. And we make sure that they understand that.

>> CHRISTIAN DABDOUB: And I think another way that we can kind of get that message across is kind of leading by example. Now most of the agencies that are involved with the job fairs, most of the agencies are members of Work Pays, a lot of the employees of those agencies are persons with disabilities. Um, so a lot of these agencies, you know, they are hiring people with disabilities in that regard and we are serving as an example. And seeing that a lot of these employees are interacting with the businesses that we are trying to bring into this group, are, you know, incredibly competent and incredibly capable. I think it goes a long way in showing that persons with disabilities are, you know, just as competent and capable as everyone else. It does a lot to take away some of the stereotypes that people might hear or think of when they hear about a person having a disability.

>> DONNA CUSTARD: And there is so many invisible disabilities as well. So, there is -- it's not always something that is very obvious and sometimes it can be just a minor disability that doesn't significantly impair a person from doing their job.

>> CHRISTIAN DABDOUB: It might not be something that you could spot walking down the street, you know, you wouldn't even know. And I think that is kind of an issue just with, you know, with the nature that a disability community, there is still a lot of misunderstanding, there is still a lot of, kind of suspicion, doubt --

>> DONNA CUSTARD: Fear.

>> CHRISTIAN DABDOUB: Yeah, fear. And it's all very -- it's there. It's very rampant and you know the more exposure that people and businesses have to this community, the more they will see that's not the case. It breaks down a lot of those stereotypes.

>> DONNA CUSTARD: But I think what you are doing really brings together all of the players and all of the pieces. You are providing these job fairs for individuals with disabilities, but it's open to the general public. You are helping to prepare them with your prep rallies and you are bringing in organizations and businesses to help prepare them for the interviews. You are having these, um, seminars for the businesses to help to explain to them why they should be hiring

individuals with disabilities, and you are also having these work incentives seminars with the individuals that are participating in the job fairs. So you have brought together everyone together and it kind of fits together all like pieces of a puzzle. So, kudos to you for doing such a great job with this.

>> KISHA THOMAS: We are thrilled. And I say we're thrilled and it's like a fire that started with, you know, a few simple people with simple ideas and its spread like wildfire across the state and it's really exciting to see. We are thrilled. It's amazing. The energy is so, so amazing.

>> DONNA CUSTARD: Well that's -- this is great, thank you so much for your participation today as my guests on our show. And if you want more information about any of the initiatives we spoke of today, visit www.work-pays.org.

Thank you again to our sponsors, the Kessler Foundation and New Jersey Division of Disabilities Services.

Next Wednesday at noon Eastern Time we will be back with another show exploring ideas, initiatives, innovations, all involving the workplace and people with disabilities. Until then, I'm Donna Custard sitting in for Ray Zardetto, and this is Disabilities At Work Radio.

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