

**Anyone Can Work with the Right Supports: Vocational Rehabilitation in Iowa
Disability Exchange
Season 4 Episode 4
Recorded August 8, 2024**

Judy Warth: Welcome to Disability Exchange. This is a podcast hosted by the University Center for Excellence in Developmental Disabilities.

This podcast is designed to center and elevate the voices of people with disabilities through meaningful conversations and connections. Our hope is that by bringing people to the table who are working, living with disability we can help people hear the beauty and the challenges of disability.

Today we're excited because we have Dr. James Williams, the director of the Iowa Division of Vocational Rehabilitation Services and his deputy assistant Brandy McOmber.

Today we hope to share their passion. But speaking of passion, I've got my co-host here.

Mike Hoenig: Woohoo!

Judy Warth: Mike Hoenig, Welcome.

Mike Hoenig: I am very passionate about this topic as well. For those that may not have tuned in before I've been blind since birth and have acquired some secondary disabilities as an adult. Employment is something that I have been fortunate to experience since my early twenties. I am so glad to welcome you to our podcast.

Judy Warth: Dr. Williams, also welcome to Iowa. You've been here from Texas for just about a year plus?

Dr. James Williams: Nine months, ten months maybe.

Judy Warth: Tell us a little bit of how you ended up in Iowa.

Dr. James Williams: Wow, that's actually a really interesting story. I also have a disability. I was served by VR as a customer. Helped me get my first degree, which was in special education and helped me get my first teaching job.

My focus really was on middle school and high school and enjoyed it.

I told myself, it's okay I like the teaching part. I like working with students, but I want to try to find something even more meaningful. I went to a transition conference and was really fascinated by this concept that school is really not about school. It's about preparing individuals for future work, future independent living, future life, education. I ended up getting my masters in rehabilitation counseling and dove into the field of supporting adult services, particularly transition age youth.

I worked for many years in a direct service role, doing supportive employment job placement, as a job coach, and a supportive employment specialist. Got an opportunity to take on a leadership role in one of those organizations and I was the CEO when I left.

So what really led me to Iowa? I really focused my search in the Midwest and Iowa had actually come here a couple of years ago, working with the school district on a temporary project and just loved Iowa.

I'd never had worked for a VR agency. Never had thought of working for a VR agency, and so when this opportunity came up, I was like this will be really interesting. And of course I did my due diligence.

Then I interviewed, got this opportunity happily jumped in, I've loved it ever since.

Judy Warth: Brandy, do you mind sharing what is the Iowa Division of Vocational Rehabilitation Services?

Brandy McOmber: Our whole goal is to ensure that individuals with disabilities have access to that competitive integrated employment setting. Pretty recently Iowa Vocational Rehabilitation Services was actually a division under the Department of Education. Our services focus on the employment world, which more closely aligned with Iowa Workforce Development. So the division went under Iowa Workforce Development.

We work really closely with the other divisions within Workforce Development. We're really like a big family. The move has really broadened our ability to provide better and more quality services to individuals. We now have an entire network of experts at hand to provide those services to people with disabilities looking for work.

Mike Hoenig: I know that for many years one of the concerns has been that people with disabilities would not necessarily have the best of experiences through Workforce Development offices.

Dr. James Williams: Michael's absolutely right, if you were a person with a disability, and you walk into a center, A, they may not know how to help you. B, if they did, they probably would say you have a disability, so you should go to VR.

Brandy McOmber: In the past, you may hit a roadblock in one of those centers, because maybe there's not a specific service available. Now you're able to get in that door and get what you need, whether it's a VR person working with you, because you need more intensive services or anyone that's been trained in the center to really just provide the accommodation that you need.

Dr. James Williams: The people we serve, the Iowans we serve, they don't care who funds their services. They don't care what federal agency is involved. They don't care what laws are involved. They just need help. And VR can be a part of that, but it doesn't need to be all of it. That is a very big culture shift for our state.

What I'd like to see is that every Iowan with disability that comes in gets access to every service IWD offers the moment they walk in our door. Are we there yet? No. Have we made progress? Absolutely. Tremendous progress.

Judy Warth: I'm going to make a little shift here. Dr. Williams you've spoken a little bit about, about a person living with autism.

Can you tell us a little bit about how autism affects you and how you've accommodated it to become a leader on the local, national, and federal level?

Dr. James Williams: Autism really is a spectrum. As part of that spectrum, I'm somebody who's on the higher functioning end of that spectrum intellectually.

My challenges have always been more socially related and more executive function related. I'm also somebody who, earlier in my life, before counseling and therapy and medication and other things I've done struggled with anxiety and depression pretty significantly.

One of the benefits of being somebody on the spectrum is my brain tends to think of things very linearly and in very logical, clear patterns.

The things that are difficult for some people are really easy for me. And I laugh, I get in meetings people are talking in circles about all these random things and in my mind, I'm like the solution is pretty simple. I have a tendency or an ability to focus on facts and details. I'm obviously biased, but I think I'm pretty good at what I do. And it's because of that.

I'm also somebody who's very driven by the why behind what I do. I know how incredibly powerful a job for an individual with a disability is. And so for me, I see so much value in VR because I know how work has been transformative to me.

I don't want to be something that just I enjoy. I want it to be something that all individuals with disabilities, autism, you name it, have access to work and to meaningful work, right?

And certainly, that's not always our first job, right? I think all of us could argue our first job was neither glamorous nor maybe meaningful in some cases. It was fast food. It was retail, whatever.

My hope is that everybody that works with VR has the opportunity, frankly to have a job like I have where I know what we do changes lives. And they get to work with a great team. It's another piece that I think is really been valuable for me. I get to work with people like Brandy and our partners, and that's what I love.

Mike Hoenig: Last week at one of our youth leadership training sessions we talked about mentors and leaders that can support us. This discussion started up about some frustrations that young people had about the ICAP program, the Client Assistance Program, and we talked about appeals and changing counselors and everything. Afterward, I got to thinking when I was their age, I was always complaining about my VR counselor too, and as I have

matured, I sit back and I look now and think about if it hadn't been for my VR support, I probably would have never gotten a job.

I'm guessing that all of you have faced pushback have any of you found strategies that help people that are actually going through the system to realize how important it is to stick with it and to persevere. Maybe they're not liking what they have to do to, to accomplish their plan for employment. But in the long run, it's going to pay dividends.

Dr. James Williams: I certainly can start. I think I've experienced this personally and professionally. And two initial thoughts.

People with disabilities need to be treated like the valuable members of society that they are. if you have a VR experience in Iowa, it's less than ideal our leadership team wants to know about it because we want to address it. Say that isn't the case. Maybe our, one of our VR counselors is delivering information that is not what someone wants to hear but is what someone needs to hear.

Because I definitely had that experience when I was in VR as well. I laugh because I complained about my counselor too. I remember coming to my mom and telling her about it, I expected kind of some sympathy from her and I think my mom said something. 'He makes a point,' I had a career goal that was wasn't necessarily realistic either when I started out.

And so what the counselor was trying to do is not necessarily to dissuade me. She was just trying to get me to look at my goal. There was an easier way to get to my goal than the way that I was thinking I had to go.

Many times we have to have uncomfortable conversations with individuals because it's what they need to hear, even if it's not what they wanna hear. Later in life, I actually got to work with this counselor when I was a provider at a colleague level, and she's a wonderful person.

We don't want to be the bad guy but we end up looking like the bad guy because we're having the frank conversation about abilities and about skills and about education and income and all those things that maybe weren't had at the K-12 level. We also have to talk about is expectations and being realistic. I am a huge proponent of informed voice. Informed choice is just what it says. It's an individual gets information, and then they take that information to make an informed choice.

And I think that's really key, because we should never be making decisions for individuals with disabilities. Never. There's never a reason to make that okay. Even an individual with a significant disability, intellectual disability, there's always a way for someone to demonstrate choice. Someone can always make a choice through their actions, through their behavior, through their words, through their, through whatever. And so I think informed choice is absolutely crucial.

And to me, that is really the cornerstone of VR We're having a conversation, we're giving information, and then we're stepping back and we're letting an individual make a choice.

I have had people that I have served, that I've had that conversation with, and then they ended up doing what they wanted to do anyways, and weren't successful. Was I happy about that? No. But did I honor their informed choice and let them fail forward? Absolutely. And I think that is a tough thing to do. It's tough for our counselors. They're really caring people. They're really good people and they don't want to see the people they serve fail. But the honest truth is in VR, we have to be willing to allow someone to grow and experience the dignity of risk, right? And, and I will tell you in my life, I have learned so much more through my failures than through my successes.

Failures shape us and make us better people. They're really uncomfortable in the moment. They are devastating. But they're so necessary for growth. And, and I think that's just a really powerful piece.

Brandy McOmber: The other thing that I think historically in Iowa, for those with the most significant disabilities, those that are struggling the most we've said, 'sorry, you're too disabled to work.'

And so trying to change that message to say 'we believe anyone can work given the right supports' has been hard. Our focus is anyone can work and we just want to find the supports that best support you.

The bottom line is we're in a really good place to be at the forefront of helping people with disabilities and providing those supports rather than shutting a door.

Judy Warth: I have to jump in here I think that part of a young person's evolution is to go, this sucks. I don't want to do this.

Dr. James Williams: It absolutely is. Yes!

Judy Warth: And there's an ebb and flow to be able to walk away and then choose to come back.

James, I always get so excited when I hear people talk about the dignity of risk. I tell people all the time, I'm a strong advocate for choice. As long as I agree with it.

Dr. James Williams: I love it.

Judy Warth: And when I have to let go of that, I agree with it. That is where empowerment comes.

I would infuse every child with the expectation you're going to work because we all have to work and then it's our job to figure out how to do that dance with them and that's what's really exciting.

But I want to take a step back. James, I know you're so much more than just VR. You have a life outside VR. Would you mind sharing a little bit about your world? You're more than just a worker. You have a full life.

Dr. James Williams: I do. I do. So I'm very fortunate. I have a two year old. My wife, her and I've been together for 11 years. I love the outdoors. I've really gotten to enjoy some of the beautiful parks and trails that we had here. My yoga, that's been a really great kind of centering practice that I've done.

I'm also a sports fan I love baseball. I'm a big Astros fan.

Judy Warth: You have a Cardinals fan in Mike.

Dr. James Williams: Oh, I didn't, oh gosh, yeah, that's the, that's our rivals. Great games though.

Mike Hoenig: Oh man they were.

Dr. James Williams: I love Astro Cardinals games. Yeah, especially in the heyday.

Judy Warth: Brandy, what a little bit more about you. You're more than just VR.

Brandy McOmber: Was born here and started in Marshalltown and then moved to Cedar Falls for school and never left. We tend to be the family in the neighborhood that all the kids come to you. Yesterday, I think we had seven sleeping over at our house. My husband is the fun one.

He always comes up with the adventures, and I'm the. 'Don't get hurt.' So we together have good family time.

Judy Warth: If you were going to give advice to our listeners, who may be family members, may be practitioners, may be individuals who might come to VR, what advice would you give them?

Dr. James Williams: Honestly, and this may sound offensive, and please don't take it that way, make sure you're not in your own way. I feel like people with disabilities, we get in our own way all the time. We get, we, in our mind, we get limited by what people have told us. We get limited by our experiences. We think we can't do this, we can't do that.

That attitude leads us to doing exactly what we can't do. That can do attitude as cheesy as it sounds, really does make a huge difference. And I think that it's not just for the person with disability, it's also for their parents. I've said this for years. If you believe your child can't work, they probably won't.

If you believe they can, they probably will. My whole dissertation study was actually to prove that fact basically what I found is that parents believed their son or daughter with a disability could work actually led to them achieving that outcome.

And I think there's so much power in the power of belief and positive thought. And it's so needed in our community. There's so much of disability the medical model, the deficit-based model, that really says we can't do this, we can't do that, here's our limitations. Changing that paradigm and looking at it from what we can do, is really is transformative.

Me not working was never an option for my mom, like she never once thought, because of my diagnosis, I was going to not work or live independently. She made sure I was aware of that fact. She was very honest even when I didn't want to hear it or when I had a bad day that you're still gonna do it.

And I think her pushing me in a positive way really also affected my mindset and helped me to realize that I could do this. And sure, I stumbled, and sure, I fell, and sure, I failed, all of that's true. But I still got there.

I've proven to myself several times in my life that if I wanted to do something or had it had a desire or a dream, I could achieve it. And once you do that enough times you start to really doubt the naysaying that is internal in your mind.

Stay out of your own way. Believe that you can do it, believe that it's capable or that your individuals are capable if you're a parent and then watch as they achieve it and blow away your expectations. Enjoy the ride.

Judy Warth: If I could can what you just said there, James, I would be selling it. And if any Iowans wonder why you are now the leader of our agency, if they just listen to that, they'll know. They will know, because that can do attitude is what we all need on good days and bad days. Thank you guys so much.

Thank you to Mike and our producer, Joanna Sabha. We are anchored on Spotify.

Mike Hoenig: The transcript for episodes of Disability Exchange can be found on our website, through the Center for Disabilities and Development.

Narrator: Thank you for joining us today on Disability Exchange. Disability Exchange is produced by the University Center for Excellence in Developmental Disabilities, which is housed at the Center for Disabilities and Development at the University of Iowa. Special thanks to Kyle Delvaux for the music contribution.