>> Philip Kahn-Pauli: Good afternoon and welcome everyone! My name is Philip Kahn-Pauli. I am the policy and practices director for RespectAbility. My preferred pronouns are he/him/his. And I am absolutely delighted to be with all of you today. I'll give people a chance to continue logging in here. So excited to see our audience today, and our audience is going to be here joining me to talk about from compliance to programmatic accessibility best practices for American Job Centers. I realize it's a bit of a mouthful, but that is the topic that we are covering today. I specifically wanted to host this webinar today to reflect on where we are now as workforce professionals as advocates for people with disabilities, as people with disabilities themselves who have aspirations, desires, and a chance to earn a spot in the contemporary labor force. I have been working in this field for many years, and I have never been more excited to see what is happening in the world of work -- what is happening in the workforce development system, and to see what people with disabilities can accomplish.

So I'm going to run through a slide deck today that's going to reflect on some of those specific best practice recommendations I have, based on my perspective, on research I've done, work I've don everywhere from California to Washington to Texas, many other states in between, specifically about how do American Job Centers -- which are at the front line of the nation's workforce system -- how do they serve people with disabilities? How can they serve people with disabilities better? What do the people with disabilities need to know about those AJCs, and what are the folks who work in those systems need to know about where we are now and what they can do to really impact and achieve transformable results for people with disabilities? So I have a title slide here which has a picture from way back in the day RespectAbility had an office. If you may remember those days before COVID, RespectAbility used to be based in a office out of Rockville, Maryland. This is a picture of some of our team members along with some of our Fellows -- nowadays we call them Apprentices. They can be --virtual participants in our work anywhere in the country. We are currently recruiting for new apprentices, and so if anyone who is a young professional who is interested in learning about leadership, learning to accomplish great things on behalf of and as a person with a disability, tell them to go check us out. Our website is RespectAbility.org. And I'm going to dive right into my presentation now. So I want to establish my bona fides very quickly. This is a picture -- old picture of me. I was younger and I was thinner, but I also hadn't survived a two year long pandemic yet. So I am the Policy and Practices Director for RespectAbility. I have been with RespectAbility since 2015. I mentioned that because I was specifically hired by RespectAbility to look at the implementation of the workforce innovation and opportunity act -- WIOA -- a national piece of legislation passed by congress with bipartisan support way back in 2014, a bill and a law that is actually currently under consideration for reauthorization in Congress. So that actually invested billions of dollars in the nation's workforce system. As part of that work for RespectAbility, I've worked on resource guides, I've interviewed people in the workforce system, I've given multiple different presentations at national conferences related disability issues -- related to workforce issues, and I'm sharing a little bit of -- a little bit of my expertise and impact here. So I'm gonna run through my presentation.

I'm gonna talk through my priorities and ideas, and then we're gonna have some time for Q&A at the end of the slide deck. So if you get a burning question, hold on to it, ask me at the end of the presentation, or drop it in the chat box, or drop it in the Q&A box. So let's keep going.

So I want to step back and remind everyone where we were as a disability community and what kind of economic picture we were looking at as workers with disabilities way back in the day. In 2008 -- which was, you may remember, a long time ago, but it was when the great recession was really kicking off. It was when there was the tremendous destruction of the housing market and the labor market. People were losing jobs left right and center. There's so much economic uncertainty and fear about what was going to happen and how the nation was going to respond or rebuild. And as a direct result, in 2008 you had the transition from the Bush administration to the Obama administration. But also at that time, we saw a major change in how the U.S. Census Bureau collected data, and specifically how they collected data around different demographic categories. And that was pretty significant because both the department of -- because the Department of Labor with the Bureau of Labor Statistics as well as the U.S. Census Bureau actually started doing a much better job of tracking employment outcomes for different minority populations in the United States. And so this is a chart which traces all the way back to 2008 through 10 years to 2018 that specifically charts economic -- the economic circumstances measured by employment rates of hispanics/latinos, women, African-Americans, as well as people with disabilities. And these numbers really present a picture where we see people with disabilities back in 2008 had an employment rate of about 37 percent, which is abysmal compared to other demographic categories. And that employment rate for the disability community dipped to a low of 32.6 percent in 2011, when, even though it had been a few years since the recession had started, people were still struggling to find work, people were starting to rebuild and recreate and remake the economy. And up until 2018, the disability employment rate still lagged behind every other minority community. And it took all the way until 10 years after the great recession to actually see the employment rate of people with disabilities get back to and above where it was in 2008. So that's where we were and that was the historical experience that many of us had kind of cutting our teeth as policy professionals, as working professionals. And throughout this, the workforce system got a major infusion of resources in 2014 thanks to WIOA.

And then 2020 happened. This is a short -- a small chart from the federal reserve which actually shows the disparate impact on people with disabilities that we've seen in the economy back in 2020. Two years ago was a long time now, but in the immediate result of COVID, because of lockdowns, because of concerns about the spread of this terrible disease, people with disabilities disproportionately felt the economic impact. More than one million people with disabilities lost their jobs in the first half of 2020. That's one million lost their jobs. And this chart shows -- you've got a blue line down in the middle which shows all people above age 18 -- that's working age folks. And then above that you actually have a chart which shows a huge -- how much bigger of a spike it was among people with disabilities, and that around this time two years ago, you were seeing massive furloughs, massive layoffs. People with disabilities were suddenly losing their jobs because they didn't have a job to go to, or companies were going out of business because of restrictions related to COVID. It was a tremendous time of economic and personal and health anxiety and fear. Many of us made the immediate jump to telework and we thought it would be two/three weeks, not two or three years later. So here we are.

But even as vaccines started rolling out in 2021, even as things were starting to look better, people with disabilities are still seeing a little bit of a lag -- a little bit of a gap in their unemployment compared to people without disabilities. And here's another chart, also from the federal reserve, which shows people with disabilities compared to those without disabilities. And specifically it shows the course of the pandemic from start to where we were at the end of last year. It's actually really interesting about this chart is it does show people with disabilities on the bottom again, given the huge gap in outcomes, but rather interestingly and rather significantly, people with disabilities, according to this chart and some of the other data, are actually seeing a faster economic recovery due to new opportunities in the workforce than their non-disabled peers, and better than other categories of -- other demographic categories in the American workforce. And so we're seeing a really interesting and very different circumstance now. And now the data is really showing that we have seen six months of sustained economic growth for people with disabilities. If you aren't familiar with it, I would encourage everybody who's here on this webinar today to sign up for the nTIDE report published by the Kessler foundation. It provides month-to-month job tracking in terms of outcomes for people with disabilities. And what they found is that over the last six months, we have seen the labor force participation rate for people with disabilities going higher and higher and higher. It is actually now at 37.8 percent. The current employment rate for people with disabilities is now better than it was all the way back in 2008. It also means that more people with disabilities are engaged in the labor force than they were before the pandemic, and this is a huge transformative opportunity. The latest research that I've seen shows that there's about 11 million open jobs in the United States, due to the great resignation and due to kind of continuing gaps in the economy due to COVID. And that creates a tremendous opportunity for people with disabilities to get out there, to get into the workforce. Employers are desperate to hire, from corner bakery stores to multinational conglomerates are all desperate to hire and retain the best talented workers that they can, and people with disabilities are that long-untapped labor force that is really being channeled into the economy in ways that we've never seen before. And it is really tremendously exciting. To really dimensionalize this further, we could be looking at almost a half million new job seekers with disabilities entering the labor force today. A half a million. Now if you're an employer, that's a huge number, that's a huge opportunity, that -- even if one percent of that number goes to work for your offices, you're going to have a tremendous advantage. But how do we get that huge number of people who now want to work and have the opportunity to work -- how do we get that huge number actually into the labor force? Well a big part of that's going to ultimately be down to the workforce development system. So as I said ,think about that number -- about -- almost half a million people with disabilities looking for work today.

Now I mentioned before we're talking about the workforce development system, and if you have any time -- spending any time -- WIOA or the department of labor the employment training administration, you know the term AJC. But it's not a term many other people outside of the niche business of workforce development might be familiar with. So AJC -- which is a shorthand term I'm going to be using here on out -- an AJC is an American Job Center. It's a federally funded -- it used to be called a one-stop center. It is literally in some cases a local office where you have counselors who have information about job training programs, career and technical education. Sometimes these offices are located at community colleges. They can tell you where you can get a credential, where you can get, say, a welding certificate or an HVAC certificate, or they can give you information on where there are local job boards. You can apply for -- apply for a job. AJCs are a critical part of the nation's workforce system. There are AJCs across the country, they're administered and overseen by state workforce development boards, or -- as well as local boards, and are really important in terms of that direct frontline service to people with disabilities and people without disabilities who want to work. Now I want to talk about AJCs today and I want to talk about -- crossed five specific dimensions. Now, many of these programs have been doing great work training people, telling people where to go get a degree, where to go get a credential, where to go get a certificate to get into the workforce, and many of these centers have never actually had to systematically serve people with disabilities before. Before WIOA, people with disabilities could be passed on and shunted off, or passed over to the work vocational rehabilitation system, and that's it. Like, you go into an AJC 10 years ago and they say "great. Glad you want to come in. Go talk to VR counselor." And when you go to the VR office, all due respect to the vocational rehabilitation system, you're probably going to end up on a waiting list. Well, given where we are now with the economy people can't wait. People need to be able to navigate and get the support and services they need from AJCs. And so there's a responsibility for people who are in the actual nuts and bolts of the workforce system to think about accessibility in new ways. And so the five dimensions of accessibility I want to talk to you about today are physical accessibility, communications, programmatic accessibility, stakeholder engagement, and employer education. So physical, communications, programmatic, stakeholder engagement, and employers.

I mentioned it before -- WIOA is the overall legal context we're operating under. The law, passed by Congress in 2014, invested billions of dollars in the workforce system. But one of the many things that they did was, because they were mandating so many changes to workforce systems and departments, state Departments of Labor, they also -- this law also directed the Department of Labor to evaluate efforts that were being done to implement this law. And one of the many evaluations that was done was by the team at IMPAQ, collaborating with Burton Blatt Institute, as well as a few others, to really look at what is the current state of accessibility. It's an old report, came out about seven years ago, but it's still a very valuable report. And what they found in the immediate period of WIOA implementation still holds true today, even a few years later. So it's a really good report, pretty thorough, I want you to read it if you have the interest. So -- and one of the first things they found was really very positive that most AJCs are physically accessible. What do we mean by that? Most of them are in public government buildings, which means they have wheelchair ramps, they've got automatic doors, they've got designated accessible parking, they've got accessible bathrooms -- the base normal things people think about when they, "oh yeah, our office is accessible, yeah, we got a parking spot, we got a ramp," the basic things that people have got. That's great. Interestingly they did find that, nationwide, about eight percent of AJCs are still not physically accessible and that's a -- that's a problem. It still means that nearly ten -- that nearly one in ten AJCs can't actually physically serve a job seeker with a disability who has to walk or roll into that office. And so my challenge to folks who are in an office that may have a couple steps, may have not a lot of modern accessibility feature, is think about -- how are you reviewing your accessibility and service standards in an annual basis? You may be in a legacy building that is 50 years old. It was built well before the ADA was law, and you have no state budget to move offices or to change your spots. Well, I'd say that's important, but really think about what are -- what counts as architectural barriers under the ADA? There are some great online resources to help orient your work and to help you understand -- what steps you can take short of tearing down a building and building a new one according to universal design principles. Likewise, something that's actually really important to think about is there are many city offices dedicated to looking at accessibility and disability issues. We do a lot of great work with the L.A. City Department on Disability. They work on everything from employment, to street signs, to community events. They have a lot of connections to the independent living movement. They have a lot of resources that could help an office or a building that wants to become accessible become accessible. So tip number one: remember your physical accessibility.

Tip number two: communication. The Americans with Disabilities Act is a huge piece of law that guaranteed civil rights for people with disabilities. Interestingly enough, one of the many provisions that people don't think about is how the ADA specifically created requirements for state and local government entities. Specifically it requires those entities to be able to communicate effectively with their constituents and their stakeholders. There's a whole section of ada.gov which is dedicated to talking about effective communications in the context of state and local government. Now, the report and research that DOL -- that's the Department of Labor -- has done shows that there's limited budgets that cover staff training, and most importantly, not a lot of staff in the workforce system understand what communications accessibility means. So let's actually think about that. We're having -- we're modeling what I think is some good communications accessibility here today, because we have captioning, we have ASL interpreters. Those can be a little pricey sometimes but it's really well worth it, because it adds value and it really embodies the commitment to inclusion that you want to model as a service-oriented part of the state -- your state or local government. There are a lot of great online resources in this PowerPoint deck. We'll be emailing a copy of this deck to everybody who attends our webinar today, so if you want to -- desperately want to click on some of these links, don't worry! You're going to get the chance to a little bit later. So if you want to kind of start thinking about as a small -- state or local entity that wants to actually start providing more communications access, well let's have -- I direct you to consult with your local disability community. Reach out to your local centers for independent living, reach out to your local deaf organizations, or reach out to your local school for the blind. They will be your entry point for understanding how to better communicate with the constituents that you need to serve. Likewise, there are online registries of ASL interpreters, CART services, and other things you need to do around serving people where they are and what they -- and how they need to be served. Something else that think about, and this is particularly important when it comes to something as complicated as workforce services. You need to have a lot of written materials and you may need to have written materials in languages other than English. I will say this is a major issue for some of the great folks we work with in California, where they may have a community that speaks Tagalog, Cambodian, Cantonese, Mandarin, Russian, as well as a lot of other languages. For example, did you know that the Washington D.C. area actually has a huge concentration of Ethiopians? And what that means is that our local workforce innovation commission actually has to print materials in Amharic, it actually has to print materials in a language that can help reach the community that it serves. And so that is something you need to think about, and that's what -- something that people in leadership positions need to think about, how can we not only close gaps in terms of language access. Also, second layer of that, how do you actually use plain language to talk about your services? This is particularly important if you're going to be serving folks connected to the IDD -- that's the intellectual developmental disabilities -- community. IDD advocates have been really pushing for both plain language in the context of advocacy, but also plain language in the context of government services. And so these are the types of communications challenges you need to think about as you're serving a very diverse public that wants to work and that comes from many different forms of lived experience as well as intersectional identities. Now, I talked a little bit about this, but I got a slide for it. Talking about the importance of respectful person-first language. The best rule of thumb when it comes to talking to any person with a disability is ask the person. Disability is a deeply personal issue. There are some people with non-visible disabilities who are not fully comfortable disclosing their disability. That's a whole topic we're going to have a training on at some point very soon. Or you may have somebody who's a wheelchair user where you can't really see -- you can't hide their disability, we wouldn't want them to. And so if you're a non-disabled worker in a context of a government office that's trying to serve a person with a disability, ask the person. Are -- are they -- do they prefer person first language? Do they prefer identity first language? How does a person want to talk about it? Does that person want to disclose their disability at the start of their job application process, or is it something that they want to disclose after they've done the initial phone interview, or if they have to disclose a disability they can't do a phone interview and have to do it through zoom with captioning? These are the kinds of considerations you need to think about. And so the best rule of thumb I can recommend is always ask the person. Now we're going to get to the meat of it.

We get talking about tip number three. So tip number three, per what DOL defines it as, programmatic accessibility is the domain where the biggest changes are needed to improve accessibility in the workforce system. And according to the estimate that they did a couple years ago, only about 37 percent of AJCs counted as programmatically accessible. And so I want to dig in and really think about what that means in four different specific points. And so my challenge for leaders in the workforce system is to think about the services they provide across this four point -- these four points of a map. What are you doing around awareness and training? What does your staffing model look like? How do you address issues related to benefits counseling? And how do you collaborate with yourself, other entities, other agencies, programs, or outside groups? So awareness, staffing, benefits counseling, and collaboration. So first and foremost, one consistent theme that I've seen at every state that I've talked to, every workforce board meeting I've gone to is that staff in AJCs at state workforce boards -- they do not -- they get a lot of training on different topics, they don't necessarily get specific training on disability issues. They may never have had disability etiquette training. They may never had had -- have had a training that talked about the history of disability or understands this context of disability rights in the workplace. And so awareness and training of your staff is the first step to actually becoming programmatically accessible. And this is the point where you get to the sales pitch. RespectAbility has a ton of free online resources for Staff training on our website, as well as specific folks with lived experience through our Speakers Bureau who can go into your community and talk about lived experience with disabilities, but also how to improve the disability friendliness of your services and work. Now to the next point around staffing. Consistently, the most success I've seen in inclusion related to disability in the workforce are places and points and programs where a specific team member -- more importantly a team leader -- has responsibility for looking after disability issues. It needs to be part of somebody's job description in order for results to actually happen. And so there's a great website called peatworks.org. They have a whole training module for how to basically build accessibility and accountability into your staff work. I think that's really important and that's really useful.

So on to my next point: benefits counseling. So this is a massive topic which we should probably do a separate webinar on, we probably will very soon. But when you dig into these issues, unfortunately there are still pretty significant federal work disincentives that keep a lot of people with disabilities out of the workforce. Many people have worked really hard to get SSDI, many people are on SSI, they are in --already enrolled in the benefit system, but they still want to work, even though they've had to go through a tremendous bureaucratic process to prove they can't work, and that they should receive government money as a result. However there are pat --there are pathways for people who are on the benefit system to actually get back into the workforce and start earning an income. However it's a very complicated process. You've got programs, you've got state programs, you've got different options related to home and community-based services, you've got options related to the ticket to work program, you have employer networks, you have a lot of different challenges and problems that are related to somebody who is collecting benefits but wants to go back to the workforce. And so this is a topic that really behooves people in the workforce system to understand. The Social Security Administration has a great resource on this specifically about what are the pathways to employment, but at the same time, some advocacy organizations such as the Association for People Supporting Employment First, also known as APSE, have some great resources on how do you as a direct support professional in the context of workforce guide people to understand what benefits they are eligible for, or what benefits they will lose if they earn about -- if they earn too much money, or if they earn enough money, or how to balance all of that, or how to put money away in say, something like an ABLE account. These are all considerations that folks who had never served a person with a disability who wants to work before need to think about. Unfortunately it's complicated, but there's the resources that are out there. And so check out Social Security Administration and check out APSE for some of their resources. The last point I want to touch on this slide is about collaboration. So this is an iterative learning process that has to be undertaken by organizations working together. Accessibility doesn't just happen overnight, it's not just a, oh, we'll put up one page in our website and we're done. No, this is an ongoing process, and the only way you can have an ongoing process is if you have ongoing relationships between an entity which is serving the public and representatives from that public, stakeholders, stakeholder organizations that have relationships and connections and perspective. I'm very proud to say that RespectAbility has built a lot of great working relationships, particularly with some of the workforce system in California, as well as a few other states, where we will provide very directed feedback to them in terms of this isn't accessible, this needs to change, this is how you need to change -- your service model. And that kind of collaborative approach is starting to see major changes locally, which results in new opportunities and new jobs. And that's great. But at the end of the day, RespectAbility, relatively small organization, but there are a lot of different centers for independent living, a lot of advocacy organizations in communities across the country. And so people in the workforce system should be prepared and ready to reach out to people from the advocacy community and build connections, and maybe even get paid doing it. So that's something to think about. So collaboration is really how change is driven and how change is sustained over time. So -- and that feeds directly into point number four: stakeholder engagement. So the research has shown that many AJCs don't really do targeted outreach to the people with disabilities that they serve. And I think this is unfortunately also connects to programs in the workforce system that also serve other demographic categories, other marginalized communities with intersectional identities. In many cases just -- people in communities that are historically underserved or have transportation barriers or other connections or barriers don't even understand what scope of services are out there, what types of programs exist to help them, or even understand the range of options that they are entitled to access as Americans who are living in community. And as such, it is really important that local organizations have connections to American Job Centers, that AJCs actually have the chance to actually hear back from their community members about what are we doing right, what are we doing wrong, and what can we do better together, particularly when it comes to people with disabilities. People with disabilities are by definitions problem solvers, and that -- the experiences of one person with a disability working through a job application will help inform how a AJC can better support future job seekers with disabilities. And as such, I would really encourage folks who are in -- leaders in this system to actually have a plan to reach out to local community organizations. This slide talks about reaching out to centers for independent living or regional centers. I think this also applies to other marginalized communities. If there is a parent-teacher association of folks related to English language learners or other civic groups where people are working together to address the problems within their communities, build those connections and give those people a chance to provide feedback on what you're doing, and the work that you want to accomplish. So those are points I want you to think about, and points where I think you need to consider building reach out, because at the end of the day you can accomplish so much more if you get word out there about these are the range of services that are provided to our community, we just need to get people accessing those services in those communities. So think about that as the importance of stakeholder engagement to inform and improve your work.

Now the last piece -- so the last tip number five is really the important tip: employer engagement. After all, the government doesn't create jobs. It's the employers who make jobs: companies, industries, entrepreneurs create jobs. And so a lot of AJCs spend a lot of time reaching out to local employers, they keep track of labor market information, they keep track of job boards and open job ads. Many AJCs will sponsor career days or career fairs at local schools to say, hey, these are all the great different companies you go and work for in your local community. And I think that the next step beyond that is AJCs do a lot of employer outreach, but that employer outreach needs to also touch on and connect with the idea of building out connections with your local vocational rehabilitation system, or asking questions about, all right local employers, are you hiring people with disabilities? Do you have a disability -- diversity inclusion or equity plans? And so as an example here, there is in state-based vocational rehabilitation programs specific teams of business engagement specialists who try and place clients with disabilities into jobs, specific with specific employers. Maybe there are ways that an AJC could collaborate with their local VR office and say hey, we've got a pipeline of folks, we've got folks with disabilities, we've got folks without disabilities, how can we get them into the jobs you want and what are the skills that they need to know to succeed in your office? And so there is a very important chance for collaboration there, both within government agencies, but also collaboration in terms of reaching out to the job makers and the job creators out in your local community. So food for thought there. Now, any conversation you're going to have with a business -- I don't need to tell you -- is why should -- it needs to address why a business needs to hire people with disabilities. Well the data is in. The data is clear. There is a business imperative to actually recruiting, hiring, and retaining workers with disabilities. And research and research report that I'm directing you to is -- some work done by Accenture a couple years ago. But they did a really good job of tracking the performance -- the performance of companies that intentionally hire people with disabilities. And the outcomes are tremendous. Those companies actually had higher profits and lower staff turnover. So not only are those companies making more money, they have lower costs for doing business. And especially nowadays, when there are so many concerns about job turnover and job shortages, companies will see the bottom line benefits of hiring people with disabilities. And so, as a leader in a local workforce system, as a leader in the disability community, you have the chance to go to your local employers and say hey, we're a valuable talented group of people who just want to work. What kind of jobs can you -- what kind of jobs are open to us, and how can we become leaders in your company? Because we're going to give back value if you hire us. So the message is there and the message will resonate, if you can get it to the right folks. Now anytime we're talking about positive messaging, we're also going to have to talk about concerns related to negative messaging. And what do I mean by that? I mean the whole issue of accommodations. Now this is a topic which, if you're a person with disability with any work experience, you're probably really familiar with how onerous reasonable accommodation requests can be. You probably at some point have had a accommodation request denied by your employer. I'm sorry that happened, it happens, but let's try and make sure that doesn't happen in the future for other future workers. So under the law, employers have a responsibility to provide reasonable accommodations to ensure that a person with a disability can perform the essential functions of their job. And in doing so, it can be something as simple as screen reader software, speech-to-text software, having an iPad to facilitate communications, there's all manner of different technology solutions, or even just something as having as a flexible work schedule in case somebody has a chronic health condition which impacts their energy levels or impacts their ability to be present during a given 24 hour cycle. And as soon as employers start hearing the term accommodation, they start freaking out, because they think cost. Even though I've been doing this for about 10 years, the same message applies that I started when I was an intern, that applies today, that most accommodations are cheap and easy to implement. Best of all, most accommodations will improve the efficiency and productivity of not only your workers with disabilities, but will probably help your workers without disabilities. And so if any employer asks -- starts asking a lot of questions about how do we actually provide accommodations, I always direct them to askjan.org. JAN is short for the Job Accommodation Network. It is an online library of accommodation solutions. It covered -- has a website that has pretty much every disability under the sun, and every accommodation provided to meet those needs. And so there's no need to reinvent the wheel, there's no need to struggle or question or remake something that's already been done. There are common solutions to common problems that are to be found online and to be shared widely. Likewise, there's also an employer-focused website called EARN, which is the Employer Assistance Resource Network on disability inclusion. And EARN is great because it really helps facilitate business to business connection. I think there's tremendous value in learning from best practices, learning from those that are doing good work. That's why RespectAbility hosts webinars like this where we point people to good work on ideas that is being done by other people. In this case, EARN is a great website that actually details what employers are doing, and it is really directed to an employer-based audience of how can we make things better, how can we build disability into our business strategies? If you're a small business, how can you actually have a inclusion program or plan if you have less than 50 employees? Or even if you are a bigger company and have never taken a step on the road to becoming accessible or inclusive, how do you actually just even start talking about self-identification of disability as a demographic category in your company? These are all topics that have been covered by other organizations, by other companies, and have done direct great work on it, and you can go to EARN and find out more. So that's one of the many resources that is out there, one of those many points and places of ideas that I wanted to share with you today.

So I'm actually going to tab back to my initial slide. So those are the kind of the five points of improving accessibility in the context of the workforce development system that I wanted to talk to you today. I invite anybody who has any burning questions to drop those in the chat box, or put them directly in the Q&A function at the bottom of the screen. But again, as we think about this inclusion journey that we're all on, this process of learning, there are five key points I want you to think about. Want you to think about what you're doing around your physical accessibility. Second, I want you to think about what you're doing to be more accessible in your communications. Third, think about programmatic accessibility -- are you systematically looking at what you do? Fourth, what are you doing to engage stakeholders? Getting community feedback and community ideas on doing things better. And then fifth, if you're in the workforce development business, what are you doing to find people who employ the workers that you train? And how can you leverage that into having more detailed conversations on inclusion access and disability issues? So I'm gonna turn off my slide deck and invite anybody who has any questions to put those in the chat box, put those in the Q&A box while I have a quick sip of coffee.

Well thank you Rachel. I do -- I've given this presentation in an abbreviated form before, but I wanted to give this out to folks today, just because there is so much exciting and dynamic work being done in the workforce system, but it's work that needs to be done in a way that reflects and is informed by the disability lens, so. All right, I have a great question from Leah Wheeler. When presenting to employers to encourage more hiring of people with disabilities, do you have any other tips or recommendations outside of the slide? Absolutely. So -- and I would say check out RespectAbility's Speakers Bureau because this is a whole process that we've talked before. I talk about accommodations very briefly, but accommodations are part of a really longer conversation to be had with employers about disability and access, because when you start talking about accommodations, you also need to talk about disclosure, which also means companies need to have priorities around how do you respond to a disclosure, and how do you comply with the law. And so you also have -- and then you get into the worker side of things where how can you encourage workers to be self-advocates, to bring their whole selves to work, and -- how to disclose their disability status, and what kinds of accommodations that you want to counsel. So askJAN is one point, askEARN is another website to use, RespectAbility also has some trainings that we have for both job seekers as well as employers, so Eric dropped those in the chat box, so I really encourage you to take a look at that. I think the other big thing in terms of accommodations -- and this is one of the things I've had in conversation with a lot of employers -- is there's honestly a lot of sloppiness when it comes to job descriptions. Now what do I mean by that? I mean that a lot of job descriptions have really extraneous requirements written into them that don't do anything to actually get you good, talented workers, and instead create barriers to employment for people with disabilities. I think the most obvious example that comes to mind is the whole pretty common bullet point in a job description: must be able to lift 25 pounds. I don't remember the last time I had to lift 25 pounds for my job, and honestly, god bless the working professions where you actually have to haul timber or lumber or nails or hammers or do construction work that is really hard and grueling and physically demanding. But let's be real: most professional jobs, the heaviest thing you might have to lift is your laptop, okay? Having a 25 pound or a 50 pound -- weight lift requirement in your job description automatically disqualifies people with mobility issues, people with dexterity issues, and that's the kind of barrier to work that employers don't think about, because that's something they've always included in their job descriptions. And so even before we get to the idea of talking about accommodations in the workplace, or even talking about disclosure of disability, employers need to think at the very beginning: how are we writing our job descriptions in a way that will get the widest net of greatest candidates possible. So I can keep going for a long time, Leah, but I hope that answers your questions about accommodations employers in conversation. All right, other questions, feel free to drop those in the chat box or in the Q&A box.

Well while I'm waiting for anybody else to ask any other questions, I will give a quick shout out to people -- to two of my colleagues who are going to be presenting in person at a live conference next month. I'm so excited. So for any California-based folks, if you're going to be going to the California workforce association conference next month, I'm super excited because you should check out the session that RespectAbility is doing in collaboration with the Los Angeles County workforce development and aging commission -- WDACS. We are doing a joint presentation on that Thursday during the conference about some of our collaborative work around workforce development solutions, we're going to talk about what we've learned in terms of actually building systemic partnerships between an advocacy -- organization, and a workforce development agency. I think it's going to be a really valuable conversation. Check it out and -- go to -- if you're going to CWA's WorkCon next month, go check out our session, you're going to have a chance to meet our illustrious -- my great colleagues Wally and Nelly, along with some of the great folks including Marissa, as well as LA WDACS board member Delbert Whetter, who are going to be talking about collaboration and cooperation in a very direct way. I think it'll be a great conversation -- it'll actually be in-person at an in-person conference, so check it out if you're going to the conference. So it's in that Thursday during the conference, and just wanted to give that shout out to my colleagues.

So yes, a couple of people asked in the chat box. We're going to be posting a copy of this recording on our website, along with the transcript of my dulcet tones, as well as the powerpoint presentation. I'll email that out to everybody who attended today, so you're going to be able to go back. If I talked a little too quickly which I do sometimes, you can go back, pause, take notes, listen, and I hope that you go and apply what you learned today to others.

Quick shout out to Rachel Ester, who's talking about more about that 25 pound example I gave. She actually brought up the issue of the fact that there's issues in the labor supply of direct support workers. That is so important and I'm so glad you raised that. It's also why I gave a shout out to the work being done by APSE actually. As many of you may know, there is a significant shortage in direct support professionals, the kinds of people who work in personal care assistance, who are job coaches, who actually train people for jobs. And it's a really -- it creates a major kind of second order problem, because these agencies put people on waiting lists because they don't have job coaches to assign to clients. And so anything we can do to build the pool of direct support professionals is really important. So Rachel, I'm really glad you brought that up, really important. And it reflects the fact that there's a whole networks and systems that feed into each other and we all need to be pushing to make those systems better for both the people who work in these systems, as well as the people who are served by these systems.

All right and Leah has another shout out about -- oh yeah, so Leah has another -- I'm gonna give her another shout out. She mentioned on that benefits counseling piece that I mentioned that Colorado has recently started a program where there are disability program navigators that work within American -- American Job Centers, and actually collaborate with the division of vocational rehabilitation to be as a liaison as well as to blend and braid funding, and that is so exciting, and that is such great work. It's one of the many ideas we're actually looking at trying to implement in California through our collaborative work on the building better futures initiative, so I'm really keen and eager to see what Colorado is accomplishing related to those benefits counseling navigators. And I think that that's really a great example of great work that's being done in other states, and maybe I'll get a webinar in the next couple months scheduled with some folks from Colorado. So shout out to you, Leah, for bringing that up and thanks for sharing that.

Oh, this is a really great question. So from anonymous, dropped into the Q&A box, do you have any recommendations when it comes to online applications about robot filters which include people with disabilities because of various gaps and skills not listed? Oh, you're raising a 21st century problem that requires a 21st century solution. So shout out to you, anonymous, for asking that question. There's a lot of actually -- there's been some really intelligent writing done -- from the autism self-advocacy space, the neurodiversity community around the issue of AI biases auto selecting out people with gaps in their employment and work history. One thing that is recommended to some of our RespectAbility apprentices who have a lot of diverse experience and are job hunting is, where there have been gaps, trying to take a strength-based approach and talk about what work you did during those gaps, or what volunteer work, or what organizations you may have been involved with, or more importantly, what are the some of the skills that you may not think you have, but actually you do have, and should be really very bolded and very explicit in your resume. So that's one way of trying to game the system. I think unfortunately, we live in an age where -- we honestly live in an age where the programming biases of folks from Silicon Valley who are probably a lilly-white -- a lilly-white bunch of tech bros, are getting biased into the AIs which are automatically choosing the resumes that are going into workforces -- across the country, and so we need to really think thoughtfully as a community about how do we kind of write good resumes, how do we try and find strengths in what we have -- our lived experiences where there are gaps in our employment history, how we can kind of address those gaps? I think it's really interesting that LinkedIn has new features related to kind of how they are addressing and covering gaps, because LinkedIn is your online resume for so many job applications -- these days. But also I think unfortunately -- there is a burden on the advocacy community to raise the issue of biases in culture being fed into AI. Because at the end of the day as exciting and dynamic as artificial intelligence is, it's just machine code that's going to reflect the biases and prejudices of the people who write the code. And so we've got to work on the culture if we're going to actually change how AI processes things. So anonymous, thank you for bringing up a really great topic and a really complicated one. Maybe that should be a topic for a future webinar about AI bias and online hirings. So shout out to you, thank you for -- asking that.

Ooh, Rachel -- Rachel's got another question about what is your opinion about private for-profit employment organizations like Specialisterne that specifically support folks who are neurodivergent? It's -- I've done webinars -- I'll say in -- my disclosure -- full disclosure of things -- I've done webinars with Specialisterne. I think they've done some great work and I think they've done really innovative things around breaking down what the interview process looks like, and they really sold a lot of big companies on the idea of recruiting and hiring people on the autism spectrum for different jobs. Now, I think the the downside is that people with autism are people, first and foremost. They have very diverse interests, very diverse experiences, and not everybody who's on the spectrum wants to be a computer programmer. That's been kind of one of those positive stereotypes that's been built up for a lot of reasons. And some of the -- I will say some of the folks I know on the spectrum are some of the -- sharpest kind of observers of sports or political dynamics, and they have absolutely no interest whatsoever in programming machine code. And so I think that organizations like Specialisterne that have really opened the doorway for neurodiversity in corporate America -- have done great work, but as with any work, there's kind of unintended consequences related to perception, that dynamic evolving communities like neurodiversity need to address. And so I'd say I think at the end of the day I'm a big tent kind of guy. I think you gotta have a lot of different organizations that are private, non-profit, for-profit, doing different work and really iterating and exploring different models and different systems. So shout out to Specialisterne and their folks who did some great work, and are doing great work. But a shout out to other folks like the Autistic Self-Advocacy Network that are really pushing other priorities and projects related to neurodiversity in the workplace. So that's my answer Rachel, and I'm glad you asked about that.

All right. Well I was gonna say I have pretty much covered everything I wanted to cover. I've got some great questions from our audience, some great shout outs to other work being done in places like Colorado, other organizations that are doing interesting work, and so last call for questions. You have 20 seconds to type anything in the chat box you want to get in. As we said before, a recording of this webinar is going to be posted on our website. I hope you share it. If you didn't have a chance to listen as closely as you like, go back and give it another listen. I'm going to drop my email into the chat box right now, if you want to ask me any direct question. As I promised I'm going to send a copy of the accessible slides which are probably already up in our website directly to everybody so you can have them. We hope you will use them, put them out there in the world. Shout out to our captioner, shout out to our ASL interpreter, as well as the master behind the screen, the Wizard of Oz himself, Eric Ascher, for the great work he does. He is one of those critical pieces of the RespectAbility team who very rarely shows up on camera but does incredible work. So shout out to Eric, shout out to our captioner, and shout out to our ASL interpreter. I just want to say as a closing thought everybody, if you liked what you heard here today, think about what you can go and do, what you can take from my presentation and apply in your workplace, apply in your office, in your agency, in your program, in your advocacy. We're really expanding our future webinar options. We're going to be really trying to kind of channel our work into really practical trainings, and we're really keen and eager to hear about how people who attend webinars like this go out and change what they do and change the world for the better. So let us know. Keep up the doing work, keep up your work. I'm going to post my email one more time, it is PhilipP@RespectAbility.org. I put it in the chat box once again. You can also find me on the website anytime and any place. Please follow us on social media. We post regular webinars, we post entertainment and news media webinars, we do live events. And you can also read our blog for some of the latest news in the political, economic, and civic engagement space. And so that is what I have today. So go out and change the world, because that's what we do and that's what we care about. So I've been your host Philip Kahn-Pauli, thank you so much everybody. Take care, have a great afternoon, and I'll see you next time.