

## Disability Exchange Season 4 Episode 8

# A Career in System Change: Tammie Amsbaugh

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**Judy Warth:** Broadcasting straight from Iowa City and Florida, Disability Exchange welcomes you. Disability Exchange is a podcast hosted by the University of Iowa Center for Excellence in Developmental Disabilities.

It is designed to elevate and center 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, and thriving with disabilities, that we can hear the beauty and the challenges. Today we're excited because we have my colleague, friend, and mentor, Tammie Amsbaugh, with us. I can't wait for her to tell us more, but first, meet my co-host Mike.

**Mike Hoenig:** Thank you, Judy. It is a cold day in Sarasota, normally this time of the year of 70 to 75 degrees, but it is 48. I'm sure that nobody feels too sorry for me. I'm very fortunate to be here. I serve as a program coordinator at the University Center for Excellence and Developmental Disabilities, UCEDD I've worked with Judy and Tammie for a very long time. Tammie, we'll just bring you right in now and introduce yourself.

**Tammie Amsbaugh:** Thanks guys for having me it's been a pleasure working with you. I started at the, UCEDD in 2005. I have always been a remote staffer before remote staffing was really popular. Our work was related to things that had to do with state and the state government and state policy, so it made sense for us to be located in Des Moines.

**Judy Warth:** The focus of your work has been on employment related things?

**Tammie Amsbaugh:** Yes. For most of my career it has been employment. The idea was employment for people with disabilities in real jobs in the community. I was mostly dealing with this policy things. In policy that said you couldn't work and receive your Medicaid benefits and your social security benefits. The

other side of it, or big side of it, is attitude and, expectations, I think, of people with disabilities and the inclusion in the school system and then once you got older, you were not included in regular life.

I didn't get to meet Judy until well into my career here. And it was interesting because my perspective was on policy barriers and attitudinal or, expectation barriers and Judy was working with getting people jobs.

**Judy Warth:** Yeah, Tammy, it was a beautiful marriage of macro and micro approaches to employment for people with disabilities, boots on the ground, and people helping open up the pathways. When you reflect on your work in the world of employment for people with disabilities, what are you most proud of that you feel like you were part of or helped accomplish?

**Tammie Amsbaugh:** I think some of the big things that I'm proud of are our work with Employment First and bringing the Employment First Summit and Employment First Concept to Iowa. That's a big concept and it's still in the works. I'm really proud of that. That brought a lot of outside expertise into the state and we collaborated on a lot of things to get, policy things done and changes in our Medicaid rules et cetera. Then benefits planning. Part of all this work was being able to answer the question, can I work and still get Medicaid and the benefits planning is hugely complicated but just the idea that I can go to work and still retain my benefits was a big hurdle.

**Mike Hoenig:** Tammie, to take a little bit of a step back. For those people who may not be familiar with the concept of Employment First, help us understand that concept and how it relates to more traditional employment of people with disabilities.

**Tammie Amsbaugh:** The Employment First Concept for the individuals with disabilities is that employment is possible for everyone given the right supports and services. And that employment should be the first and preferred outcome so, employment in the general workforce, with other people without disabilities paid the minimum wage or above of the going rate for the job you're doing. That concept is big because there's just so many people who assume growing up that I'm not going to be able to work. When I started in this, that was probably the prevailing attitude and now I don't think that is the prevailing attitude. And that's a big deal. If people don't think they can work, then they can't work. And if parents don't think they can work, then it's going to be a real uphill road to get anybody anywhere.

**Judy Warth:** Tammie, I think you make an important distinction. People used to believe that people with disabilities, unlike neurotypical people, had to prove they were ready to work in Employment First says when you're 14, you don't have to prove that you're ready to go work at McDonald's. You don't have to jump through certain hoops to be able to make that happen. Tammie highlighted, if we can help people begin to see that and that becomes more of the common way, then hopefully we'll begin to see everyone have the opportunity to have meaningful work.

**Tammie Amsbaugh:** Judy, I am so proud of Iowa for taking the steps in this direction early on in the movement. Senator Tom Harkin had a big impact on this with the ADA and getting this kind of attitude and expectation out there.

**Mike Hoenig:** It was interesting when you talked about expectations and how really early that process needs to start if the child is an adolescent is 14, and there's already been this expectation. 'Oh, they're not going to work.' 'They're going to always be taken care of.' That's 14 years of having to undo that within the family unit and all within the professionals that are supporting the individual and the person him or herself.

**Tammie Amsbaugh:** Mike, you're exactly right. the idea that you're going to be independent and you're going to be a contributing member of society starts really early. Judy and I we did this little promotion around the CDD clinic. What do you wanna be when you grow up?

**Mike Hoenig:** Remember that?

**Tammie Amsbaugh:** And that was so cool because we asked little kids, and their parents in the clinic and we got some really cool answers and we've had some really cool results from that. Some of those kids are out in their careers now.

**Judy Warth:** One of the individuals will be sitting on a panel for me next week her dream, was to be a fashion designer in New York or Paris, and she was probably no more than 12. She's about to graduate from high school. She's hosted her first fashion show locally. This is an individual with complex support needs including using assistive technology to speak and to design. if you guys could see our faces, we're both smiling from cheek to cheek because this is what makes employment fun.

**Tammie Amsbaugh:** Oh! That is so true.

**Judy Warth:** Some highlights that pop into my head is your work on Individual Placement and Supports,

**Tammie Amsbaugh:** This was a model of employment for individuals with serious mental illness. Work impacted their life in such a positive way. Working is really a treatment and causes much better outcomes. So we had 2 pilots going on in the state and now we have 8 projects that are working.

We reworked some Medicaid language around employment to make this work for people with mental illness and it has branched in a cool way in Iowa.

Part of that is working with, expanding and promoting IPS or other evidence based practices, within the state, that impact not only the individual's life, but impact on the system; the jails, the hospital emergency rooms, when people go to work, all those things, all those interactions reduce in their life.

**Mike Hoenig:** It must be really gratifying for you to have been on the ground floor of some of this work in Iowa. You're starting out with a pilot and now we have an entire center for excellence devoted to IPS and other best practices.

**Tammie Amsbaugh:** Adults with serious mental illness is the target population for that program, but the impact on the, UCEDD, and on the work that we do, that is really a point of pride for me. There's so much co-occurring between individuals with intellectual disabilities and people with mental illness That's a, that's big stuff and it's developing area in our UCEDD.

**Judy Warth:** Let's take a hard turn here. You've done more than just employment two things that pop in my head are the community ambassadors and transition to adult health care.

**Tammie Amsbaugh:** Yeah

**Judy Warth:** and I know there's more. Do you mind sharing a bit about those?

**Tammie Amsbaugh:** I tell you what, the Community Ambassadors is a highlight of my career. That was the first situation where I was working directly with the individuals and not in a policy role. I was working right with them. The reason that we did the community ambassadors, the purpose of it was to promote community living. We were working with their guardians and support staff to see a move into the community in a person's life. And so we told those stories. We presented at conferences.

**Mike Hoenig:** Now, just to clarify these, the ambassadors were people that had all been in congregate or sometimes referred to as institutional settings.

**Tammie Amsbaugh:** Yes, they had all come from either one of the state institutions or another ICF. And moved into host homes or their own waiver home or their own apartments. We have a couple that have advanced to living in their own apartments, going to college, serving on national boards and commissions related to disability and inclusion and community activities.

**Mike Hoenig:** I'll never forget this trip that you and I took from Iowa City to the state conference. You started getting these anxious calls from ambassadors and one in particular who was overstressed and there wasn't staff around and you just navigated that. You provided assurance and at the same time, really gave him the dignity of being an adult.

**Tammie Amsbaugh:** Boy, thank you for saying that. I'm not trained as a social worker. I'm not trained in medical or any kind of direct care. I was really trying hard to walk that line of being concerned and empathetic, but still not taking care of people.

**Mike Hoenig:** You did well.

**Tammie Amsbaugh:** Thank you.

**Judy Warth:** From there you sprung into another opportunity where you had a chance to interact more intimately with the people you've been working for 20 years. Do you mind sharing a little bit about that?

**Tammie Amsbaugh:** The UCEDD wrote a grant and we set out to improve adult care for people with disabilities who are moving out of the pediatric world.

Dr. Pixie Plummer was our leader at the time. She said, 'the idea is to answer the question, 'Transition to what?' and to improve that care system out there for adults. One of the big problems is getting people into the community that have access to the medical care they need. If I'm concerned about, a person, I don't want them to move somewhere when there's no medical care or no follow up available.

We have a great group of self-advocates who've helped us do that. We've reached out to some Latino or Spanish speaking communities in the Iowa City

area and around the state. We have presented this training at agencies who provide services to people with intellectual disabilities

We just got finished with the DD council series on our Taking Charge of My Health. We did four webinars. We've tried to give people the tools to be involved, giving them permission to talk to the medical staff, and giving the medical staff permission, if you will, to listen and to engage, as opposed to just go through their routine. I think with the self-advocacy piece to this is just giving people a voice.

Yes, you have the right to question, why is the doctor prescribing this drug to you? The choices to receive or to participate in recommended treatments. It's not just a, 'I'm walking down the path with my doctor leading me blindly.' You have the right to participate in that stuff. That's a big concept.

We did a little table game where we wanted the person to interrupt the doctor talking in lingo. We call it the interruption game. So, the doctor is doing his thing or her thing with all the language about what's wrong with you.

And the person is supposed to say, 'Wait a minute. Can you use plain language? Can you explain that in a way I understand?' And that brought a lot of attention, because not only do people with disabilities not speak up, but neither does hardly anybody speak up with their doctor

**Mike Hoenig:** Excellent example.

**Judy Warth:** Tammie, as we as we're wrapping up, we ask everybody who comes on this podcast. What do you hope your legacy is? What's the thing that you hope people remember?

**Tammie Amsbaugh:** When I think about the impact that I might have had on people, I hope that it is as positive as they've had on me. Before I came to work at the UCEDD, I was working in private industry, and I just do not think I would be as good of a person had I stayed in that world. Does that make sense?

**Mike Hoenig:** Yeah, Well, You have had an impact. One final question, just for fun. what's retirement going to look like for you?

**Tammie Amsbaugh:** I plan to just be like relaxed. I think I'll just get my feet in it and learn.

**Judy Warth:** Tammie, you have brought perspective, competence, compassion, and just a very systematic, intelligent approach to the work. Don't ever diminish that, is the legacy the foundations you've laid through the transition to healthcare work your work with employment policy, as well as the community ambassadors continue to do amazing things

**Tammie Amsbaugh:** Yep. Yep.

**Mike Hoenig:** I concur with Judy. You've educated me in many ways you really do walk the walk. On behalf of our crew here Joanna Sabha, our producer, and my co-host Judy. I would like to thank you so much for sharing with us. It's been a wonderful conversation.

Of course, we want to thank our listeners and invite you to stay tuned for the next disability exchange, which you can catch on Spotify and any number of other platforms.

**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.