



## **Interview with Karen McCulloh President, Karen McCulloh and Associates Consulting**

**[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 feature podcast of the NTAR Leadership Center. I'm your host, Laurie Harrington. Karen McCulloh is the President of Karen McCulloh and Associates Consulting and the former Executive Director of the Disability Work Initiative in Chicago. In this podcast, Karen shares her extraordinary story of work and success in today's labor market as a person with a disability. Welcome to our podcast, Karen. First, Karen, please introduce yourself to our listening audience and tell us a little bit about your history.

**[Karen McCulloh]** My name is Karen McCulloh, and I'm a Healthcare Professional and a Registered Nurse. And I have been working actually in work force development for people with disabilities since 1990; so I'm going in to -- towards the 20th year in specializing in this area. And I've done it in a variety of areas. I own my own small business, Karen McCulloh and Associates from 1990 to 2005, at which time, I took an Executive Director position at Disability Works, which is located at the Chicagoland Chamber of Commerce. Did that for four and a half years because I like foundation building. And as of January 31 -- or February 1, I have resigned from that position and have gone back to my own company Karen McCulloh and Associates Consulting. And rather than doing local and state, I'm working on a national level with government, government agencies, businesses, and organizations that are working on diversity and inclusion. And I'm pretty much known for being a person who thinks out-of-the-box when it comes to workforce development for and with people with disabilities.

**[Laurie Harrington]** Could you talk about some of the challenges you've faced and the strategies, techniques, and resources you used to address these challenges and become successful?

**[Karen McCulloh]** Meaningful employment means, for me, also setting goals and going in a direction of a career of my choice. And I think that, that's being inclusive here because that's what we would hope for anyone working is that they're -- actually, have the opportunity to be working in a job that they like and they want to be in and, of course, that's not always true. So I need to take a step back in regard to being engaged in meaningful employment and say, well, what is it going to take for me as a person, who has very low vision, who is hearing impaired, and multiple sclerosis, and look at the options. And one of things that, of course, I wanted to continue with my work as a registered nurse -- and I will get to some barriers a little bit later, but one of the issues even when I first became -- developed low vision -- and each one of my disabilities has come at different times and, with low vision, the question was always asked of me: How can you be a nurse if you can't see? So I know -- knew that I needed to address barriers. I knew that I needed more education. I knew I needed to develop greater skills even though I had a very successful job experience background. And I needed to get the -- gain the confidence in the sense of self-worth so that when I went for meaningful employment, that I



radiated a sense of confidence and credibility that would certainly make me eligible for a specific job that I was going to. So one of the important things is, is that I'm one of the 85 percent of people with disabilities who develop disabilities somewhat later in life. So I went through nursing school not having any disabilities and was licensed -- and licensed prior to developing disabilities. So I have lived in both the world of not having a disability as well as the world of being disabled; so that I have an opportunity that gives me a perspective of what life was like before and what life is like now and, obviously, for me, I wanted to make my life not be impacted constantly by the fact that I was a person with a disability. So I needed to be educating people, while I'm communicating with them in a subtle way, to get them beyond my disabilities and in to my skills and abilities. So the meaningful employment was very important but to go towards a job, that was my choice and was career directed, was extremely important to me.

**[Laurie Harrington]** What advice would you give to people with disabilities who are thinking of entering the work force for the first time or returning to work after a disability?

**[Karen McCulloh]** I think the first thing is to know yourself. Believe in yourself. Particularly, if you have a visible disability and you are working with individuals who are not comfortable with working with disabilities frequently, that comfort level has to do with -- they don't know what to do. And if it's non apparent disability, sometimes it's more difficult because you may have to say more if you're requesting an accommodation than if you're using a guide dog or you're carrying a white cane. Some things are obvious but there's perceptions of people -- of both because there's a lot of people who have MS who look really, really well and so, for some individuals, it's really hard to believe that they have a disability but given certain circumstances, and they have an exacerbation, it's very believable. But if a person needs accommodations in order not to have an exacerbation, if they have any control in it, then they have, you know, they need to ask for what it is they need and not hide. I think for a person with a disability, one of the things that I'm most concerned about is still the stigma that people feel about disclosing their disability and, if not disclosing impacts their success, whether it's in the university or college or a job-training program or it's on-the-job, if it's impacting their success, they may have set themselves up to fail. And I'm so sad about that, because I'm so out there about my disabilities. And I am assertive about what it is I know I need in order to succeed. I'm not embarrassed about it. And if there's a stigma, I will help people get through it. But a lot of people who start out and are born with disabilities, then the messages they get begin with their parents, messages they receive begin with their secondary school teachers and counselors, and so either they're positively impacted, or they're negatively impacted. Where parents potentially might not even think their kid is ever going to be able to work. And I've see a big change or I'm seeing a change evolving in this country where more education is being directed to parents but not enough, and more education is being directed particularly itself, advocacy skills directed to youth, and not enough potential is seen in some students with disabilities but the potential is there. But -- and that's where I call the scripts that are written for us; So I reject those scripts. I rejected them when I went back to school. I went back to school less than a year after I started losing my vision. And I actually went in and interviewed my professors before I signed up for their classes. And I shook their hands like it was a business proposition. I wanted to know if they were willing to work with me and to provide the accommodations that I was going to need as a blind student. And so -- but I also was a woman in mid life. And how many youths in transition are taught the skills to know how to do



that and to feel comfortable in doing it? So my area of work now is a thinking -- I'm a think out-of-box person because I've lived it. Professionally, I've been impacted myself, as a person with a disability, being told that I'm not worth it and I reject it. And, I think, that because I have a lot of inner strength -- and I don't know where that came from -- but I had a strength to reject it and say, wait a minute, you can't tell me what I can and can not do. Let me find out for myself. And if I set goals and I set them in chronological order so that I need this skill before I have to go to this skill, then I'm going to get where I need to go. But youths, in particular, which is a group of individuals in our disability community, that I care very much about, are still, -- their needs are still not being met. And I'm very passionate that what is happening to them now will make or break them as a productive worker. And so I don't want anyone to have to go through what I went through. And recognize that I had a career already, that I had work history, and I had some good things that were speaking on my behalf. But when I became disabled, it was like all of that disappeared, and I had to start over and establish credibility and accountability. And I will say that in most jobs that I've had, I will work twice as hard or as hard or as much as it takes to be able to not only meet expectations, but to exceed expectations and help pave the path for the next person with a disability who might be given an opportunity because I was there to help open it up.

**[Laurie Harrington]** Thank you, Karen McCulloh for speaking with us today. I've been talking today with Karen McCulloh, President of Karen McCulloh and Associates Consulting. 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](http://www.ntarcenter.org).

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