

Episode 29: Interview with David Jones

Summary Keywords: disability, mental health, ACL, support, people, priorities, developmental disabilities, community, IDD, programs, individual, DD, focus, states, pandemic, administration

Speakers: Alex Schiwal, David Jones, Matt Wappett

Alex Schiwal 00:00

Music Hi, and welcome to the Mental Health Crossroads podcast, where we explore the intersection of mental health and developmental disabilities. A few housekeeping items before we jump into this interview with David Jones from ACL (Administration for Community Living). First, this interview was recorded in June of 2021 so some of the information about grants may be dated. Second, we're approaching the end of our second season of the Mental Health Crossroads podcast. Please watch this space for our new center podcast, the Developmental Disabilities Network Journal podcast. You can visit the link in the show notes for more. We hope to be highlighting research and other work from the AUCD network published in our journal, the Developmental Disabilities Network Journal. That's all the news we have for now. Please enjoy this interview. Thank you. *Music*

Matt Wappett 00:54

Thank you, everybody, for joining us today for Mental Health Crossroads. We're excited today to welcome David Jones, who is the new director of the Office of Intellectual and Developmental Disabilities (OIDD), and the acting director of the Office of Disability Services Innovation at the Administration for Community Living in the US Department of Health and Human Services. David, prior to coming to ACL in July of 2020, served in two federal agencies focused on disability employment and programs. At the US Department of Labor, he oversaw the administration of Disability Employment Initiative grants, and technical assistance contracts to help strengthen the capacity of American Job Centers to serve people with disabilities. And he served at the US Department of Education, where he monitored state VR programs and was a program officer for two Protection and Advocacy (P&A) programs. Prior to his career focus on disability, David served within the inspector general community for three federal agencies and the United Way of America. He's originally from Pennsylvania, holds a bachelor's degree from Bucknell University and a Master's of Public Administration from George Mason [University]. We are really, really excited to have David with us today. Thank you for joining us.

David Jones 02:20

Thank you, Matthew, and really nice to be on today's podcast.

Matt Wappett 02:23

Yeah, you bring a really diverse background. And although you've been in the disability field for quite a while, you're relatively new to ACL and many of our listeners work in ACL funded programs. Outside of what I've shared, can you share a little bit more about your background and sort of what you bring to your position at ACL?

David Jones 02:44

Sure, Matt. I actually joined ACL last July, so I'll be coming to my one year anniversary. As you mentioned, I am the director of the Office of Intellectual and Developmental Disabilities. I'm very fortunate in that role to be collaborating with the DD Council (Developmental Disabilities Council) and the UCEDD (University Centers for Excellence in Developmental Disabilities Education, Research, and Service). We're also ramping up the President's Commission for People with Intellectual Disabilities, and we're currently in a transition right now. I'm also serving in the Office of Disability Services Innovation, where we work with the P & A Agencies and the Projects of National Significance. I'm very fortunate to be in both roles right now, because I feel we can really learn from each other. But on a personal note, I am an individual with a disability and I very much beat the odds through hard work, determination, and resilience. I was born with severe hearing loss, and I do feel very much my disability has shaped me in pushing through barriers to achieve my goal. But one of the things I do know is that I did not do this alone. I was very fortunate to have strong family support and a wonderful community growing up in a coal mining town in Pennsylvania, where the church, my teacher, and the community were very instrumental in shaping me. I've been very fortunate. I went to Bucknell University, after that I came to DC and I'm currently in my 20th year of government service. I do feel very fortunate to be in this role, to give back. I am one of the fortunate few people who have the job having a disability, and anything I can do to strengthen disability employment is one of my passions. I feel like I have a job with a purpose and a life with purpose, so I'm very fortunate to be doing what I do each day.

Matt Wappett 04:36

You have just a remarkable background and it is nice with that diversity that you bring and a different perspective from multiple different federal agencies. In addition to your lived experience, [which] I'm sure will be informing your priorities, in your role at ACL as the Director of OIDD, what priorities do you have? What priorities are you trying to focus on?

David Jones 05:04

Oftentimes I tell people, I don't really establish the priority. I do serve the administration, and oftentimes they will set the priority. But what I often do to support leadership is say, tell me your vision and I'll help you get there. I'll get you there from point A to point B. I basically give a lot of the leaders options for the path to take.

David Jones 05:28

The priorities right now that we're really focusing on is combating COVID-19. Earlier this year, we've done a remarkable job with getting grant dollars out to the UCEDDs, DD Councils, the IL community (Independent Living), and the P&As to increase vaccine access in the communities. I think we received nearly \$93 million between the disability and the aging network. One of the things that we're doing right now in ACL is making sure that the funds are getting out there and that people can get vaccine access. That's one thing that we're doing. Another priority is racial equity and that's huge. As we look at criminal justice reform, ending disparity in health care access and education, [and to] improve housing access is very important in what we do with our grants. Another priority area, that I feel also very passionate about, is building back better. This is the priority of President Biden. He did recently sign the American Rescue Plan to support economic recovery. I know that there's a lot of funding for the home and community based services (HCBS) so we're very excited about that. We're in a very unique moment in time in which we can build the economy back from the pandemic, and people with disabilities do play a very important role as part of that recovery effort. And so within ACL right now, we're looking at the AoD (Administration on Disabilities) Disability Employment TA (Technical Assistance) Center, to support our grantees to make sure that there's shared knowledge around that. We also have provided a business prize challenge to support employers to be more inclusive to people with disabilities. There's some of the priorities we have.

David Jones 07:14

But I think the unique thing that I do bring to the role is on 'the how.' I very much am focused on increasing visibility. I'm one of those persons with a megaphone, to really get our word out there in terms of what we do. Also, it's so important that [we are] not only externally communicating what we do but internally increasing engagement. And it's so important with our grantees that we build trust. Last year when I came on board, one of the first things I did was have monthly calls with the DD councils in smaller forums, across the regions. We're starting something like that this summer, and I'm really looking forward to getting to know more the UCEDDs. We also did something innovative, just about two weeks ago, where we brought the whole DD network together with the DD Councils, and the UCEDDs, and the P&As to think together related to how ABLE (Achieving A Better Life Act) accounts can be helpful to individuals with IDD (intellectual/developmental disabilities). Basically, ABLE is a tax-advantaged savings plan to pay for disability-qualified expenses. Yeah, increasing visibility and

increasing engagement, it's something that I really do to support our leadership in carrying out the administration priorities.

Matt Wappett 08:32

It's great. Outside of the priorities that are set by the administration and that are kind of underway, there's other things facing Community Living Programs. The settings rule implementation is just on the horizon, and there's a bunch of other things that are waiting in the wings. From your perspective and from your big picture view, what are some of the most pressing issues facing community living programs in the US today?

David Jones 09:01

I do think, first and foremost, it is equity. I know within the criminal justice system, there have been a lot of lessons learned from what we saw last year with George Floyd. One of the things I'm very happy to see is some changes happening in DC. For instance, first responders to crisis, we're right now pivoting from sending the police force to instead sending mental health officials to provide support. That is something that I think is very important, because we need to make sure that the experts are responding to these very delicate, critical situations. What we're finding is that it's not only pivoting in DC, but also the state of Virginia. They're taking similar steps to mandate behavioral health crisis teams statewide. I'm really pleased to see that there is a lot of training and leadership happening. I feel like that is one way that we can bridge the gap in equity as it relates to our criminal justice system with our first responders, so I feel that's a very pressing issue facing community living.

David Jones 10:18

Another area of equity is going to be more from the labor lens. The statistics show that for a lot of youth that get incarcerated, they do have a disability, and there is a higher ratio of percentage of those within the African American population. There is value to the reentry program, from the incarceration of youth back into the community and into the workforce system. I think that's a program that's often overlooked, because this is a group that often gets marginalized, and not able to get a fair shot in life by being an ex-offender. And if you can get to them early in their youth, through mentoring, I think it's something that would be a great investment. I do believe that there's value of partnerships in having more effective reentry programs to support communities. They look at workforce education training and job placement. I feel there's a lot of correlation between individuals with disabilities, youth incarceration, and helping them get them back on their feet. I think that's one area that is of critical importance right now that we need to look at a little more closely.

David Jones 11:34

And finally, the third area, which everyone is talking about is the labor shortage for direct support professionals. As we know, they are a wonderful group of people who help the IDD population live independently in the community. But unfortunately, there's a turnover rate of about 45% and the challenge has only worsened during the pandemic. It's largely due to low wages, lack of benefits, and lack of training. I do believe that there's a unique opportunity in which we can invest in this, and ACL has already begun that. Earlier this year, ACL launched the disability service provider prize challenge. Basically what that is, it's looking for an innovative solution to address the crisis. I do believe in this area, it is a priority of the Biden administration and so I do think that we'll be getting more and more support in this area. They're the three leading areas that I feel are critical as we think about priorities, but then, you know, community living.

Matt Wappett 12:38

Yeah, all of which are huge. Two of my calls earlier today were about the direct support professional shortage and training issues out here in Utah. I'm glad to know that that's a priority that's also being looked at from the big picture, because it is a huge challenge, especially post COVID here. It's just become so difficult to find people and to retain people, honestly. One of the things that you brought up earlier in your comments, as you were talking about racial equity was mental health and of course this podcast is part of the Mental Health and Developmental Disabilities National Training Center, which is an ACL funded initiative. Mental health hasn't always been seen as part of a community living program. A few years ago, with the emergence of this national training center, we saw that ACL was starting to shift their focus to start thinking about mental health. What are some other things that ACL is doing, in this administration, to prioritize mental health, particularly for people with intellectual and developmental disabilities?

David Jones 13:47

That's a great question. I feel like right now in ACL, we are continuing the course that we've been on, but I am very pleased to say that we're continuing to invest. Right now, we do have a Notice of Funding Opportunity out there on the street for the UCEDDs to apply with our national training initiative. Basically, it's focused on supporting people with IDD with co-occurring mental or behavioral health disabilities. While I can't talk about that, the one thing I do want to kind of note and I guess this is my public administrator hat is...

David Jones 14:21

Within this area, I think one of the things that we always are thinking about is, what is the root of the problem? We often know that too many people with IDD and mental health often go undiagnosed, and misdiagnosed because of the lack of tools for mental health professionals. One of the things that I do know is that the numbers are pretty staggering, there are about over

7 million people in the US that have IDD and of that group a lot of them have mental health conditions. We do see how the two are interconnected. One of the things that I have been reading, and I've been doing a lot of reading about this last December, and coordinating with SAMSHA is... One of the leading challenges is that there are varying levels of collaboration at the state level between agencies overseeing IDD support and mental health treatment. Basically, what we're seeing is a lot of stovepipes, you know, the DD agency, mental health agency, and the structure of the system [are] very unique to each state where there could be a lack of coordination.

David Jones 15:30

I have to admit, when I did read that, I just had a flashback to when I served at Labor and Education as it relates to the workforce. And before went it from WIA, the Workforce Investment Act, to the Workforce Innovation and Opportunity Act, the very same challenges that I've been reading have been described. Basically, there was a lot of fragmentation and what WIOA tried to do was, they tried to align the program, and they try to be creative by the way that we do planning. How do we align with planning? How do we get data together? And how do we coordinate with services? I feel like there had been that shift with WIOA to focus on the customer and not on the system. And I feel like there is some of the challenges that I'm currently seeing in this sector that we're in right now, but at the same time I am seeing very shining stars right now in this field of IDD mental health. A good example would be in New Hampshire, the Institute on Disability, I'm seeing how they're doing the biopsychosocial approach. I like it, because they're looking at the biology of the person, the psychology of the person, and the social aspect to the person, so looking at that individual as a person. So it's not about the system, it's about the individual. And they're taking a teams approach to focus on that individual. I really think that's really neat work, and I've been watching that, and I'm acknowledging their work.

Matt Wappett 17:09

Yeah.

David Jones 17:09

But also, I'm seeing how states are doing some very innovative work. I know in Delaware, they've established the ACIST program, the Assertive Community Integration and Support Team. And what I like about what they're doing is, it's similar to what we talked about with WIOA, how do you make it more seamless for the customer? So they're making it more of a seamless handoff between the mental health agency and the IDD agency. That's really neat to see that they're focusing on the customer. And of course, in New Mexico, I'm hearing good things about the training for the direct support professional, specifically, not 'the what' of what they need to do, but 'the how.' So how do they recognize what they do? And it's not just

focusing on the behavior, but kind of communicating what that means. I feel like there have been some innovative training that's been happening in that area. Yeah, so I feel like we're kind of improving in terms of recognizing the importance of person-centered planning and the individual. I feel like if we're on that track, I feel like it'll make good strides.

Matt Wappett 18:18

Yeah, those are some model states that you bring up, who are really doing good work. It is exciting, the new grant competition that's out there although we can't talk a lot about it. But just the focus on building that local capacity, when you talk about that systems fragmentation and how things aren't always working together, that new grant really, I think, highlights and provides resources for states to pull those stakeholders together and really address that fragmentation in a way that will hopefully address the needs of individuals with dual diagnosis in our service system.

David Jones 18:57

One thing I want to add, Matt, that we've been doing lately, and this is a testament to Jennifer Johnson's leadership and in coordination with Ruby Moore from University of Georgia. They lead the international initiative for Mental Health Leadership. Basically, in the age of COVID-19, we're not in this alone like COVID-19 does not know any borders. And so one of the things that we've been doing at ACL is actually engaging with other countries focused on the IDD mental health population, as it relates to COVID. It's really been informative to have exchanges in that area, because we're a world of one.

Matt Wappett 19:39

Yeah, as you bring that up... This isn't one of the questions that I sent you, but if you don't know just say, I don't know. *Laughter* In that international work and looking at how other countries have been addressing this issue, are there any promising practices or things that have caught your eye?

David Jones 19:58

Yeah, I would say the role of technology is something's that been surfacing. I think for so many in the world, we were in a fixed mindset and I think we all had to learn to adapt, and change, and be in a growth mindset with technology. We've seen, especially in this country, with telehealth in terms of how that has actually fostered innovation in ways not seen before. Granted, there are challenges in rural communities with using that, but I've seen in the more developed countries how technology has been very instrumental. It should be very interesting to see as we kind of pivot from telehealth to telework, how that is going to transform how we

live our lives every day, and it could actually be an opportunity for the disability population to be more engaged in the workforce.

Matt Wappett 20:56

Yeah. Yeah, hopefully. There's also significant issues around a digital divide, especially for people with intellectual and developmental disabilities who are in services, which I think to be truly effective, that we need to address as well in this process. But yeah, the technology has been a huge, huge lifesaver. When we talk about mental health, the evidence is coming out that telehealth therapy, things like that for mental health, but also just primary care, is just as effective if not more effective than in-person, which is interesting. As we've all gone through this experience with the pandemic, everybody has struggled with mental health things and it's become kind of first and foremost in our news and it's kind of been elevated. It was always there, but it's kind of been elevated to a national epidemic. One of the questions that we like to ask participants on the podcast here are, what strategies have you found to be effective in supporting your own mental health through this pandemic?

David Jones 22:11

That's a great question. In the beginning, ironically, I actually kind of did quite well. I know a lot of my friends were struggling with the pandemic, but I actually came across a newspaper article and they said the difference is between people who are intrinsically motivated and extrinsically motivated. And I'm one of those that is more of the intrinsic scale of things. I actually found myself in the beginning to be very creative. At the time, I was at DOL (Department of Labor) and I was pushing out really cool, innovative stuff for eLearning that support our American Job Centers. That was interesting, that I saw that some of my friends struggled, and I don't know if it's maybe because I have a disability being more resilient, but I actually used a lot of that time to be very creative in the beginning and really used that time to learn. But at the same time, you can overwork and you need that work life balance, so one of the things that I'm very firm in doing is one hour walks. It's so much easier to do now. It is a way for me to clear my head, and I do a lot of good thinking during those walks. And of course strength training, I don't enjoy that, but the next day I feel better and it helps me stay focused. A little bit of cardio and weight training is something that helped me with my mental health. Exercise, I guess, bottom line helped me get through those days when I feel zoomed out-

Matt Wappett 23:50

-Yeah.

David Jones 23:51

That's some of the strategies that I've adopted.

Matt Wappett 23:55

Yeah, it's amazing. As we've done these interviews and as we've talked to more and more people through the pandemic, more and more people have recognized that connection between mind and body. Healthy body equals healthy mind, and vice versa. And the more we move our body, the healthier we feel and it increases self-esteem and lots of other things. That's great. I'm glad to hear that's been working for you. How can people be more effective advocates? One of the things that we do is, and especially within the UCEDD system and the DD councils, is train people to advocate for more effective community services or mental health supports or whatever the case may be. In your experience, how can people be more effective advocates for community living supports or mental health programs?

David Jones 24:49

Again, I'm gonna go back to the person-centered planning, always knowing the unique needs of the individual. Because I feel that is the foundation of it, knowing and understanding that. But I think to be a very effective advocate, we need to have data. I know that's a challenge we have right now, there's a dearth of data. But that is something that we really need to collect in order to advocate. We need that baseline for continued research so that is something that we really need to get more of in order to be more effective advocates. But I know, in the meantime, there are kind of emerging, promising practices happening and evidence-based models. And so wherever we can highlight that, put a spotlight on them to replicate, I think, is one way that we can advocate. One of the things that I do know, over the years is, states are not always hungry for 'the what', but for 'the how.' They want to know the recipe. And I know a lot of times states are very different, because their structure as we talked about before. The stove pipes are there, but I do feel we can show that recipe on 'the how', that is a really good way to effectively advocate.

Matt Wappett 26:14

Yeah, that reliance on data and really ensuring that we have the evidence to support the decisions that are being made I feel is so important. What one big idea would you like people to take from our conversation today?

David Jones 26:29

The leading key takeaway here is always think about the customer, the individual, and how can we have a seamless support system within a fragmented system. It's something that we navigated through in the labor force, and I feel it's something that we can similarly do in this realm. We can't focus on the system, but we got to focus on the individual. We're starting to see changes happening in DC, again, with the first responders. We're seeing some innovative work with incarcerated youth returning to the workforce. We're also seeing some really unique

training that's happening with the direct service professionals. I think at the end of the day, if we find that this is a good investment upfront, that it's going to help us in the long term, in terms of minimizing expenses down the road for any institutional stays, hospital stays, or emergency visits. Really that keen approach upfront, wherever we can, because one cannot be the expert in everything in this complex realm. I feel like when we can work together to focus on the customer, I think we can move the needle.

Matt Wappett 27:36

Yeah, that is a really important idea that I don't think we can over emphasize enough. Yeah, that focus on the individual. A lot of times that focus on the person has been the primary motivation at the local level, but we haven't always seen it trickle up. And so I appreciate that, that is really something that you bring to your position there. I look forward to more guidance and direction on how we remain person-centered in all that we do. How can people learn more about you and about your work at ACL?

David Jones 28:14

At ACL, we have a very active social media account. Twitter is the best, so please sign up for the ACL Twitter account so you can get updates for all the great things that are happening. Another area that I feel very passionate about is our Disability Employment Technical Assistance Center. We have a contract with The Lewin/TASH group and basically we have tools and resources available. That address is addisabilityemploymenttcenter.com. On that website, what you'll find is a state map that includes employment data for all states and territories, and it includes a clearinghouse of resources related to employment system change efforts. I feel employment is one of those critical areas to add value to life. It gives everyone purpose when we can work and do something. Finally, also on this site, we have the national community of practice. What you can do is sign up to join our national community of practice, I encourage you to do so because it allows you to stay engaged with our webinars, blog posts, and other podcasts. They're the two areas that I like to highlight and hope that you can follow.

Matt Wappett 29:40

Great, we appreciate your time today, David. This has been a great interview, and a great opportunity to meet you and learn a little bit more about your priorities and what you bring to ACL. Thank you so much for your time.

David Jones 29:54

Great. Thank you for having me.

Alex Schiwal 29:55

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