>> Philip Kahn-Pauli: All right well good afternoon everyone. My name is Philip Kahn-Pauli. I am the Policy and Practices Director for RespectAbility, a national organization dedicated to fighting stigmas and advancing opportunities for people with disabilities. My pronouns are he him his, and to provide you a visual description, I am a 30-something white guy with light brown hair, glasses, a scraggly beard and a blue suit and blue jacket. And I'm so delighted to be here today with some really preeminent experts, some thought leaders, and some real -- some truly transformative personalities who are really driving federal policy forward and really impacting in a very positive and transformational way the lives of millions of people with disabilities. Today's webinar, as promised, is entitled Federal Policy Priorities on Disability Employment: NDEAM 2021 and Beyond. This past month, October, was National Disability Employment Awareness Month, an annual celebration of the work, talent and the value of workers with disabilities. And that celebration wrapped up on October 31st, but the work never ends. And to really kind of carry on and to give us a sense of, like, what are the federal government's priorities around getting millions of people with disabilities into the workforce -- back into the workforce, trained up, better educated, I have pulled together, really, the people who are -- I am humbled to know. I am always eager to hear what they have to say and listen very intently. And so I hope all of our audience members will do the same today.

I am going to be starting today with Taryn Mackenzie Williams, who is the Assistant Secretary of Labor for Disability Employment Policy. In this position, she advises the Secretary of Labor, Marty Walsh, on how the Department's priorities and policies impact people with disabilities. And she leads the incredible team of the Office of Disability Employment Policy. Before ODEP and before working for the Biden administration, she was the managing director for the poverty prosperity program at the Center for American Progress, working on a variety of progressive policies to address the broad range of anti-property strategies. And then before that, she worked at ODEP, so she has a long history of really transformational leadership in and out of government impacting social security and medicaid, civil rights. And even before that, when I first met her she was working for the White House, she and I bumped into each other at -- it was a NCIL briefing about disability issues way back, and I think it was 2012. And I remember meeting you and knowing that you were somebody who was going places. And I'm humbled to know you and I'm humbled to kind of be learning from you today. Likewise, holding up the educational side of things is Carol Dobak, who is delegated the authority to perform the functions and duties of the Commissioner of Rehabilitation Services Administration within the Office of Special Education and Rehabilitation Services at the Department of Education. Carol also serves as the Acting Deputy Commissioner and the director of the state monitoring and program improvement division. She actually started working at RSA in 2000 with responsibility for the client assistance program and protection and advocacy. In 2004 she made the jump to the office of policy and planning in the office of the assistant secretary, which oversees RSA's programs. And in 2006 she became the chief of the VR program unit. And then in 2016 she became the director of the SMPID. And she she's been really a transformational leader in her time with VR. And so we're gonna start with Taryn, we're gonna jump over to Carol, and then with any luck we'll be joined by Katy Neas, also from the Department of Education, and I'll do her introduction when she joins us. But for now, Taryn Mackenzie Williams, the one and only Secretary of Labor for Disability Employment Policy, take it away!

>> Taryn Mackenzie Williams: Thank you for that introduction. I'm, as you heard, Taryn Mackenzie Williams. I am a black woman, light skinned, I have an afro. I'm sitting in a room with blue walls, and I'm wearing light clear glasses. And I am a 40 year old woman. And good afternoon and thank you for having me. As you learned, I'm the assistant secretary for disability employment policy, and in that role I lead ODEP, as we call it in the US Department of Labor. And we are an agency that was founded 20 years ago to promote the employment of people with disabilities by working across policies, programs, federal agencies and external stakeholders. And I can say that this type of engagement is essential for ODEP's work, and we are always looking for opportunities to strengthen our relationships with the community. And so I'm so happy to be here today. ODEP has four key priorities under this administration: ensuring an inclusive recovery from the pandemic, advancing equity, promoting competitive integrated employment, and supporting successful youth transitions into the workforce. So I'd like to spend my limited time highlighting a number of ODEP initiatives that are dedicated to promoting competitive integrated employment, both for adults and for youth. And so I just want to check here, Philip, how much time do I have?

>> Philip Kahn-Pauli: You've got 10 minutes.

>> Taryn Mackenzie Williams: All right good, that's about what I planned but just wanted to make sure. So as I noted, we are a key federal agency charged with developing and promoting policies and practices that support the competitive integrated employment of people with disabilities, including those with significant disabilities. And our work reflects the recommendations of the WIOA advisory committee on increasing competitive integrated employment for individuals with disabilities. And we are committed to ensuring that people with disabilities are paid comparable wages and benefits as people without disabilities, integrated into work locations with people without disabilities, and afforded equal opportunities for advancement. Through the national expansion of employment opportunities network or NEON, the NEON initiative, ODEP is partnering with five national provider organizations or NPLs – ACCSES, ANCOR, APSE, the Arc of the US, and SourceAmerica – to implement a national strategic plan to increase competitive integrated employment. The plan includes training and technical assistance to local provider organizations within their national membership networks. And in 2022, as many as 75 local providers will receive training and technical assistance through NEON. ODEP has also produced multiple guides, reports and webinars on employment-first, systems change, provider transformation, interagency coordination, rate reimbursement and restructuring, employer engagement, mental health, seamless transition, data collection and so much more. And these and other resources are available on our competitive integrated employment webpage on ODEP's website at dol.gov. We've also recently collected information on the impact of the pandemic for people with disabilities, in order to document emerging practices that have potential to increase competitive integrated employment. Researchers conducted interviews with national and international leadership groups knowledgeable about CIE and the impacts of the pandemic. ODEP's advancing state policy integration for recovery and employment, or ASPIRE initiative, is supporting states in aligning policy program and funding infrastructures to scale up evidence-based supported employment services for workers with mental health conditions. And the lessons learned from ASPIRE will help other states, federal agencies and service providers adopt proven methods to increase gainful employment for a population that we know is underserved. And I'll just note here that this is work led by one of our senior policy advisors, Richard Davis, who is such an incredible asset to our team at ODEP. We are also working to support youth and young adults in transition to employment, and we do that through our Center for Advancing Policy on Employment for youth, or CAPE Youth. It conducts policy research and it disseminates policies to help youth with disabilities launch careers and overcome barriers. And we are just now completing a project that explored various options for conducting new pilot programs or demonstrations targeted to youth participating in Supplemental Security Income program, or SSI, to support their successful transitions to competitive integrated employment as adults. And I just want to, again, thank everyone at RespectAbility for your commitment to increasing competitive integrated employment for all people with disabilities. My ODEP colleagues -- I will say just a few more words about them. As I've reflected on coming back to ODEP, a place where I spent a decade of my career in federal service, something that I find most enjoyable is again being among such talented and committed subject matter experts on all -- areas of policy that touch on disability employment. So when I say that my ODEP colleagues and I look forward to collaborating with you, I want you to know that I'm really talking about the collective that I have the pleasure of working with every day. So I'll stop there, I know we'll have some questions at a later point.

>> Philip Kahn-Pauli: Fabulous, thank you so much Taryn and that's exactly why I wanted to structure this panel today was because ODEP, OSEARS, RSA, there's so many different agencies that are out there that are doing such good work that -- particularly for people who are at the self-advocate level or working at the state level, it's kind of hard to keep track of everything that's going on in Washington and all of the good work that is being done at the highest levels to really drive employment. And I was just gonna say I was looking up priorities to help more states move forward on competitive integrated employment just today, and so, they got a lot of work and I've taken the liberty of starting to drop some links from ODEP's website in the chat box. If people would like to know more, go and check those out, whether it's ASPIRE or the CAPE youth initiative or ODEP's work on competitive integrated employment. I will say I will answer Amy Newlast's questions before I go to Carol Dobak. Unfortunately we are -- we do not have our ASL interpreter today, I am so sorry, scheduling problem happened, but we have open captions and it's the best we can do, I'm so sorry. I do apologize. But we'll share transcripts, and a recording of this webinar will be posted on RespectAbility's website next week along with more resources and information. So to pivot I wanna -- ODEP has such a huge mission and I wanna pivot now to talk to Carol Dobak from the Rehabilitation Services Administration. RSA is part of the Department of Education and has a very dedicated focus and a really tremendously impactful work helping states -- helping fund for state vocational rehabilitation programs a hundred and one-year-old system for getting people with disabilities into the workforce that began out of World War I, which I'm very cognizant of given tomorrow is remembrance day also known as Veterans' Day. And so VR has been around for 101 years and Carol Dobak is leading the work of RSA into the -- 21st year of the 21st century. And so Carol, can you talk to me about RSA, your work, your leadership and what's going on with VR, people with disabilities and the modern workforce?

>> Carol Dobak: I certainly can Philip, and thank you for recognizing the long-lasting viability that the VR program has had in its ability to secure employment for individuals with disabilities over more than a century. I have not been with the program that long but I will just describe myself briefly for all of you. I'm -- I will say -- I'm middled age. I'm not going to pinpoint my age as closely as Taryn did, but I'm a middle-aged white woman. My hair at this stage is a somewhat light reddish brown, and I am sitting in the library of my 150 year old home in the heart of Baltimore that has green walls, painting on a wall, there are a couple of windows behind me with draperies and wood. And I am currently today wearing a red dress and jacket. So from there -- I will tell you, yes, that the main work of RSA, the Rehabilitation Services Administration, is to support through monitoring technical assistance the vocational rehabilitation program, those state agencies that deliver those critical services to individuals with disabilities so that they can obtain competitive integrated employment. We also fund a number of discretionary grants that support professionals in the field as well as look to improve the vocational rehabilitation program and its services. But again, given time on this panel, I am going to focus on our vocational rehabilitation program as I talk about the effects that the pandemic has had on that program, some of the trends we've seen through our data related to the effect of the pandemic, as well as -- some of the really strong and positive performance we are seeing as of late in the program and we can look forward to in the future. So I first want to say, just as Taryn did, we at Rehabilitation Services Administration are -- take very seriously the call for diversity equity inclusion, as evidenced in the President's executive order, as well as for the full equity and inclusion in society of individuals with disabilities through competitive integrated employment. And I want to recognize that many of the individuals served in the VR program also experience a host of other barriers to employment. And for example, our data from program year 2020 -- and when I refer to program year or PY 2020 I am speaking about the period from July of 2020 through June 30th of 2021 this year. So in program year 2020, we see as we have seen -- has been the case in several years past since the implementation of WIOA, that a majority of the individuals served in the VR program come from low-income households and are among the long-term unemployed. We also know that a third of the individuals served in the VR program are English language learners, experience levels of low literacy or other cultural barriers to employment. So that's just a picture of who is actually being served in the VR program. Before I move on to describing the VR program in some more detail, I do want to say that we most recently honored our commitment to competitive integrated employment, diversity and inclusion for individuals with disabilities by celebrating in National Disability Employment Month through the issuance of a set of frequently asked questions that provide guidance on the Department's interpretation of the integrated location criteria and the definition of competitive integrated employment. These FAQs make clear that it is the purpose of the VR program to assist individuals with disabilities to achieve competitive integrated employment, and they provide important guidance to VR agencies that will help VR counselors and VR agency professionals identify high quality competitive integrated employment opportunities for people with disabilities, so that students, youth and adults with disabilities no longer feel that their only option for employment is non-competitive and segregated employment. And you can find those frequently asked questions on our website, rsa.ed.gov. And I encourage you all to read them, and if you have questions about them, please do not hesitate to reach out to me at RSA. And I believe you can share my contact information, Philip, with the audience if you would like.

>> Philip Kahn-Pauli: I will definitely take the advantage -- I will definitely take that privilege and do so, thank you very much. And I also really -- I really appreciate you bringing up and sharing -- your agency's commitment to issues of diversity equity and inclusion. Those are all issues that have -- always been important but have not always gotten the wider recognition in the disability space that they should have. And so I think it's really interesting to see you bringing together the socioeconomic differences of VR clients, the intersectional identities of -- that people with disabilities bring to VR when they're getting services. And it also -- you mentioned English language learners as being a component of VR clients. And that is so important because that creates another layer of barriers and another layer of planning that needs to be thought of when agencies provide services, when programs are intended to help people with disabilities, especially people of color with disabilities enter the workforce. And so you're living in your direct way -- kind of the need for advancing disability justice very practically. So I'm gonna start diving into the moderator questions that I have the chance to ask. And so, you know, the big thing -- and this will give some time for hopefully Katy to join us so she should be here any moment. But talking about the moment we're in, I was so excited when I read the most recent jobs report from the Bureau of Labor Statistics and the report from nTIDE, the researchers at the University of New Hampshire and supported by the Kessler Foundation. I was so excited to actually see that labor force participation rates for people with disabilities are going up, and they're going up high --and they're now higher than they were pre-pandemic. And anywhere you go there's "for wanted" or hiring signs. And the evidence that I'm hearing anecdotally from working with folks at the state level, working with former fellows, working with other agencies is that -- people need -- it's not just that people need warm bodies, employers want people with disabilities. And so for Taryn and for Carol -- I'm really curious, what's your perspective on how agencies and advocates and nonprofit organizations -- how can we take advantage of this current economic moment to really get more people with disabilities into the workforce, support employers to better understand what it means to hire people with disabilities, and really show that return on investment that comes from making disability a priority in inclusive hiring?

>> Carol Dobak: Taryn, would you like to go first or --

>> Taryn Mackenzie Williams: Sure, I'll start. Thanks Carol. I would say that's a great observation, Philip, but I would want to bring a couple of things in response to that. And first is something that I know that we're all witnessing in this moment, which is that the workplace has been transformed during the pandemic. Remote and flexible working arrangements have become the norm in many occupations and industries. I say many, certainly not all, and this can expand opportunities for many people with disabilities, such as individuals for whom transportation was a barrier to employment. To the extent that these changes in employer expectations become the norm, this may increase opportunities for, again I would say some workers with disabilities. And this may be a part of what we're seeing in the recent employer numbers. I'd also note that ODEP, the Department of Labor and the administration as a whole are committed to an inclusive recovery, to building back better. And this will involve multiple strategies, including career pathways and apprenticeships for quality jobs, opportunities in new industries, especially in clean energy, and -- improving accommodations and supports that enable people with disabilities to work. But I would maybe, in close -- really want to stress that even though we've seen recent improvements in the labor force participation of people with disabilities -- and indeed it is good news --we really should not lose sight of the fact that the labor force participation of working age people with disabilities is still much lower than that of those without disabilities. And the gap in labor force participation has been well over 40 percent since 2009 when these data first became available. So any increase in the proportion of working age people with disabilities who are working is good, but the enormous gap that remains in some ways is the more important point here.

>> Philip Kahn-Pauli: Absolutely. And before we pivot to Carol, I'll just kind of comment -- I think there's -- there's several gaps that we need to focus on. I think there's several gaps that I think qualify as kind of the metric for success when it comes to disability employment. You've got the gap between people with and without disabilities. But at the same time among people with disabilities, I think it's really critical that federal agencies, states, advocates really continue to look at the gap among people with disabilities across different demographic categories. Like, even when things were pre-pandemic and things seemed to be going really well for the disability community overall, the employment rate for African Americans with disabilities was only 32 percent. Poverty rates amongst people of color with disabilities are significantly higher overall. And so recognizing that intersectional identity needs to be that second layer of -- directed impact and kind of -- really, if you define the problem, you can help solve the problem. And I think defining the problem by recognizing demographic diversity and -- changing populations is a big part of it. Now, that being said, Carol, how can we take advantage of this present moment and capitalize on the economics of today?

>> Carol Dobak: Sure, sure. And some of what I have to say -- it will echo what you heard in Taryn's response to the question, but more focused directly on VR. I think we all recognize that the pandemic did have a significant effect on the ability of VR agencies to deliver services, as well as to work with their individuals and employers to identify employment opportunities when we were in the height of the pandemic. Now that we're moving out, as you've pointed out, Philip, there are improvements in the economy, as well as we see people returning to the workforce, seeking employment, and all of that is great. We do anticipate that people with disabilities are going to be returning to the VR program as well to seek support as they look for employment. And we're going to be looking very closely at our program year 2021 data to identify those trends moving forward, program year 2021 being beginning this past July. So we do know that as the VR agencies had time to adjust during the pandemic and work with their providers, they did find ways to deliver a whole host of VR services remotely, including -- not just career counseling, but training, vocational adjustment, disability adjustment services, as well as even surprisingly supported employment and job coaching services. They found very innovative and creative ways to do that. Like Taryn mentioned, I think we will see some of those services and service delivery models being maintained moving forward, and they can be particularly beneficial and VR agencies have told us so for individuals who live in rural areas or where, for other reasons, transportation options may be difficult. That is also true for the expanded opportunities in the economy as a result of hybrid work environments and telework, and the opportunities that that can provide for people with disabilities, and -- as well as expanded opportunities in the economy for individuals who are now categorized as our essential workers, opportunities that are going to be provided and supported under the Build Back Better and other legislation in the caregiving economy, the -- the green economy, STEM fields, etcetera. All of that provides a wealth of employment opportunities and we're going to be looking to expand it and improving -- performance data around individuals involved in the program, receiving services in the program, as well as the outcomes they achieve -- as we move forward.

>> Philip Kahn-Pauli: Gotcha, perfect. Well thank you so much Carol, and that was one of those things that came up when I was listening to Taryn talking about how remote work has expanded but -- how things are going on, as this infrastructure package is rolled out, if we expand broadband access, that can -- if we can get high-speed internet in the hands of people who have never had it before, that opens up a lot of economic opportunities. But there needs to be those training programs out there and people need to be able to be trained up and skilled up to get those jobs. And so I've gotta -- I wanna shift things up a little bit. I've got a question from Eric Dibner and I'll put it to the both of you. "What potential new funding may be coming to states to support disability employment?"

>> Carol Dobak: Okay, well I'll start this time, if I can Taryn, and -- as many people are aware RSA has a significant amount of funding that is left over from the VR program funding. It's -- it's funding that states are unable to expend in the year of appropriation through the re-allotment process, as it is described in the statute in our regulations. They return that money to RSA, and then Congress, rather than letting that -- the use of -- those funds lapse, gives us the authority each year through the appropriations legislation to use that money to support, very basically, competitive integrated employment for individuals with disabilities. In fiscal year 2021, which ended on September 30th, we were able to use approximately 110 million dollars in excess VR program funding to support eight career advancement projects. Those are discretionary grant projects that 22 or 24 VR agencies, in partnership with employers, other workforce agencies, schools, etcetera, and through those partnerships competed for. We were able to award eight, and those projects are designed to assist individuals with disabilities, including individuals with disabilities who had been previously involved with the VR program, to advance in their careers, whether that be through post-secondary education opportunities and other career pathways. So those grants are just starting their work now, and we're looking forward to that. We also now have approximately 177 million dollars of excess VR funding from fiscal year 2021 to distribute in discretionary grant projects in this current fiscal year, fiscal year 2022. And we are looking to use that money to help to transform non-integrated not competitive employment for individuals with disabilities, and ensure that not only are services provided that assist individuals who are currently in non-competitive and non-integrated employment to move out of that employment into a high quality employment with great wages in the community, as well as to ensure that individuals with disabilities -- in particular students with disabilities -- are no longer going to be directed to that type of employment, and that they have other options available to them. So you can look for hearing more about those grant activities as we move forward with planning and putting out funding announcements this year.

>> Philip Kahn-Pauli: Wonderful, all right, and then I'll pivot to you. So we have Department of Education covered, and that's a lot of really serious investment that's going to going out to the states. But I'm curious what funding streams from the Department of Labor might be coming out too that could help impact people with disabilities. So Assistant Secretary Williams?

>> Tarny Mackenzie Williams: Absolutely. So one thing I -- I'll note in the area of potential, something that we are closely monitoring is that certainly, in in drafts of the Build Back Better Bill, there is a section that includes grants to support competitive integrated employment transformation, or CIE transformation grants program. And that includes language for a multi-year grant program of which 270 million -- in the bill that was voted on back on late October -- 270 million which would be appropriated for the Secretary of the Department of Labor to issue five-year grants to states, specifically to insist employers to transform their business and program models to provide for competitive integrated employment. Now again, I want to stress that this is language that is included in drafts of the Build Back Better Act -- including one that was most recently voted on by the House, but that's certainly something that we are -- monitoring closely. And beyond that I would note that ODEP has a long history in investing in provider transformation and in supporting technical assistance that is focused on advancing competitive integrated employment. I mentioned some of those examples earlier when I talked about our work with both the NEON initiative and ASPIRE. So I would point to the ongoing technical assistance and work with subject matter experts in those initiatives as opportunities that we know will be available. We're certainly expanding those in 2022, in addition to what could be additional funding that will -- come available to states in the coming months and years, as we continue to watch Congress act.

>> Philip Kahn-Pauli: Gotcha, I really appreciate that. And I was going to say just from my experiences taking what I know of ODEP's work, like, I will say I was always thoroughly impressed with the -- those community communities of practice that ODEP would convene where you'd get some -- thought leaders from across a bunch of different categories, different employers, agencies, nonprofit partners, VR counselors, get them all together in a room on a consistent basis and sharing ideas. And that's why I think communities of practice are really valuable, because states can learn from other states. And I think that convening function is one of the things that an agency like RSA or ODEP can do really really well. And so that question about states is what I want to ask as my next question. I will encourage members of the audience, you can either ask a question in the chat box or through the Q&A function, which Eric Debner already used, but anyone who has questions for team ODEP and team RSA, please drop those in the chat box or in the Q&A. But my next question, as the moderator I'm going to exercise my moderator privilege, is to ask about states. And I'm curious -- for both of you, starting with ODEP and then going to RSA, really, what do you see as being the sum of -- what do you see as being a state that is really forward leaning or states that are really forward leaning on disability employment, and what are they doing differently that other states can learn from?

>> Taryn Mackenzie Williams: I think that's a great question. Many states are doing innovative and impactful work to support the employment of people with disabilities, and it would be really hard to single out specific states that are clearly doing the best work overall. As I was just sharing, ODEP engages in states really across all of our work. And I can say that we've worked with essentially all of the states, and many territories and localities as well. I'll note that our state exchange on employment and disability, or SEED, has engaged with a number of states or all states to support them and creating policies that increase employment opportunities for people with disabilities. Our ASPIRE initiative is working with seven states to scale evidence-based supported employment services for individuals with serious mental illness. Some of the states in this -- work are already national leaders, and others are early on, but as committed to doing the the work and doing it better. And then we see states that have made visible commitments to disability employment. For example, the state of Maryland has an entire Department on Disabilities led by a cabinet level secretary. Colorado established a state level office of employment-first. Washington, Iowa, Oregon and Tennessee were first mentor states for ODEP's employment-first state leadership mentoring program. In fact you were -- just talking about our communities of practice, and I will note that one of our most robust communities of practice really does stem from the work that the employment-first state leadership mentoring program, sometimes inelegantly referred to as EFSLNP, has done over the years with states across the nation. And I could probably go on and note many more positive examples, and certainly you should go to our website at dol.gov to to find more examples. But there's just a real range of examples that we could point to.

>> Philip Kahn-Pauli: Fabulous. All right. Carol. You. You're up.

>> Carol Dobak: I also would be hard-pressed to identify a state, as you've have -- you've asked us to. I'd like to say there are a wide range of very innovative and creative programs being developed within our VR agencies, most of which are being done in collaboration with their partners. VR cannot achieve high quality employment for significant numbers of individuals without collaboration, so much of the work that is innovative and creative is being done through collaboration with other workforce agency partners, school districts, particularly the area of pre-employment transition services, employers, developmental disability agencies, the list goes on. And -- as well as disability organizations. And -- it's just very creative. I was -- just about an hour before this panel, I was participating on a panel all about mentorship for students with disabilities, and the incredible value and impact that those types of services have, whether they're formal mentoring relationships, informal mentoring relationships done individually or in group fashion, those mentoring opportunities and opportunities for self-advocacy training and support are critical to the ability of students with disabilities particularly to achieve their employment goals. What I can tell you though -- just a little bit of data nationally that can shed some light, maybe, on how successful some of those projects in our states are at this point in time, is that we are seeing really strong performance in the area of serving students and youth with disabilities. More than half of the individuals served through the VR program currently, and this has been the case since WIOA was implemented in 2014, are under the age of 25. That encompasses both individuals who would be considered students and youth with disabilities. We also know that in program year 2020, approximately 200,000 students with disabilities received pre-employment transition services, which encompass work based learning experiences, and the mentoring types of projects I just spoke about. For those 200,000 students, agencies have provided approximately 1.7 million discrete pre-employment transition services. So those 200,000 services were receiving a wide and very robust set of pre-employment transition services that are critical to their ability to explore careers and engage in that early job exploration.

>> Philip Kahn-Pauli: Well that's -- that is -- I'm going to cut you off Carol, because Katy Neas has joined us. And you were talking about students, you were talking about transition age youth, and that is the perfect way to segue to very quickly introducing Katy Neas, who is the deputy assistant secretary at OSERS, the Office of Special Education and Rehabilitation Services. Before she joined the Biden administration, she was the senior VP of Public Affairs at APTA. She was working on a wide variety of policy activities, regulatory issues, grassroots and political action. And before that, and where I first met Katy Neas, was during her long career as a tremendously impactful leader at EasterSeals, leading their national work and supporting their commitment to advancing disability inclusion, disability rights. And I know that before that, she was down in the trenches in the United States Senate. And -- Katy, I have a question, do you still have that framed copy of the ADA on your wall in your office? Oh, we're still on mute.

>> Katy Neas: Oh, won't we be glad when that's over. [Panelists laugh] I still have it, it's in my home office right now, not my Department of Ed office. But as soon as I get a permanent landing spot it'll be here, as a reminder of when people work together to do good things.

>> Philip Kahn-Pauli: So I put this to the rest of the panel, but really, what is OSERS, your section of the Department of Education, working on in the months ahead, and what are the transformational breakthroughs that you're hoping to have for the students and youth with disabilities served under your huge remit of responsibilities?

>> Katy Neas: Sure, thanks Philip, and -- thanks for including me on this panel, and glad to be with two of my favorite people Carol Dobak and Taryn Williams. So I'm just glad to have the opportunity and I'm sorry to have to have been so late. I think at OSERS, we are looking at how do we make the existing laws work better, and how do we support states in their effective implementation of both IDEA and vocational rehabilitation act? We just issued this morning some letters to the State departments of education and the state lead agencies that implement the early intervention programs, reminding them of our responsibility to monitor their activities and their actions, so that young kids with disabilities and school age kids with disabilities can get the services and educational services they need. I think for, on the education side, just to continue on that route, clearly it's been a very very unique and difficult year for a lot of kids with disabilities and their families. And one of the reasons I was so proud to be able to join the Department was Secretary Cardona's profound leadership in trying to make sure that kids can go back to in-person learning where they can be safe and learning, and that the needs of students with disabilities have been top of mind, that we have to make sure that it's both safe and learning that goes on. So we are -- we are working hand in glove with our other folks here at the department to try to make sure that we are providing good guidance to states. We just issued a significant resource on mental health that's targeted not only to youth but also to the adults involved and that with very specific recommendations on how different levels within the education system can address the issues of mental health. We know that if adults and children aren't taking care of themselves, learning is going to be that much more difficult. On the rehab side of the ledger, it's been a very exciting time for me personally to work with the RSA staff and with the vocational rehabilitation agencies. We just put out guidance on -- a frequently asked questions document on competitive integrated employment, and really having the focus of our work continue to be how do we make sure that youth with disabilities see competitive integrated employment as their future, and that people who have been in segregated work see competitive integrated work as part of their future, and the necessary supports to help them. I think one of the things that -- Carol just mentioned it -- that half of the people that are served by the vocational rehabilitation system are under the age of 25. Similarly, the other half are long-term unemployed. And I think they have -- they have different needs and require different supports from the system -- the vocational rehabilitation system. So we are working to see how we can increase our efforts with them so that more of those folks can be successful in the world of work. So it's an exciting time to be a part of the federal government, recognizing how challenging the pandemic has been in the delivery of services, and how we're all hoping that the pandemic is waning. Every time you sort of feel that way, something bumps it up and then we're sort of back to where -- it feels like we're back to where we are. But I really do have optimism that the -- that there is a bright future and especially in on the employment side, since we just finished the National Disability Employment Month, there are more and more jobs. Unemployment is going -- going down, the job participation rate is going up. And so I think there's lots of reason for optimism.

>> Philip Kahn-Pauli: Definitely. And I mean I was so excited to see the news today that about 1 million kids are getting their first COVID dose today, and that's --that is a huge achievement for the administration, but it has long-term impacts of -- if kids can go back to school safely and they can -- we can -- keep kids healthy, it means people who -- particularly women who may have dropped out of the workforce due to expectations and struggles with remote learning -- can get back to work. And so we've got a lot of things going and a lot of things that are really coming together. So I will say Taryn and Carol have already covered it, but really important because at OSERS you have responsibility for both special ed and VR. And so Carol really covered and touched on how VR is addressing issues of equity and intersectionality and addressing the unique needs of people -- people of color with disabilities. But I'm really curious how is OSERS really embracing -- the racial equity and social justice agenda of the Biden administration, and really, how are you bringing in the perspectives of people most significantly impacted by the policies that you're responsible for implementing?

>> Katy Neas: Right, thanks for that question. I think how the law works -- and I'll just speak to the Special Ed side because I know Carol has done a great job on the VR side, but we have data that demonstrates the pandemic was disproportionately awful for kids of color, and particularly kids of color with disabilities. We raised that in our letters that went out today to the states to say this is something that we're -- very interested in and how they are implementing things so that those kids can get the supports that they need. I think we are looking at what are the training and technical assistance opportunities we can provide to the adults in the system so that they can better be prepared to meet -- whoops, excuse me one second -- better prepared to meet the the needs of kids of color. One of the things that we're also doing at the Department is the Office for Civil Rights collects data on a biannual basis, and that's one of the most profound sets of data that we use to establish policy goals -- the CRDC data -- and it really does demonstrate how many kids are inappropriate -- the use of restraint and seclusion, particularly for kids of color with disabilities and kids of color in general, and how we can use that data to shape policy going forward. I think we are also looking at the issues of personnel and teachers, general education teachers and special education teachers, and how we can attract more people from diverse backgrounds, and how we can keep them in the profession, and how our our training, technical assistance and some other -- and some other tools that may be available at the department to that end, because we know how incredibly valuable it is to have mentors and role models for students at every level of their education. And that's something that's not not lost on us at all.

>> Philip Kahn-Pauli: Well I think that's really wonderful. And I mean -- teaching can be a really rewarding career path, and if we can encourage a more diverse teaching workforce, that's going to make for a more diverse workforce, I think. The second order effects that really getting --embracing diversity and inclusion as a value can bring. So obviously we have five minutes left on the schedule, and I want to make sure to get everybody in for one last big point. And I want to keep up that theme about optimism, so I'm curious, Taryn, Carol and Katy, in that order, what about your work gives you the most hope, and what should we come back and talk about next year in November 2022?

>> Taryn Mackenzie Williams: Yeah that's a great question. I mean, we've covered the issues that give me the most optimism. One is the way in which the landscape continues to evolve around competitive integrated employment. And we're seeing the continued investment in resources to advance CIE for youth and adults with disabilities. So that's something that makes me incredibly optimistic. I think second, I'll certainly point to issues around equity -- and that laser-like focus on the ways in which our our policies and -- the practices that we advance impact all individuals, but particularly those communities that are the most marginalized. I think emerging from this pandemic, that needs to be a continued focus of all of us. And I'm certainly glad that I'm working with partners across the entire government who feel the same way or are bringing that to their work on a daily basis.

>> Philip Kahn-Pauli: Perfect, fabulous answer Taryn. And I'm going to quickly jump in and answer Sherry Parazoli's question, if that's okay. So she was asking, are there programs that target aging workforce and acquired disability issues, and I will just share that -- I'll jump in and just say that ODEP several years ago worked with the coalition on state governments on a really great toolkit talking about return to work and state work issues for acquiring disabilities, so I wanted to slide in and get your -- question answered before we go to Carol. What brings you hope and what are we going to be here talking about in November 2022?

>> Carol Dobak: Okay. What brings me quite a bit of optimism and hope, Philip, is just the widespread commitment to competitive integrated employment that we see across the federal government, through our collaboration with ODEP, administration on community living, center for medicaid and medicare services. And it's just a significant amount of effort and focus that's being brought to competitive integrated employment. That brings me hope. That same level of focus is also evident on state level, as we see states phasing out the use of sub-minimum wage in their states. It's a growing number and that's a really positive thing to see. That gives more and more opportunities for individuals with disabilities served in the VR program to achieve competitive integrated employment. And that's terrific. Within the VR program itself, I think a renewed focus on the value of post-secondary education and training in support of competitive integrated employment that we see demonstrated through some of our WIOA performance indicators and improvements in those areas, that gives me a lot of hope, as that level of training is so critical for individuals with disabilities to achieve quality employment, whether it be in STEM fields, professional fields -- as I said, the green economy, the caregiving economy, etcetera, it's all really great to see. So that's where I'm gonna end.

>> Philip Kahn-Pauli: All right, fabulous. Katy you've got the last word.

>> Katy Neas: Sure, so I have to show my true colors. I'm excited about the commitment this administration has for early childhood and helping kids with disabilities get a great start in life. I've just seen over the course of my career that when people get access, when kids get access to the supports they need sooner rather than later, they have more choices as adults. And I think having this next generation of kid -- this post pandemic generation of kids having greater access to high quality early education, I think that's going to see -- we're going to reap the benefits of that for generations to come. And so I'm very optimistic about where we're going and how we can get there. And I will say -- having been in the federal government for a whopping 17 weeks, I am just overwhelmingly impressed by the dedication of the career staff and the dedication of the new politicals of wanting to make things better, have laws be effectively implemented, and having those things apply to everybody. And when they meet everybody they mean everybody. So I think we're -- looking at a very inclusive, strong, supportive government that wants to do right by the people that we care about the most.

>> Philip Kahn-Pauli: Gotcha. And that at the end of the day, good government requires very involved citizens. It requires civically engaged people participating locally, voting in elections, but also knowing what they're -- knowing what agencies are working on and providing feedback as they can through public forums, online dialogues and learning about the great work that people like Katy, Taryn, Carol are doing. So each one of you, thank you so much for being with us today. Thank you for lending your expertise, your impact and your perspective. I really appreciate your time today. I know all of our audience members appreciate your time and commitment as well, and keep up the good work. We will be -- we'll be hosting future webinars like this, we will be sharing resources that are coming out of different agencies as they come out. And so once again, thank you so much for joining us for today's webinar, and let's go change the world.