Emily Ladau:

Hello, hello, everyone, and welcome to our next episode of Disability Inclusion: Required, a podcast for the Disability & Philanthropy Forum. I am the host, Emily Ladau, and I could not be more excited to be chatting with our guest today. I wanted to say welcome to you, Taryn, and I'll have you introduce yourself in just a moment, but first I wanted to say that I am so excited to have you joining us today to talk about a topic that I am particularly passionate about, which is accessibility. And I want to note that everyone who's tuning into this podcast is definitely at a different point on their learning journey when it comes to disability. I believe very deeply in trying to meet people where they are, and part of that is really offering some key foundational information on disability and accessibility so that we can expand our shared understanding of that and then facilitate better conversation and communication.

And it is always important to talk about disability. When planning out this episode, I thought to myself, "Who can we talk to who can speak very holistically, I think, to the topic of accessibility?" and I thought of you because you have been so committed in your career to really making our society a more accessible and inclusive place. To kick things off, I would love if you could just tell us a little bit about yourself and your role, and then we'll dive into some conversation.

Taryn Williams:

Great. I am happy to talk about this, I can talk about it all day, but let me first just start by saying thank you so much for inviting me to be part of this conversation. And you are so right that accessibility is central to any conversation that we're having about disability inclusion, and so I'm really thrilled to have the opportunity to talk more about it, both broadly, but also in the context of philanthropy.

And, just to tell you a little bit about me, I am the assistant Secretary of Labor for Disability Employment Policy, and in that role, I have the honor of leading the US Department of Labor's Office of Disability Employment Policy, which we sometimes call ODEP, with the acronym O-D-E-P for short. I've also formerly served as the chair of the United States Access Board and currently serve as a DOL representative, the Department of Labor representative to that board. Just recently, Gregory Fehribach was elected to be, excuse me, chair, and I just have so much respect for the work of the Access Board and their role in advancing accessibility.

ODEP's mission is to develop and influence policies and practices that increase both the number and the quality of employment opportunities for people with disabilities, and it's one that I care deeply about. It's been a defining thread running throughout my career, and that comes, in part, because of my own lived experience. I am a woman living with non-apparent disabilities. I grew up with digestive disease. I later, in early adulthood, acquired arthritis. These are experiences, including needing accommodations to succeed and advance in my career, that have really contributed to my motivation to pursue disability inclusion as a focus of my work.

Emily Ladau:

And, Taryn, I want to thank you for sharing that you have lived experience with disability. I think that what has been so crucial to the conversations that I'm having on this podcast are that people are coming to it from all different angles, and I always say, if you've met one person with a disability, then you've met one person with a disability. And so I know that we each speak from our own lenses, but I think it's incredibly valuable to have that context in addition to the fact that you have such an incredible career dedicated to advocating for access, especially in the employment space.

And so I'm hoping that we can actually take a bit of a step back because, now that we know a bit more about you, I think it's helpful to make sure that we're really starting out with the basics. I would love to know how we can understand what the term accessibility actually means, both to you personally, but also much more expansively.

Taryn Williams:

To me, the crux of accessibility is in fact equity. It's about ensuring that all people can access not only places, but also opportunities to fully participate meaningfully in society. And, in that way, it's really something that has to be viewed both through a collective and an individual lens. Personally, in terms of my career, examples of accessibility are the things that assisted me in pursuing education and job opportunities, mainly accommodations, but it's also been about the environment, and that's not just literally, but figuratively.

And that's where we really start to talk about it more in a collective or an organizational level. Accessibility is not one particular tool, it's not just an architectural feature or a type of technology, even if those things may increase accessibility for a particular person with a particular type of disability, rather, it's really a mindset. It's the philosophy that all people should have equitable opportunity to determine and pursue their goals. And, for us, particularly as I think about the work at the Department of Labor in the context of the workforce, I believe that everyone has a responsibility to make sure their workplaces are accessible, and that requires ensuring that the physical and digital environments take the needs of all employees and job seekers into account.

Emily Ladau:

And I think that you touched on this already, but I really want to focus in on the fact that accessibility is not a one-size-fits-all thing, nor is it focusing on the fact that we just need a ramp or we just need captioning. I so often encounter this misconception that access is making the physical environment a little bit more welcoming for people, but you and I both know that that could not be further from the truth. Accessibility is so many things. It's wide-ranging, it's systemic.

Can we jive a little bit more into what we should be thinking about beyond just putting in a ramp or putting in an automatic door-opening button? What else should we think about when it comes to accessibility?

Taryn Williams:

That's a great question, and it really gets to the heart of what I was just talking about. And accessibility is about more than the literal or the physical environment, and today we know we really have to fight that misconception since so many of our lives, again, whether it's school or work or socializing, the things that we do in our community, it's carried out in a digital environment or it's facilitated by digital tools. And businesses certainly need to ensure that their technology infrastructure is accessible to people with disabilities. That's both from a workplace and a marketplace perspective.

We have something called the Partnership on Employment & Accessible Technology or PEAT. It's an initiative funded by ODEP, and it has a lot of resources to assist employers in this regard. Just one example is something that we call Talent Works, which is an online resource that helps employers and HR professionals ensure that their e-recruiting technologies, like online job applications, are accessible to all job seekers, including those with disabilities. And, of course, companies also want to ensure that their outward-facing systems, like their e-commerce systems, are accessible to people with different disabilities. Otherwise, they're missing a large part of their market or their market segment.

But, while I reinforce your point that accessibility is more than the physical environment, I also want to note it's more than even the virtual environment. It's also about ensuring that all are welcome, and that's where I think the mindset really comes in. It's a spirit of continuous improvement. It's not something that you can ever achieve. We don't just check the box and then we're there, because we are constantly evolving our workplaces, our society is constantly evolving. And so that mindset is one where we continuously strive to improve and adapt along the way as new barriers and new solutions are identified.

Emily Ladau:

First of all, thank you for talking about the Partnership on Employment & Accessible Technology because I love a good tangible takeaway resource that people can go to. I definitely encourage people to check that out. And I also wanted to zoom in on the fact that you talked about accessibility as a mindset because that really resonates with me. It's very different to me when I get in the room and then I'm not included in what's going on there, versus when I'm able to get in the room and then I'm also welcomed into what is going on.

And so I think that providing a ramp may be accessibility, but accessibility does not automatically lead to inclusion all the time. And so it's not about checking boxes. It really is about that active mindset and that active practice. And I think that, as we are talking about accessibility, it can be possible for people to feel a little bit uncertain or overwhelmed when it comes to how to approach that mindset, because many people have very limited, if any, real awareness of what accessibility requirements actually look like under laws like the Americans with Disabilities Act.

But, more than that, there's so much more to accessibility than just the ADA, and so I think if we could just try to demystify it quickly. Certainly, this is not a podcast giving legal guidance, but what should we know about the laws that pertain to accessibility? What should we know, especially in regard to workplaces?

Taryn Williams:

Yeah, that is another great question. You're right that many people don't necessarily have the knowledge of the Americans with Disabilities Act, or ADA, that they could or should, and although I do believe that has improved over the years, it's just not fast enough given that we're coming up on the 33rd anniversary. And we certainly, in our work, we want folks to know what the ADA is, but certainly, when it comes to the built environment, we have seen many improvements with accessibility being incorporated into architecture and building, construction, education, for instance. We're really working hard to ensure that this concept is woven into technology education, for instance, and for developers and programmers so that they know and understand that technology can be bor accessible.

And so it's not just the ADA that we focus on, and you're also right, there are other laws that impact accessibility. One example is the Rehabilitation Act. And, in fact, this year, 2023, we are marking the 50th anniversary of this act, which really is a milestone in advancing access and equity for people with disabilities. And, throughout this year, we are observing this important anniversary by examining its impact and talking about where it was then, where it is now, and what's next. And the Rehab Act, as it's often called, is key legislation protecting the civil rights of people with disabilities in the US. And, in fact, it was the first to address the notions of equity and access for people with disabilities.

And it's often spoken about in terms of various sections, some of which focus on employment and career readiness. And, for us at the Department of Labor, the Rehab Act really works to make our workforce more inclusive. It prohibits certain employers from discriminating against job applicants and employees with disabilities. It also requires that these employers take affirmative action to recruit and retain people with disabilities, and this includes federal agencies as well as federal contractors and subcontractors, and federal agencies are covered by Section 501 of the Rehab Act, and federal contractors are covered by Section 503.

But the Rehab Act doesn't just protect those who are already in the workforce. It also is something that addresses those who are preparing to join it. And so Section 504, which a lot of books in the disability community will talk about, is the section that prohibits discrimination against people with disabilities by any program or activity receiving federal financial assistance, and that means public education, for example, or publicly-funded workforce services. If you are a person with a disability seeking employment or training assistance through an American Job Center or any other organization that receives federal funds, the Rehab Act means that services must be accessible to you.

And I should note that the signing of regulations implementing Section 504 of the Rehab Act was really a seminal event in disability rights history, and achieved as a result of tireless efforts on the part of many advocates, organizations, and our allies, among them the late disability rights champion and mentor Judy Heumann. The world today is very different than it was in 1973, with technology powering so much of our daily lives, and on this note, the Rehab Act has really provided the flexibility to meet our changing needs.

Emily Ladau:

I want to say that I am so thrilled that this was not only a primer that you gave on accessibility laws, but also really on some seminal turning points in disability rights history. And I think that it's important to take these conversations of accessibility in that context because there are so many people who have done such incredible work to get us to the point that we are today to create a more accessible world.

And I can imagine that some people who are working in philanthropy might be wondering about the applicability of this more broadly, especially for the rules and regulations that apply to federal entities. And I just want to emphasize that no matter what sector you are talking about, accessibility really does impact all of us. And so philanthropy absolutely has a role to play in contributing to the work of creating a more accessible world, and not only that, but really a more just and equitable world.

But, when we are thinking about how we can create a more equitable world, accessibility is so often left out of the equation entirely. It's not taken into account in the work of broader social justice movements, and yet we know that disability cuts across all identities and that movements cannot exist in silos. I'd love if, continuing the beautiful thread that you started about disability history in general, can we talk about accessibility and how it's more broadly interconnected with disability rights, disability justice, and then rights and justice movements more broadly?

Taryn Williams:

Absolutely. I believe that, and you put this so nicely, I believe accessibility is intrinsically interconnected with efforts to advance disability justice and, really, efforts to advance justice for any marginalized or underserved group. And, as I said earlier, accessibility is about equity, and equity, or the fight for it, is the common thread running through all social justice movements. And I've understood this for a long time. I reflected on it a lot. This past March, I had an opportunity to travel to Alabama to celebrate the Selma Bridge Crossing Jubilee, and while there, I met with members of the National Black Caucus of State Legislators.

And Alabama, as you know, was really the backdrop for so many pivotal moments in the Civil Rights movement. And I was awestruck being in Selma, not only because I'm a proud Black woman, but also as a person with a disability who really understands and had the opportunity to learn the role that the civil rights movement played in the disability rights movement. And we see the linkages there through several critical moments in our history, and the thing is, both of those movements were about access. And, while the nature of some of the barriers involved might have been different, some were absolutely the same and they related to attitudes.

And, when the disability rights movement was just emerging in the 1960s and '70s, its leaders looked to the civil rights leaders, such as those who marched in Selma, and took action across the South to advance their cause and are inspired by the passion and the commitment they saw. And these leaders made disability rights the next step in America's ongoing progress and demands that we live up to this ideal, that we advance, that we are created equal. And the meaning of the word access, as a noun, it means approaching or entering a place, and when we look at it, that, simply, you can see that disability rights, which are facilitated through accessibility, are in fact civil rights.

And, on a basic level, both movements were really fighting for the same theme, the right for people to equitably enter and to be fully a part of our society. And so let me just say, while there were many people who brought the disability rights movement to the forefront, someone who has been top of mind lately is someone I mentioned earlier, my friend and mentor and Judith, or Judy, as we knew her, Heumann, who actually passed away the very day that I was in Selma. And, in fact, as I was meeting with those legislators and talking about the linkages between the civil rights movement and the disability rights movement and where we are today, I was grappling with the news of the loss of Judy.

And one of so many examples of her impact, Judy helped lead the 1977 504 Sit-in at the San Francisco Federal Building, and that demonstration resulted in the long-awaited implementation of the Section 504 regulations of the Rehab Act, which I mentioned earlier. And Section 504 was actually modeled on the Civil Rights Act in 1964, and it laid the foundation for the more comprehensive legislation, the Americans with Disabilities Act or the ADA. The interplay between the two movements is clear, it's compelling, and it continues absolutely to this day.

Emily Ladau:

Taryn, I could not be more thrilled how you tied that all together. And, as somebody who had the privilege also of calling Judy Heumann a mentor and a friend, I am very happy to be able to use this as a platform to honor her legacy, but also to note that there are so many disabled activists across all cultures and identity groups who are really doing the work to carry forward, not just Judy's legacy, but the legacy of everyone who fought to ensure that we have a right to an accessible world, and I know that there is more to do.

And so, as we wrap up, recognizing that, although we've made so much progress, inaccessibility is still incredibly pervasive in so many places. What do you think needs to happen across the philanthropic sector, across all sectors, to ensure that we're moving in the right direction toward disability inclusion, and what is a message that you would like to leave our listeners with today?

Taryn Williams:

Yeah. It's hard to think of just one message. I will start with a moment of optimism, and that is I'd like to believe that we're at a tipping point when it comes to diversity, equity, and inclusion, and it has to do with accessibility being interwoven in, the increasing use of the A, so that, when we talk about diversity, equity, and inclusion, we say diversity, equity, inclusion, and accessibility, or DEIA, which is part of the Biden administration's executive order, focus on just that for the workforce.

But what I would really want to say is that philanthropies have an important role to play in strengthening the momentum that we're seeing, or this tipping point that we're in. For instance, they can champion accessibility and inclusion, not only when it comes to resource allocation and grant-making, but also within their own staff and leadership. And that, of course, necessitates fostering an organizational culture conducive to self-identification, and it means that you ensure that all individuals with disabilities, including those who live with non-apparent disabilities, that they can disclose and feel as if they can share without fear of stigma and discrimination, and it's my belief that increased accessibility really will help fight that very stigma.

And, as you were saying before, as I think we've been talking about, it's not just a box. It's a spirit and an ongoing mindset of creating the most inclusive spaces possible, and we all have a role to play in that.

Emily Ladau:

The depth and breadth of everything that you've shared today has just resonated so deeply with me, and I'm so excited for people working across philanthropy to be able to dive into what you shared. So I just want to say thank you, really, from the bottom of my heart for joining me in this conversation and for this episode of Disability: Inclusion Required. It has been so wonderful to have you. I so appreciate your work, and I want to thank you for everything that you continue to do to foster a more accessible world for all of us.

And I want to encourage our listeners to continue your learning journey by visiting disabilityphilanthropy.org, the Disability & Philanthropy Forum, for more resources to support you in your learning process. Again, Taryn, thank you for joining me. Thank you to everyone for tuning in. Until next time, I'm Emily Ladau, and this has been Disability: Inclusion Required.

Taryn Williams:

Thank you.