

Editorial

Introduction to APSE national conference 2020 special issue

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Maintaining momentum and consistency in the Employment First movement is a challenge in “normal” times. A benefit of the National Association of People Supporting Employment First (APSE) Annual Conference is that it brings much of our community together for an intentional time of mutual sharing and learning.

Perhaps even more importantly, the conference is an annual reminder that each of us is part of something bigger than ourselves or our place of employment. Of all of the challenges faced in 2020, the challenge of finding ways to stay connected was of utmost priority. The APSE community is a unique and diverse one, comprised of dedicated and passionate people who represent a wide variety of experiences, thoughts and opinions. Where we are in absolute agreement is that we care deeply about achieving #RealWorkRealPay for people with disabilities. Yet at a time when coming together was needed the most, we simply could not do it safely.

In the very early weeks of the COVID-19 pandemic, APSE’s National staff and Board of Directors made the difficult decision to cancel the in-person conference and transition to a virtual format. In retrospect, this is a decision that completely makes sense. However, in April 2020, we were all still trying to wrap our brains around this “new normal” which was literally changing every day.

We are direct support professionals – job coaches and job developers on the front lines in breaking down barriers to employment for people with

disabilities – who needed to quickly shift to a virtual supports model. We are also policy makers, funders, and administrators of services, who were suddenly immersed in thinking through new strategies to ensure that the disability employment services delivery system did not collapse as entire portions of our economy shut down. We are researchers who continually strive to put forward the newest and most innovative tools available to make a measurable impact on the gap in the labor participation rate for people with disabilities, and who recognized quickly the need for even newer tools and strategies that potentially look different than anything we’ve seen before. And we are self-advocates and family members whose very lives and livelihoods were significantly changed in the blink of an eye.

APSE’s team, presenters, and many more worked to transform an event that means so much to the APSE community. A fully virtual conference was not something our community had much, if any, experience with and many of us were slow to find enthusiasm for the idea. However, what emerged was a completely new way to engage and connect as a community. Not wholly better. Not wholly worse. Simply different. During the 2020 APSE Virtual Conference held during June and July 2020, 979 attendees participated virtually and had access to 45 different sessions of content.

This special issue highlights just a few of the incredible topics covered during the 2020 event. It represents the resilience of a community that remains dedicated to making a contribution in research, practice and policy. All three are integral and necessary to create lasting change, perhaps more now than ever as we continue to work for Employment First, Employment for All.

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