



Interview with Judith Heumann Director, Washington D.C. Department on Disability Services

[Announcer] This podcast was presented by the NTAR Leadership Center, helping state leaders help adults with disabilities to employment and better economic opportunities through collaboration, innovation, and change.

[Laurie Harrington] Welcome to Lead.State.Gov, a featured podcast of the NTAR Leadership Center. I'm your host, Laurie Harrington. Judith Heumann is the first Director of the Washington, D.C., Department on Disability Services. Ms. Heumann is a widely recognized leader in the disability rights movement, both in the U.S. and throughout the world. In June 2002, she was named as the World Bank's first Advisor on Disability and Development. In this position, Heumann, an internationally recognized expert on disability and diversity issues, led the World Bank's work to expand the Bank's knowledge and capacity to work with governments and civil society on including disability initiatives. Her work highlighted the importance of integrating disability priorities in Bank discussions with client countries and improving policies and programs to allow disabled people throughout the world to live and work in the economic and social mainstream of their communities. From 1993 to 2001, Heumann served in the Clinton administration as the Assistant Secretary for the Office of Special Education and Rehabilitative Services in the Department of Education. Heumann was responsible for the implementation of federal legislation for programs in special education, disability research, vocational rehabilitation, and independent living, serving more than eight million youths and adults with disabilities. Welcome to our podcast, Judith. First of all, could you introduce yourself to our listening audience and tell us about the work you are doing in Washington, D.C. to promote employment for people with disabilities?

[Judith Heumann] My name is Judy Heumann, and I'm the Director of the Department on Disability Services for the District of Columbia. And the District of Columbia, it's important to describe, is not a state but basically is treated as a state. And the reason I explain this is people are frequently confused about the District versus the federal government. I became the Director of the Department in 2007. And Mayor Fenty, who is the one who appointed me, has had a very proactive position on improving the quality of life for residents of the District of Columbia, including those with disabilities. And employment has been a very critical part of the work that DDS has been doing. The Department on Disability Services is made up of two agencies; one is the Developmental Disabilities Administration, and the other is the D.C. Rehab Services Administration. As you know, RSA has a hundred percent responsibility for working with disabled individuals who are interested in securing employment, maintaining employment, advancing in employment. And the Developmental Disabilities part of the house also works on employment. And when this department was created, one of the advantages was that it was going to enable us as two agencies to be able to work collaboratively on the employment aspect. Now, over the last three years, what we have been doing is really ramping up our efforts in the area of employment for disabled people. The work that needs to be done has really been to reconnect more effectively with employers, get a much better understanding on what the market is in the D.C. and surrounding areas, looking at opportunities to be able to engage with employers, to let them know more about the population of people that we're serving and their interest in work and



capacity to be able to work, as well as to really raise the expectations for residents in the District of Columbia with disabilities about what the world of work looks like today and is expected to look like in the future. We have a large government sector job, for jobs here in the district, and we have not been engaging as effectively as we needed to be, and we obviously have a private sector here also.

[Laurie Harrington] Could you tell us about the work you've done with the NTAR Center, and how having a relationship with the NTAR Center has in any way helped your work that you're doing in D.C.?

[Judith Heumann] A few years ago we had the opportunity to make the acquaintance of NTAR when we applied for a State Leader's Innovative Institute grant. While we were not successful on getting one of the three grants that were awarded, we were very lucky to be able to begin to work with NTAR -- Kathy Krepcio and other individuals from NTAR and other groups -- and became a part of the leaders' network. We've found our relationship with NTAR to be particularly valuable because of the skills that the, that the NTAR staff have, and the vast amount of experience. They've been very helpful to us as we've been moving forward, doing more strategic planning, and working to get our department up to par to be able to help ensure that the rehab counselors are more knowledgeable about the world of work, learning about what other states have been doing to work collaboratively with departments of employment services. And then the meetings we've attended have been very beneficial for us.

[Laurie Harrington] Can you describe your Project Search collaborative?

[Judith Heumann] In 2009, DDS began a collaborative project with Project Search and the Federal Department of Labor, and the Office on Disability Employment Programs to begin a collaborative that is focusing on transitional services for disabled youth. Project Search is a program out of Cincinnati that was working with ODEP, and they were looking to start a project in the Department of Labor. So since August of 2009, we have had a project in the Department of Labor, which has about ten or twelve high school students who have disabilities from the D.C. public schools. And the program is working very effectively. There's a teacher who is coming everyday to the Department of Labor to work with the students. The teacher is paid for, with funding from the D.C. public school system. And the D.C. Rehab Services Administration is paying for the time of a rehab counselor and is paying for job coaching. The program has been so successful that Labor is going to run the program again next year, and we are also working with a number of other federal agencies to start a collaborative there. And right now, the Department of Education and Health and Human Services have agreed to start Project Search programs for this fall. And we're still talking to one or two other agencies. So it's our hope that by August of this year, we will have at least three collaborative projects with the Department on Disability Services, and the D.C. public schools, and Project Search are working together. Now this is important for us because disabled youth -- not just in the district but all around the country -- as a result of various federal laws are supposed to be getting more enriched transition services. But in the District in part, because of the high poverty rate that we have, many students have not had the same opportunities as others have in other parts of the country. So this particular project we view as enabling us, one, to make better inroads into the federal agencies to get district disabled



students to have meaningful work experiences, because over the course of one year, each student will get three work experiences for 13-week periods each. So when they graduate from high school, some of them will get jobs in the federal agencies; others will have a much more enriched resume, which will enable them to be able to go out and pursue other employment opportunities. So that's one of the programs that we feel very positively about.

[Laurie Harrington] What other successes could you tell us about that you're having in Washington, D.C., particularly in the area of youths with disabilities?

[Judith Heumann] We have been increasing the work that we're doing in transition. That's one of our big areas of focus in the district: to be able to really help ensure that those students who are eligible, have a disability, and are in their junior year of high school are being linked into the state rehab agency for the purposes of really helping them to look at work, and to start thinking about work as something which is possible. We've also been doing a fair amount of work in the area of benefits counseling, because individuals in the District who may be on Social Security benefits need to understand the various opportunities that exist while being on Social Security -- that in fact you can work, and you shouldn't look at work as something which is impossible because you're on benefits. So our, you know, mission is really to help families and youth understand that A, if they stay in school and we can help them move through community college certificate programs, other higher education programs, that their ability to be able to secure employment and earn a higher wage is really where they want to be moving, that Social Security benefits in and of themselves are insufficient. And I think the changes that are going to be going on in health care right now are also going to be a real boon to individuals who maybe have been staying on Social Security because they're afraid of losing their health care through Medicaid. So that's another effort that we've been working in. And then we've been working on something called "customized employment." And the customized employment program again was a collaborative with the Department of Labor. And we had an instructor come in and work with our staff and with a number of our providers to really help them get a better understanding of how to work with individuals who had more significant disabilities but were able to work, how to work with employers to help them look at ways to review work that they need to have done in their offices, which may not be currently happening, and how we can help them through RSA to get valued employees. We have another program like that that we've also recently started with different district agencies where we're getting work experiences for other RSA recipients of service -- not just high-school students, but individuals out of high school of all ages who need some internship programs to be able to increase their capacity to work.

[Laurie Harrington] What would you say are the greatest challenges in implementing some of these initiatives?

[Judith Heumann] The Rehab Services Administration and the Developmental Disabilities Administration have needed a great deal of assistance to strengthen the work that we've been doing and have the responsibility to do. And I think we've been successful over the last number of years both to recruit new staff who have more experience from working in the field specifically in the area of employment. We've brought in a good team of people now who are really helping to strengthen the way we're delivering our services. NTAR's been very helpful in



that regard also -- bringing in various resources, not in dollars but certainly in knowledge, people who have been able to assist us in looking at ways of doing our work differently, and that's been very beneficial for us. So I would say that, looking at where we were three years ago and where we are today, we're in much better shape, and you know, we're a department now where coming to the district and working in the district is seen much more favorably. We're looking for really innovative, creative individuals who have backgrounds in rehabilitation services, can be very proactive, outgoing, work particularly with poor populations -- as I said, because we have a higher incidence rate of poverty in the disability community that we work in. But I feel very proud of the work that we have been doing, and I believe that we're going to see, in spite of the economy right now, the restructuring and changes that we've been making will enable us as the economy improves to be able to have people who are ready to move into the world of work.

[Laurie Harrington] Thank you, Judith Heumann, for speaking with us today. I've been talking today with Judith Heumann, the Director of the Department on Disability Services in Washington, D.C. This is Laurie Harrington for Lead.State.Gov with the NTAR Leadership Center. For more information about the NTAR Leadership Center and its research activities, visit www.ntarcenter.org.

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