

Kessler Foundation Podcast Transcript: Elaine Katz on Grantmaking

Recorded October 2019. [Listen to it here.](#)

[music]

ANNOUNCER: 00:06

Welcome to this Kessler Foundation Podcast. The foundation is a global leader in rehabilitation research that seeks to improve cognition, mobility, and long term outcomes for individuals with disabilities by testing new interventions and gathering data that may be used in treatment to restore function and help people living with disabilities improve quality of life. In addition, the foundation Center for Grantmaking leads the nation in funding programs that expand employment opportunities for people with disabilities in New Jersey and the nation. In this episode, we are talking with Elaine Katz. Katz is a senior vice president of grant and communications. She spoke with Rob Gerth, the foundation's communications director.

ROB GERTH: 00:53

Let's start with a basic question. The Center for Grantmaking. Tell me what your role is and what the role of the Center for Grantmaking is in the Kessler Foundation.

KATZ: 01:02

So the Center for Grantmaking at Kessler Foundation over the past 13 years has funded close to \$45 million both in New Jersey and nationally through our three grants programs. And what we do is support new business ventures, job training, job creation, job placement. But more importantly, we're the leading funder of innovative approaches that we hope will lead to change by creating real economic opportunity for people with disabilities. And it's really important for us to do this. When we started 18 years ago, there really weren't any foundation-- well, 18 years ago we weren't doing grantmaking, but when we started our actually grantmaking program about 13 years ago, there wasn't any foundations that focused exclusively on employment for individuals with disabilities. Through the years that's really changed. So we've seen the landscape for foundations see that that is important, that people with disabilities can contribute to the economy and do need some assistance when it comes to specifically getting them entering the job market and becoming great employees in competitive integrated employment.

GERTH: 02:13

And how important-- this is a pretty broad question, but how important is it for people living with a disability to have the opportunity to work?

KATZ: 02:22

Well if you look at the 56 million Americans who probably identify as having some sort of a disability, only 20% are really working. And that actually is the largest minority that crosses almost every demographic. And in fact, the Office of Disability Employment Policy in Washington has said that that's actually the third largest market segment in the US after we have Hispanics and African Americans. So when you think about that group, probably about 15.1 million Americans are of working age. It's really important because currently they want to work, we've seen that through our Kessler 2015 employment study where they're striving to work and at the same time, those who are working are often underemployed. So they're not working in jobs really up to their level. Or they're unemployed because they have not been able to enter the job market for a whole host of reasons.

Kessler Foundation Podcast Transcript: Elaine Katz on Grantmaking

- GERTH: 03:19 So talk to me then-- you mentioned about innovative approaches. So what constitutes to you an innovative approach? And has that changed over the years?
- KATZ: 03:28 So what our grantmaking is in our large signature grants, which are those grants that are over \$100,000 over two years, the idea is to find a way that will increase the participation rates of people with disabilities. So when we talk about innovation, it's-- we're not talking necessarily about something new. What we're talking about is ways to use perhaps what's out there and combine and braid them and twist them in a new way. And typically we're looking for those ideas that, as you say, as we say, can move the needle on employment and really make a difference. And oftentimes that may be a new form of collaboration. It may be economies of scale, taking an idea that worked in one community and do it nationally. There's lots of ways to look at innovation and I think that's really the difficult point in our grantmaking is that many organizations that apply to us really don't have an idea of how to use creativity and imagination and not do the same old same old when it comes to employment for individuals with disabilities.
- GERTH: 04:32 Do you have any success stories that you've-- organizations you've funded that have turned out really well over the years?
- KATZ: 04:39 So I think when we talk about our successes, it's really the work of our grantees that we've looked at that makes us successful. In 2017, we put together a whitepaper that was the employment practices of individuals with disabilities. And what we did in that is look at 20 different projects that were all evaluated by the Heldrich Center for Workforce Investment. And what that center did-- and we have hired them-- is to evaluate each project as it happened. So we put together a report of all their information and tried to pick out some best practices and lessons learned. And through that, a lot of our projects were highlighted for a number of different reasons.
- GERTH: 05:28 And what were some of the best practices?
- KATZ: 05:30 So I'd say the-- you know, there's three or four different ways we can look at best practices. I mean, some of what we looked at was actually, what could be organizational elements of success? So when you're putting together a grantmaking process and you're putting together a program that looks at employment for individuals with disabilities, you have really two components. You have the organization itself and how does that work and really carry out a program and then you have the programs. So what we found when we looked at all our different projects together is that there are really three components that really worked as elements of success. So when you're looking on the organizational side, you have things like diverse funding. How diverse is their funding, are they having different source of the funding, their leadership and staff, what kind of leadership, what are they looking at, how are they evaluating the project, their experience carrying out the project, and then lastly collaborative relationships and partnerships. Who are they working with to carry through this project? And when you have all those elements together in an organization, of course you have to have the program elements together, but we found you have a higher rate of success. When we're looking at the best practices side and what kinds of things you need in an organization, we came up

Kessler Foundation Podcast Transcript: Elaine Katz on Grantmaking

with five different elements from our lessons learned and all our practices. So when we move forward and talk about our program success and we can talk about some examples in a minute, really there's different components. So we see that there has to be a component about changing attitudes about people with disabilities. So when you look at employment, is somebody who doesn't have a progressive attitude or willing to give a person with a disability a chance obviously is not going to be hiring people with disabilities. So it's changing attitudes of employment both within an organization, a business that may be hiring, and also the personal-- how a person with disability sees themselves. Because sometimes they're so beaten down and so challenged in getting employment that they really don't have faith in themselves. Another one is person-centered approach is that looking what a person really wants to do, not just placing them in a job because that happens to be the easiest job available. Community partnerships, working within the community to find organizations and supports to may be needed to help a person as they seek employment. And what we call wrap-around services. So those may be the transportation, housing, other aspects that really are important to getting and keeping a job. It could be chicken and egg. For example, you know, if somebody doesn't have housing, are they really going to be able to get a job if it's not permanent housing? So really we've found that it's almost-- you know, takes a village sometimes to keep somebody to seek and gain employment. And lastly, you have to be able to document all those four elements. So I mean, you may-- if you carry through any kind of a project and then you can't document it, what have you really gained or learned? You can't see the challenges, you can't see the good lessons learned that came out of it.

GERTH: 08:44

And in this day and age, do organizations or businesses still need to adjust their attitude or is it easier for people with disabilities to get employed because organizations are more enlightened? Or is it just as difficult as ever?

KATZ: 09:00

If you're asking about employing talent with disabilities or actually inclusion, diversity, companies right now, because the economy is almost at full employment, are very open to hiring populations they really never considered before. Whether those are individuals who are formerly incarcerated, people with disabilities and maybe other underserved populations. Whether or not it's true inclusion and diversity is probably up for grabs. Those are probably the first people to lose their jobs if the economy goes south, so to speak. There's a book by Frances West, who's the former IBM's first accessibility officer, and what she talks about is authentic inclusion and what that means is that really for an organization to be successful in their inclusion and diversity aspects, they really need to look at an individual's ability across the whole organization for everyone to look at a holistic approach in that company to see what are the talents that everybody can add to the organization. And it's because of those differences that really causes almost that innovation to happen because of the different thinking and the way the confluence and thinking can come together and really push that organization forward so you have your principals, your purpose, and your profit can all be aligned. So it really helps. It's not charity, necessarily, when you look at including people with disabilities and including them. It's really bringing everybody's experiences and perspectives together to influence change and growth.

Kessler Foundation Podcast Transcript: Elaine Katz on Grantmaking

- GERTH: 10:42 And how about the nonprofits that are-- that their mission is to help people with disabilities get employment? Are they adjusting to sort of this new thinking as far as employing people with disabilities or are they struggling with it?
- KATZ: 10:57 Well if you look at the history of employing people with disabilities, when you started at the turn of the century, there were more workshop settings so there were specialized settings for individuals with disabilities to work together to learn a skill. That kind of morphed into what they called sheltered employment or segregated employment where people with disabilities were being paid piecework and typically below minimum wage. That kind of morphed into a late 50s and 60s hire the handicap. So there's always been initiatives about individuals with disabilities being hired. What's really different today is that people are recognizing more of the talents of the individual, the capability of individuals with disabilities and the right that everybody-- an individual has to work and live within the community like everybody else. Work is a really important part of your identity. So if you think about how it is when you meet somebody at a party, the first thing they usually ask after what's your name is what do you do. And most people's answer is I work or I'm retired. If you don't have an answer to that question, you really lose a chunk of society.
- GERTH: 12:11 That's a good point. Now, you had mentioned transportation earlier. I assume that that's one of the big blockades to getting people living with disabilities jobs. Is it as big as I think it is and then what are some of the other obstacles?
- KATZ: 12:29 Transportation is a huge barrier for individuals with disabilities. In fact, the federal government office of disability employment policies has had different calls and opportunities to present some opinions on that with the coming of the new transportation, new accessibility with Uber and Lyft and other kinds of services, there are some opportunities there for individuals with disabilities, people who may have visual impairments, get some rides door to door where before the traditional ride services offered through public transportations have drop off and pickup spots a lot of times and not necessarily door to door. They don't cross communities, they're not always on time, they provide a window until recently some of them didn't have any online ability to pay, online reservation system. It's a very antiquated way of providing transportation. In fact, some individuals have even proposed that maybe if you're on a benefit like Social Security income and Social Security disabilities, maybe transportation should be included. So when you wrap that into an issue of employment, how do people get to jobs? So oftentimes people with disabilities who don't have a mode of transportation will turn down a job opportunity simply for the fact they think it's too difficult an obstacle to overcome. And in fact, when we did our 2015 survey of Americans with disabilities a number of years ago, we found that actually transportation was one of the barriers that could be overcome with family and friends. It's not an easy-- it requires some creative thinking, but oftentimes we have found that individuals are able to gain rides through the workplace. So for example, if they work at a warehouse and there were other people who may be on their route at the same shift, sometimes there are rides. But it's a huge barrier. It's often seen as an insurmountable barrier. I'm not sure the-- again, it's one of those

Kessler Foundation Podcast Transcript: Elaine Katz on Grantmaking

issues where-- do you make sure you have transportation to a job or do you find a job and then find transportation?

GERTH: 14:43

So I guess technology is going to play a role in this, whether it's something to do with self-driving cars or any other kind of technology. Can you give us examples of any technology that's come along that's made a difference in people getting employment?

KATZ: 14:58

So autonomous, self-driving vehicles are something that's really been of interest to the whole disability field. There's been a number of whitepapers that are produced by different organizations and foundations on that. I think personally we're still a long way from that becoming a reality. Technology mostly has been used to help people accommodate on the work site. So in other words, if somebody is needing some sort of assistance to do their job well, then they've been able to ask the company to provide some sort of equipment to help them. So if you think about somebody who isn't disabled, most of what accommodations we see when you think about what you may need on the job. The hot thing used to be standing desks so everybody would ask for a standing desk. Now the hot new thing is asking for a second computer screen so you walk around an office and you see people with standing desks and two computer screens. So you know, when it comes to technology, the most common technology you may see is something like screen readers to help people who are visually impaired read their-- the computers read for them or other technology but the issue is not just solely the technology that's needed to do the job because it's there. The two questions that typically come up are, will employers pay for it? Most of the time they will, but a lot of times individuals, especially placement-- individuals with disabilities and those who place them in employment think employers will not necessarily provide it. The other thing is in order to get that kind of an accommodation as we call it, you have to identify somebody with a disability. And that person may, if it's not a self-evident disability, in other words a person is not presenting in a wheelchair or use a walker or a cane or is visually impaired, they may not want to identify as having a disability because they may think and in reality there may be discrimination in the workplace.

GERTH: 17:00

And let's talk about another-- I'll ask you. Is it a subset which are veterans living with disabilities? Is that a special subset that Kessler is particularly interested in or-- and is there a special-- like is it a subset that people-- veterans living with disabilities need special attention?

KATZ: 17:21

Oh, Kessler Foundation grantmaking has funded a number of programs through the years for veterans who have disabilities who have been returning from some of the recent wars. We started funding national organization of disabilities many years ago with a national project that they had which included those wraparound services, which was one of the first times that-- for veterans especially, there was a look at-- beyond the job itself, at housing and some supports they needed. We've also funded some local organizations. JEVS in Philadelphia had a project years ago which was Jewish vocational services in both Philadelphia and New Jersey which worked to hire individuals who have been-- who are wounded warriors into employment. And we've also worked locally with groups like the GI Go Fund in New Jersey. What's really

Kessler Foundation Podcast Transcript: Elaine Katz on Grantmaking

unique about veterans, and we saw it especially in our veterans service network project with Easter Seals in Washington, DC, that it started a job board for individuals with disabilities who are veterans and also close family members, is that in order to be successful projects with veterans, really had to have people with veteran experience involved. It needed somebody who was familiar with the veteran environment, especially with service ratings and disability service ratings to be able to get and maximize the current system benefits that veterans were entitled to and also get whatever else they needed and integrate it with other benefits that they may be eligible for. This past year we started a new program with veterans that we're funding through Cornell University and it's a project in upstate New York and Missouri. And what it is is looking at veterans who are-- veterans with disabilities who are in two year and four year schools becoming placed in apprenticeships. Apprenticeships, as you may know, is a very big initiative of the current government and has been for a while in labor in the United States and it's a way of entry into a profession that gives paid experience and then eventually accreditation to a particular field.

GERTH: 19:40

Are there any other-- as we're talking about successes, are there any other successes whether for veterans or anything else that you want to point out? And I would assume a big part of what you would define as a success would be something that can be replicated.

KATZ: 19:52

An important part of our grantmaking program is-- especially in our larger programs-- is trying to look for projects that do have some potential. I mean, the whole idea behind innovation is a way to try something new and then hopefully you can scale it. So we had a project a number of years ago that was putting faith to work. It was a very small project in Minnesota. It actually started in New Jersey and then it ended up having to be moved to Minnesota because the project lead moved. And that project worked within the local community trying to have faith based congregations connect so their leaders would connect with their congregants for employment. That ended up being a much larger-- being morphed into a much larger grant that was in Texas and Tennessee as well as Minnesota and that grant looked at 28 different congregations and part of the grant put together a manual of how to do it yourself. So one of the things that made it an innovative process is that-- a project-- it was a low-cost way of getting the community involved in learning about people with disabilities and their likes and their dislikes and also how to place them in employment but it also provided a way of identifying congregants within their own faith based communities that required perhaps some extra help, some services. Many of the congregations didn't even recognize that there were individuals with disabilities within their congregations that could use some assistance. It also led to things like making services more accessible, making buildings more accessible. So it was a ramp up, scale up if you will, of success. What we did find, though, and the downside of that project and some of the challenges is because it was a lay leadership driven project and required volunteers, if the faith based community lost a good volunteer or on the flip side, they didn't find enough congregants to keep that flow going to the different committees they set up, it simply would fall apart. So it really was a project that worked very well but required a lot of nurturing on the part of those that carried out the project.

Kessler Foundation Podcast Transcript: Elaine Katz on Grantmaking

- GERTH: 22:18 Well let's talk about some down and dirty nitty gritty things like to help people when they're applying for a grant, what are some of the biggest mistakes [crosstalk]--
- KATZ: 22:26 Well I think before we start with mistakes, let's talk about some of the do things they need to do.
- GERTH: 22:30 Okay, that's fair.
- KATZ: 22:31 So you know, I think what we're looking at is just the traditional kinds of grantmaking in one aspect. So on one side, you know, you're looking for a simple, direct idea of the concept. You're hoping they'll draft it and rewrite it, clearly state their goals, develop their budgets, so that everything looks like it is in order. At the same time, before I get to what I call the magical thinking of grantees, we want to make sure that it's really something that's going to pop. And if I had to list the qualities of standout proposals, I would say it's-- we're looking at the energy of the proposal. As you're reading it, does it have enthusiasm, does it have passion? As a reader do I get inspired or whoever else the staff leader who read the proposals in our organization, do they get inspired and excited? You know, do we see the expertise comes through or the people who are writing it, do they really understand the problem they're looking to solve? Do they seem committed to it, whether that may be a willingness to invest in the project, to use some unrestricted money of their own, extra time? Is it clear? Is it clear what they want to do? You wouldn't believe how many proposals you can read through and you could read through 20 pages and still not know what they want to do. Collaboration. You know, who are they collaborating with? What are they looking at for partners? Are they unusual partners? Have they worked together before? What's the benefit and value that's going to come out of this grant? Is it comprehensive enough? Proposals are proposals so you never know if they're truly going to be effective but do you really think from reading it that this project could be carried out? So those are kind of the things that we look for when you read through the proposal. I would say most grantees-- most grantmakers, rather, are looking at that from their grantees. The downside is what I call the magical thinking of a grant application. And those are really the don'ts. And part of the magical thinking is getting a phone call where you're talking to a person who wants some feedback and the first thing they say is they're a great fit for you according to your website and they know that you're going to fund them because you're a great fit. Well I don't know who-- where is that coming from? So that's kind of part of the magical thinking. A lot of times we'll get phone calls even that they haven't read our website. So if you're going to call and connect finally with a grantmaker, you have to be sure that you're going to read their website, you know their priorities, you reviewed a list of some of their prior grants and you actually have some questions that you're going to ask besides one or two questions. I would also that rejecting good advice happens a lot. So for example, I've gotten phone calls where people want to talk about a presenting idea and we'll-- at Kessler Foundation we're pretty accessible. So we will talk to people about lots of ideas. We can't tell them if we'll fund them but we can tell them if we're definitely not interested in it so they won't waste their time and apply. So sometimes they'll share an idea with us, we'll say maybe we're probably not interested in this, this is not a priority of the foundation or trustee even though they-- magical thinking think it's a great fit. And

Kessler Foundation Podcast Transcript: Elaine Katz on Grantmaking

then lo and behold they'll give us all this push back like why we should be funding it. And they'll be very defensive and it's like, wait a minute. You're asking us for-- we're trying to save you time and energy here and you're pushing back on it. So again, you know, I understand where they're coming from. I've been on the side of writing grants, but at the same time, you know, when we're providing you feedback to try to save you time, energy, and money, as far as you're spending money, good money, the organization lots of time writing, you really need to listen to the grantmaker. The other thing I think is another magical thinking of the grantee is that you-- especially somebody who is a grant writer, oftentimes they'll put in one grant or two grants and think that's it, they're done. So really one application is one application. And that does not mean you're going to be getting funding from anybody because getting funding is really a numbers game. So the more applications that your organization fills out and applies for, the better the odds that you're going to have of getting it. So all in all, you know, that's the kind of advice that we give to people who call us. And again, if anybody's listen, feel free once you've read our website, once you've seen our deadlines, which are usually posted each year in December, you're always free to call us, send us an email, and hopefully we can answer your questions.

GERTH: 27:15

One more thing before we wrap up. You had mentioned some employment statistics early on and I would be remiss if I didn't get you to talk a little bit about nTide and tell the folks what that is and why we invest in that.

KATZ: 27:30

So we produce-- Kessler Foundation with the University of New Hampshire produces a report which is the National Trends in Disability Employment and that's a monthly report that comes out following the release of the Bureau of Labor statistics numbers. Our last one came out this past October so it's always a month behind the month we're in. And what that looks at is the participation rates of people with disabilities, how many people are in the workforce, how many people may be looking for jobs, and it also compares year over year because we're not seasonally adjusted yet, the numbers for individuals with disabilities compared to people without disabilities. So we saw this past month that the numbers were flat. The past few years has been kind of an up cycle, a down cycle, it's been all which ways depending on how the economy is trending. But really when we come down to it, about 30% of people with disabilities are working compared to about 74% of people without disabilities.

GERTH: 28:30

Excellent. And I have one last question for you. Do you feel like the success your grantees have had, does it leave you hopeful for people living with disabilities who want to work?

KATZ: 28:40

That's really an interesting question. Because I think funding employment as a grantor and even the federal government is kind of like trying to end poverty, find a solution for healthcare, and find a solution for housing. It's one of those big bucket items that is-- it requires a lot of money, a lot of energy, and a lot of people are not on the same page. I would say for us, we feel we've made really a substantive improvement locally in New Jersey so we do a lot of funding through our local community employment grants which are grants of \$50,000 for one year as well as we do fund the arts and sports and recreation through special initiative grants that we have locally which are grants under \$20,000. So locally, we found we started grantmaking, organizations

Kessler Foundation Podcast Transcript: Elaine Katz on Grantmaking

really weren't talking to each other as far as the community of those who were employment funders. And I think over the years, we've brought people together through our grantee symposium, which are programs. We've really tried to network within the community and I think our local nonprofits have done a good job of bringing the issue of employment of people with disabilities really to-- locally and around the state. I mean, look at our national initiative and our national funding, although we're really considered a small funding, some of our funding may seem large at 45 million, but really yearly we're about two and a quarter million. I think our success really has been that other funders have seen the importance of entering that marketplace and looking at the priority of helping people with disabilities become employed. We're seeing more workforce funders who are large, mainstream funders such as the Ford Foundation and others, JP Morgan Chase and others really become interested in exploring this further and supporting the work of others in the field.

GERTH: 30:48

Well thank you so much for talking to us today, Elaine.

KATZ: 30:50

It's been my pleasure.

ANNOUNCER: 30:52

For more information about Kessler Foundation, go to [KesslerFoundation.org](https://www.KesslerFoundation.org). Follow us on Facebook, Twitter, and Instagram. Listen to us on Apple podcasts, Spotify, SoundCloud, or wherever you get your podcasts.