

That's Inclusive!

Episode 17 Transcript

Episode title: Sarah Tollefsen from ABLE NH

Vanessa Blais (VB): Welcome to That's Inclusive! Where we talk about disability and what it means to live a full life, engaging in our communities.

What does that look like? And how can we work together to make our world a more inclusive place?

Isadora Rodriguez-Legendre (IRL): Hi everybody welcome to That's Inclusive a podcast by the New Hampshire Council on Developmental Disabilities I'm Isadora Rodriguez-Legendre, executive director at the DD council and I'm here today with Sarah Tollefsen from ABLE New Hampshire. Uhm and were going to learn more about Able NH and what they do. But first let's have Sarah introduce herself.

Sarah Tollefsen (ST): Hi thank you so much for having me I'm really excited to be here today. Uhm So my name is Sarah Tollefsen and I'm the executive director at ABLE NH and uhm Able stands for advocates building lasting equality and our mission is to advocate for the civil and human rights of children and adults with disabilities. We promote full participation by improving systems, connecting families, inspiring communities and influencing public policy, so I'm happy to be here.

IRL: Yeah that's great, that's a lot.

ST: Yep

IRL: It's definitely a lot. And uhm One of the reasons that we love ABLE NH is because your mission and our mission our visions align so well in that we you know really promote inclusion and community participation and really kind of taking action oriented approach and uhm for us you know advocacy is really important can you tell us a little bit about how Able advocates for people with disabilities

ST: definitely. So ABLE to go back a little bit ABLE historically was really started by a group of parents who wanted to advocate for their children uhm children and adult children who were receiving services like through ah you know the DD services that we have in NH. Uhm and Ah so that's been going on since it's inception in the 90s. And uhm as time has gone on we've evolved a bit into still doing that, but also starting to acknowledge that we really also want to create opportunities for people with disabilities themselves to uhm to know how to and be in the right places to advocate for themselves. So I'm still doing that in regards to services we also do a lot of advocating at the State House through legislation and we're very busy with that right now. But kind of that are the two avenues. And then I would say also we do a little bit of like community advocating too. Where we're kind trying to reach out to just the general NH community and make sure that people with disabilities are not an afterthought, are a consideration in businesses and recreation and things like that.

IRL: yeh that's great it's very similar to what we do Uhm and we love that you all kind of give space to people with disabilities to be that voice to be those leaders in the community but really around topics that are important to them right?

ST: yep

IRL: And there is no shortage in those in NH in a place where we have our minimum wage is the federal minimum wage so people don't earn enough there's a housing shortage, there's a workforce crisis to be able to support people with disabilities and really employment is also a big topic area I know for our members who have disabilities and want to work and are having trouble kind of finding uhm meaningful, competitive, integrated employment in NH that helps that supports them and in the ways that they need. Uhm can you tell us a little bit about how you became the executive director what kind of interested you in this field.

ST: Yes, so when I was in college, I went to Saint Anslem college and my mom was she was one of the vice presidents of the Moore Center which is one of the area agencies in NH and I needed a second job I think to pay for a car or shopping or something like that so mom was like well we're looking for people to work at this group home and the group home had 8 people living in it. And they all had intellectual or developmental disabilities and also physical disabilities, so they all required a really significant amount of personal care services.

IRL: okay

ST: So I got a job there and it was like nothing I had ever experienced before stepping in there was just like stepping into a whole new world and uhm and I worked there I worked at the Moore center for 13 years and I worked at that group home for several years and it really just became a part of who I was and I was still kind of growing into a person while I was working there and I would say that the biggest things that kind of became a part of me were seeing other people not for what look like or their level of intelligence or their ability to run a race or play a board game but really truly like who they were as people and how they treated other people and uhm how they reflected on the world and were able to give and receive and uhm and what I came to realize was that I was surrounded by people who I could admire and have beautiful relationships with and uhm and also deserved the same things that anybody else deserved.

IRL: yeah

ST: and getting the same opportunities. So after I did that I worked in various ways in the Moore center I did do employment for a while since you brought up employment.

IRL: mmhmm

ST: And at the time that I started there there was still piece work that type of thing

IRL: mmhm

ST: Yes and I was like I didn't know what I didn't know and so I was just like this is outrageous that people are making less than minimum wage I don't even understand. So we actually in our employment program which was robust we did away with it every contract that we had we either asked them to pay minimum wages or we removed we didn't work with them anymore.

And I was gone very soon after I started that. And then I did I brought Project Search to Manchester which I don't think is there anymore at the time I had so much respect for the program because it really aligned with the way that I saw the world and people with disabilities which was that everybody regardless of

disability or non-disability has some skills and value that they can add to any business and it's just a matter of finding what things are and then kind of making efficiencies for each person at an organization to be able give back skills to the organization so I loved that about that program and then yeah so I worked at the Moore center for 13 years. And then I had some children, SO I also owned a yoga studio I quit the Moore center then the yoga studio and then I started selling real estate so I did that for awhile uhm but in regards to what brought me specifically to ABLE I would say I have always been really passionate about the rights of people with disabilities, human rights in general, the rights of children, women. And So the mission of ABLE really spoke to me and felt like it was the right fit for what I would like to contribute to the world

IRL: That's awesome Its really really great I feel like a sense of identification because it s really great because when you find a job that really aligns with your passions for both kind of leaving the world in better condition than when you found it and also helping to educate and inform people about the value that every human begin brings to the table no matter what they're going through what their situation is like we have to as human beings that we all bring importantly in every situation and that its that variety of perspective and lived experiences of differences that help us really uhm I guess find meaningful ways to connect everyone right in a similar way so when we talk about our disabilities work we say that improving communities and building a capacity for NH neighborhoods to support people with disabilities it helps Improved community and the neighborhoods for everyone that lives there its not an us and them type of scenario it's a we're all in this together so we better make sure it's the best boat right we're all in the same boat you better make sure it's the best boat that can weather any storm and carry us wherever we need to go

IRL: So that's fantastic, I love that. Tell me a little bit more about kind of the priorities that ABLE has currently.

SF: Yeh so uhm every year at our annual meeting we, so we're a membership organization people can be a member and being a member means that you have like access to some of the trainings that we're offering I would say probably most important from my perspective is you have a voice when ABLE is making decisions about the stands that we are taking on any particular issue that uhm that impacts

people with disabilities uhm that to me seems like one of the big reasons to become a member as an individual so we poll our membership at our annual meeting and say what are some of the areas you'd like to work on this year and uh the membership decides and then we set up task forces to come together anyone who has an interest in working on that particular issue and that could be that's members, other community stakeholders, other services providers, individual with disabilities, family members of people with disabilities and they will come together and they will kind of find one particular task that is actionable that they can work on throughout the next 6 months, or a year however long it takes to accomplish it

So this year the things that we're working on are, uhm our 2 new ones are transportation uhm which is a, such a wide

ST: Did you go to the transportation meeting?

IRL: I was not able to attend the transportation meeting but let me tell you that that is the nut that we've been trying to crack for a while there's so.. transportation NH is so like community specific and the funding for it is so community specific that its really hard to make in impact where someone that lives in Nashua wants to come to Concord and like how do you make that happen it's kind of been impossible to address that.

ST: Yeh We're such a unique area like NH all things considered is just really rural so it's hard to get places period. Uhm and one the things that you know I think the group might be interested in working on is kind of there's a lot of topics that effect many people in NH not just people with disabilities and so there are already organizations who are working on particular issues and ABLE wants to also make sure that people with disabilities have a voice at those tables so when there's others groups of people who are working on transportation And trying to crack the nut

IRL: yeah

ST: they're not overlooking the particular needs that people with disabilities also have as it relates to transportation.

IRL: right

ST: part of like for that one their work might be to kind of to figure out who those groups are that are trying to work on it in general for the general community and then come to them and say let us be a part of your conversation so that you're including people with disabilities when you coming up with solutions so that's transportation

IRL: yeah now that it totally makes sense and its kind of true grass roots community organizing approach right is that you're not going to reinvent the wheel you're going to infiltrate for lack of a better word infiltrate spaces where there is all of this already happening get to know the players, get to know the the how the process works so that then you can be a contributor and collaborator within that process

ST: Yes

IRL: we run into that all the time and sometimes there are groups or individuals that want to something new and something like that is important but cause then there's an area that hasn't identified and area of need especially for people with disabilities you're swimming against the current if you are not working with the groups and with the organizations that the manpower have the funds have the resources that have all of the foundational work laid because again transportation is an area just like housing where there has been a lot of work in the state happening for many many years and lot of different players are contributing valuable time, energy, and resources and funding to helping address these issues. So you don't want to create something kind of off to the side just specific for people with disabilities you want to go into the spaces and say okay here we are don't forget about us and here's how you support our needs within your existing plan right and that for me I think has a greater impact

ST: 100% you couldn't have said it better and that is what as an organization the approach we want to take when it comes to big issues like that. And we're really not we're not equipped to we're not a service organization.

IRL: right

ST: We're not equipped to make up new plans and deliver them or to tell other people hey we have this great idea so that's really our place is to go to those

places and say we're here people with disabilities are one in four people in the United States disability is a natural occurrence in human life and we need to make sure that you're thinking of us when you're making your own plans

IRL: that's great, so what are some of the other kind of focus areas that you all have been working on

ST: okay SO there's a new mental health equity task force which as only me once and all our If anybody wants to check out any of the task forces we have a community calendar on our website and they're all listed there.

IRL: nice

ST: Uhm and then we have a housing one. Housing is a really big issue right now for people with disabilities in New Hampshire everybody knows I think that has been kind of looming over our heads that there could be a housing crisis soon for people with disabilities Uhm an

IRL: Yeah I mean I think it's already there right? there's a housing crisis for everybody

ST: for everybody

IRL: the rents can be so high the inventory is so low and really the cost of living is way more those folks earn at a typical job right so it creates this issue and now you have competition for scares resources. Right and so people with disabilities sometimes have different types of income and depend on housing vouchers kind of fall to the bottom of the list

ST: yeh

IRL: cause when you're a landlord who have the ability in new Hampshire that something were working advocating against is that they can kind of discriminate on the type of income and the type of voucher holds as a renter and they can choose whoever they think is the most the candidate with he most income lets say versus than someone that needs supports and services which is discriminatory and should not be allowed but it is in New Hampshire so were working on it.

ST: Yeah, that's such a big issue and really because I work in real estate I do work with landlords and uhm I will say that I have small handful of landlords that I work

with who like altruistically rent their spaces and are like I need to make sure I'm being equitable in the big picture and I they keep their rents lower you know they'll say how much is this worth and I'll say you could charge this much and I have people who will say I am not going to charge that much. It doesn't seem right. And those are my favorite people. I love them. There should be more of them.

IRL: Yeah. There should be more and you know and there should be more landlords willing to make more reasonable accommodations for anyone, you know, whether they are already a tenant or are renting a vacant space. It's really about considering what they individual's needs are because they are going to be a good tenant if you are supporting whatever their needs are. Yeah, so that's another tough nut.

ST: We are getting all of the big issues. We also have a civic engagement task force. Which that one has been going for a while. And Krysten our policy director, she runs that one and like last month she ran a training there on how to tell your story for testimony. It ended up that like a week later she was at a hearing and three people who were in her training testified.

IRL: How cool

ST: Yeah, it was nice to just see how that came full circle and how the whole process start to finish worked out. That people took her training and used it in the coming week.

IRL: Yeah, that's the best.

ST: Yeah, and then we have the oral health care task force. We do a lot of oral health care work at ABLE. That's definitely one of our big priorities. And then we have...the last two kind of task forces are...you're very familiar with one because you go to it, Advocate NH.

IRL: Yes!

ST: Which we are really excited about this year! So, Advocate NH, and please jump in if I miss anything, so Advocate NH was a self-advocacy conference that was being put on annually with some really great success from what it sounds like, until Covid.

IRL: Yes

ST: And if couldn't happen obviously in 2020 and just kind of hasn't been resurrected since then. So we were approached by umm, well we went to a meeting actually. I think you were there at that first.

IRL: I think me or some folks from my team.

ST: Vanessa was there

IRL: Yeah

ST: It was a meeting to talk about possibly getting it back going. And then after the meeting we talked with the Institute on Disability and they were like, would you like to work with us on putting this back on. Because you have the infrastructure for self-advocates. And we were so excited and thrilled to be able to do that. And we have just like an awesome group of people who are working to put that on. Do you have anything to add about it?

IRL: Yeah! I am super excited about this task force also. I think Advocate NH as a group that was putting on that annual conference was really supported by the Institute on Disability. There was someone there who used to help convene the meetings and help with the planning. So it kinda makes sense that there be kind of a group that helps organize and coordinate the self-advocates that are providing input.

It was always talked about as a conference by self-advocates for self-advocates. So the people with disabilities, and I go to the task force meetings, so I know it's the people with disabilities kinda of leading the work and getting things done and calling the hotels and thinking about what the topics areas that we want to present on.

And so, it's really incredible, so um, it's also been helpful to kind of, what I see as a connection developed, having developed with People First of NH and SALT and being able to collaborate with other self-advocacy groups in the state to really have this amazing opportunity for people who are interested in either learning about advocacy or going to a conference where the leaders who are presenting are people with disabilities. And of being that power of example. Like all of the things that you can accomplish and all of the things that are important when you

want to tell your story. When you want to advocate for better communities and more inclusive communities for people with disabilities. So, um, I always say that we are stronger together. So, something like this again is very exciting because there are so many groups, um, and individuals kind of really wanting this to be successful.

So the conference is scheduled for October fourth in Concord, so we were both wrong.

Yeah. We are excited. So far it looks like it is going to be at the Holiday Inn in Concord, on October fourth. You have some exciting topics that people with disabilities are excited about presenting. I think the theme is going to be the Art of Advocacy. And I know that there is an art project being planned by People First of NH. They were talking about it at their last meeting. So that is super exciting. I can't wait.

ST: I do. I just want to echo that I love the partnerships that are being made and then if I can puff my chest for a second, I will say that the thing that I am most proud about, about ABLE, is that we are not just talking the talk, we are walking the walk. And everything that we do is done by, for, and with people with disabilities. We are not...umm... we know the value of our members and what they have to give. And they run with it.

And just as an example, and I am sure he won't mind, like me saying is that Alex, who is facilitating the Advocate NH task force. He, and I'm like, I was trained to facilitate groups. That was my last job at the Moore Center. I was a facilitator. And it takes like real skill to be able to do that. That I had to learn. I didn't just know it. And that guy is so skilled at facilitating a group. And so, no one is going to stand in his way to be able to do that. He is truly doing a phenomenal job doing that. And it goes back to you have to for anyone, any human, you have to just find what it is, what their gifts are and provide the opportunity for them to be able to give it. And that's how we all commune, I think, in the big picture.

IRL: Yeah. That's great. I so appreciate that sentiment. And I definitely want to piggyback on that and say that part of what we appreciate about ABLE NH at the DD Council is your willingness to partner. Is your understanding that we all bring something and that we need to support people to really develop their leadership skills. To really build their confidence, build their skills and support them in

whatever way they need. We have for a long time appreciated that ABLE is an ally and definitely aligned with our work. And a lot of times because we are a federally funded state agency, we have limitations that you all don't. So we appreciate that you are all there and that you have our backs. And that you can say that things that we want to say, but because of our funding we can't for example lobby or tell people how to vote on something. But we can certainly set up the story because we have plenty of families and individuals who umm, are either members or who are allies of our organization, who can very clearly say what the impact is going to be of some policy or law and then kind of, I feel like we tee it up and then you guys swing it out of the park by saying yes, you can't vote for this, right?

ST: Wow, we are, we do, that is a great description of how we can all partner with one another and ABLE's place in those relationships. Those organizational relationships and right now the staff that we have. We have such an awesome group of people that are working at ABLE. And we spend a lot of time talking about how we can advocate for the difficult issues while still remaining respectful. And in partnership with people and organizations that we don't always have the same views with. And everyone in our organization right now is just really skilled at that. We are really a group of thoughtful and kind people who are also delivering difficult messages sometimes, I think when it comes to advocating.

IRL: Yeah and it makes it that much more easily heard I think. When the messenger is someone who kind of understands how, you know, human relationships work and how people are wired to align or not align with certain viewpoints. Like really being able to have the approach, really person-centered approach, I want to say, to advocacy and finding that thing that someone who maybe doesn't align with all of the priorities that ABLE has. But finding that thing that you connect on, that's common ground. And really developing that relationship to be able to work together no matter what. We have a common goal, right.

ST: We do. So many of the organizations that we work with. I started thinking about this when you started talking about how our missions are aligned. When I first started, I looked up the missions of our 3 advisor organizations. So, you, the Institute on Disability and the Disability Rights Center, and I was really surprised and delighted to see that there was common threads throughout all of them.

Even though we are all doing a little bit different kind of work, we are all working towards the same goals.

IRL: Absolutely. Thank you so much, Sarah for taking the time today to talk to us on our podcast.

ST: Thank you for having me. It was fun!

IRL: We look forward to working with you on many of the areas of need that New Hampshire has and of really building our advocacy networks and building the leadership of people with disabilities to really say what they want and to be that voice of change in New Hampshire.

ST: We have a lot of work today but we are looking forward to doing it. We are very, very thankful for our partnership with you.

IR: Thank you.

Vanessa Blais (VB): Thank you for joining us today. I'm Vanessa Blais and this was a production of the New Hampshire Council on Developmental Disabilities produced by Isadora Rodriguez-Legendre, and Vanessa Blais with many thanks to Josh Hardy and rest of the crew here at Concord TV.

We love to have guests with differing perspectives. These are personal, and do not necessarily represent those of the DD Council.