Emily Ladau:

Hello everyone and welcome welcome to another episode of Disability Inclusion: Required. I am your host, Emily Ladau, and today we're going to be chatting about something that is central to the work of the Disability & Philanthropy Forum, which is the Disability Inclusion Pledge. So foundations and philanthropy serving organizations that sign on to this pledge commit to engaging in a learning journey about disability inclusion and they work on eight different action items that are intended to advance systemic change across the philanthropic sector, both inside and out.

And so today I could not be more excited to be joined by Kristy Trautmann, who's the executive director of FISA Foundation, which was actually one of our earliest pledge signatories. So they've been part of this work for quite a while now. And we're going to dive more into that soon, but first I just want to say welcome. Kristy, I'm so excited that you're here. Can you just tell us a little bit about yourself and the work that your foundation does?

Kristy Trautmann:

Hey Emily, thanks so much for having me and allowing me to talk a little bit about FISA's work and the pledge, which we are big fans and proponents of. So FISA Foundation is a place-based, population focused funder. We're headquartered in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania. We're a health conversion foundation. So our endowment was formed from the sale of a rehab hospital, which is where our disability focused on grant making has roots.

But before it was a rehab hospital it was actually started as a convalescent home for women in the early 1900s. And so our mission today is to champion equity, justice, safety and inclusion for women and girls from the first life of FISA and people with disabilities from our rehab days in southwestern Pennsylvania and to address the intersection of systemic racism with our work. And so about half of our annual grant making focuses on disability.

And as you can hear from our mission statement, we're really proud. We amended it just a couple of years ago to make permanent our commitment to addressing the intersection of systemic and racism with our work. So and then I guess me, I am privileged to have worked at FISA for almost 20 years. I originally was a grantee.

I worked at the rape crisis program in our area and got FISA's first ever multi-year grant to address abuse of women with disabilities. So I came in as program associate, was promoted to program officer and had been the executive director since 2010. I don't currently have a disability, but my mother lived with multiple chronic disabilities and so many of my family and friends also live with disabilities. It's been a central focus of my work since the early two thousands maybe.

And on a more personal note, I'm a native Pittsburgher. My wife and I have two kids and a spoiled rotten Goldendoodle, which you'll probably hear Auggie in the background during this. We really strongly believe in think globally, act locally and the power of making changes on the ground in our own community as a way of leveraging larger scale change in the world. So that was a lot, but thanks Emily.

Emily Ladau:

That was honestly such a lovely way to start off and I am very much the same in terms of how we can begin where we are and take those small steps that become bigger changes. And so I really appreciate you naming that as your approach. And also we'll just say that dogs are always welcome of a Disability Inclusion: Required podcast. So if we hear Auggie in the background, we'll just consider it an added bonus. But I wanted to specifically call out the fact that FISA Foundation already has a disability focus as part of its work.

And so unfortunately that is a bit of a rarity still across philanthropy. And I think it's really important to recognize that even if you do have some kind of a focus on disability, there is still more work that can be done, assuming that you have any kind of focus on disability to begin with. And so I'd love to know what it is that led your foundation to choose to sign the disability inclusion pledge. And that's even though you were already doing this work. So I think that's especially important to focus in on.

Kristy Trautmann:

Oh, Emily, I'll say we jumped at the opportunity to sign the disability inclusion pledge. We had been really following Darren Walker's lead and appreciated his open letter on disability, justice, equity and inclusion, when was that? 2015, 2016. And the leadership of really talking about how disability intersects with and is part of every issue. And so we've really, we admired that, followed it closely.

And pretty much the day that we heard about the pledge, we immediately signed on. I feel like there's always an opportunity to learn, grow, and do better. And that's a lot how we think about our work, right? That we have a mission, we have goals, we have aspirations, and then there's really always a gap between what we aspire to do and what we're actually doing, right?

Always and forever there'll be that gap and it's about how do we live forward into that gap and always learn and always grow and always do better. I'll say that I think in our field, maybe in this time, checklists tend to get kind of a bad rap. It's a negative thing to say about checking the box.

But I think the other side of that is that checklists and concrete suggestions can be enormously helpful in focusing attention, in helping to set priorities, marshal resources, and take really concrete and meaningful next steps that really build on each other for change. And so I think the pledge is a fantastic tool for people who are all different stages of disability inclusion, equity and justice work. And we all have next steps to take.

Emily Ladau:

This actually brings me back to something that you said a little earlier about the fact that you don't currently identify as someone with a disability, but you are in many ways surrounded by experiences of disability and it's also something that you actively work on through FISA Foundation. And so I think that that really points to what you were saying about the fact that we are all on this journey and we can all be at different points and sometimes having those concrete actions, and yes, having a checklist can be incredibly helpful.

And I'm in agreement very often with the sentiment that having a checklist is not what it's all about. But that being said, if there is a way to provide some guidance for a process that we're all navigating and all at different points on, then I think that's equally as valuable.

And so that's really important about the pledge to me is that it tries to give you those concrete actions to take. And speaking of taking action, I'd love if you could share with us some of the actions in connection with the pledge that FISA Foundation has already taken specifically internally to ensure that you're fostering an inclusive culture for staff. Because the pledge is really about focusing on internal culture and external grant making practices.

Kristy Trautmann:

Excellent. That's really is a good question. And if we don't get our internal culture right, then the best we'll ever do externally is kind of intermittent success. So you have to do both, the inside work and the outside work. So a little bit more about FISA is that we are a really small foundation as foundations go, although we're in a pretty weird field, Emily, I never said only and millions in the same sentence until I worked at a foundation.

But we have a really small staff, three people. We just added a fourth person. We are ecstatic about that. And outside of her, everybody else on the team has worked for longer than 10 years with FISA Foundation. So we have a really small, generally long tenured staff and we have a board of 18 community members who are really recruited for their expertise and contributions to our mission.

And so when we think about internal culture, we think about a lot of time staff and board together because our board are really active in reviewing proposals and going on site visits and helping us think about our work. So when I think about board and staff together, a few things stand out. One is that we have always had a focus on ongoing education. There is always so much more to learn. And so we pretty regularly have guest speakers or educational efforts built into our board meetings.

Our next board meeting coming up, we have a guest speaker talking about Neurodivergence and the autistic community. Pretty recently we had spent half of a board meeting talking about the school to prison pipeline and the ways that people with especially non-apparent disabilities and particularly people of color with non-apparent disabilities end up criminalized and in the justice system.

So we've had really deep conversations on whole variety of things as well as talking about disability history and language. It's regular and ongoing part of our board agendas and our learning agenda together. And so that's one thing. I would say another that has been super interesting to me is we took the demographic survey that the Disability Philanthropy Forum put forth. You had a great webinar and then some written resources that was released, I don't know, a couple of years ago.

We took that and really adapted that for use with our board. Now I'll say where we were at that point a few years ago is we had been for a long time intentionally recruiting for diversity on our board. And so we knew that a third of our board at least had disabilities or a deep personal relationship and experience with disabilities because that's part of what we were recruiting for. And we kept statistics about board diversity and every year we would ask people, 'Do you have a disability?"

But I'll say when we started to use your tool, which was a much more nuanced way of talking about what disability is, right? And so instead of saying, "Do you have a disability?" It said, "Do you have any of the following disabilities or chronic conditions?" And then listed examples of physical disabilities with mobility, chronic health issues, learning disabilities, memory and cognition, chronic medical issues, vision loss, hearing loss or deafness. When we listed, I don't know, it was 10 or 12 different categories of things and then asked, "Do you have any of the above disabilities?" Two thirds of our board said yes to that question.

And so that was a really rich learning for us that even though disability was a core part of what we talked about, every meeting and everything that we did, there was still a gap in people having the experience of living with a disability and embracing the identity of living with a disability. And so that's been really rich conversation internally as well as with our grantees and partners because I think talking about what disability is and means is not a one-time simple thing. It's a journey. So that's been really enlightening.

Emily Ladau:

I cannot tell you how glad I am that you talked specifically about these practices, not just with staff, but especially with the board. Because really one of the things that is a priority for the disability inclusion pledge is making sure that we're encouraging a very top down and also bottom up approach, meaning that at every level of an organization from board all the way down to the newest hire, that everyone has some kind of stake in buy-in into this work. And so the work that you are doing with your board and all of those trainings, that's one of the action items of the pledge.

So that's really essential and really wonderful to hear about some of the tangible takeaways from the work that you're doing and also just exploring identity and disability and getting into the nuances of the conversations. And so that is essential to the work, but what's also essential is ensuring that external practices are reflective of truly being disability inclusive. So I'm curious to hear a little bit more about the grant making practices. Can you tell us how FISA Foundation has implemented some of the tenets of the pledge into your grant making work?

Kristy Trautmann:

Sure. I love to talk about that, Emily. So I would say longstanding, we've always had a mission and strategic priorities that had a disability focus. So for us that was baseline and that those focus areas were really developed around what were the gaps that people with disabilities and people in the disability field were saying existed, that a relatively small foundation could make a difference in. And so we had longstanding priorities that were focused in that way, informed by people with disability. Some of the, I think other practices that we've adopted and refined over time. One is... I'm sorry that my notifications keep going off. I hope that's not too bothersome. I frankly-

Emily Ladau:

No, that's a matter of just getting work done.

Kristy Trautmann:

Awesome. Because I can't figure out how to turn that off, so I apologize.

Emily Ladau:

Don't worry at all. I'm sure everybody listening understands. Yeah. They're probably wondering if it's their notifications [inaudible 00:16:34]

Kristy Trautmann:

Okay, great. Yeah. So back to the point is we really believe that who is at the table in making core decisions matters a lot. And so we have recruited for diversity on our board. We specifically look at the diversity of who's around the table when we're vying proposals and making funding recommendations and figuring out how to make sure that that table is as diverse and inclusive as we want it and inspire for it to be.

A couple of years ago, we ended up bounding an advisory committee of paid disability advocates who were also people of color because we recognized that we had work to do in that intersectional space. And so that's also really informed our grant making process. Another thing that's been a really interesting growth for us is asking our grantees and applicants about the composition of their boards of directors. So we've been asking for a pretty long time in informal ways since [inaudible 00:17:50] 2018, 2019, we started to ask particularly about gender and racial diversity.

And it's been a journey to figure out how do we ask about disability diversity. It seems like there are things like that on the checklist about asking about board diversity that seemed like they're one thing, but really we're in several years in to thinking about how do you ask the question and then what do you do next with what the answer is? And so that's been a real area of growth for us.

When we started to ask about people with disabilities on boards, one of the things that we learned pretty early on is that the power differential that we have in asking questions is something that we need to always pay attention to in our practices. I mean, that was something that we knew, but we had somebody send us their diagnosis and it's like, "Okay, that's not what we wanted to ask you to disclose something that you hadn't disclosed before that felt personal to you."

And so then we adopted or adapted our language really to be, "How do you publicly identify?" And when we have nonprofits that say they have no people with disabilities on their boards, that's not the end of the conversation. That's really the beginning of the conversation about, "Well, are you asking about that? And if so, how are you asking about that?"

And so we have a number of grantees, we're in our, [inaudible 00:19:30] third grant with them thinking through disability inclusion and other intersectional equity issues as part of their board as well as staff composition. And so I'll say when we looked at our statistics for last year, we've been asking about board composition and leadership composition for about four grant cycles. Still only about half of our applicants were giving us disability demographic information. So that still is in process, but of those who did, almost 30% said that the executive director publicly identifies as disabled.

And so it's an evolutionary process for us asking the question and then asking for more information at the site visit, and then putting the information and the conversations we've had already at the site visit in our grant letter that asks them within their report to talk about progress and that feeds then the next request. And so for us, it's been a point of ongoing learning and dialogue internally and externally, and we're really seeing some changes of organizations that have come around and evolved in the same way that we have evolved about how we think about and talk about who's at the table.

Emily Ladau:

I love how you talk about this work as an evolutionary process because that's definitely something that we talk about a lot when we are doing this work internally at the forum. It's not always going to be a linear journey towards disability inclusion, and sometimes it require creative thinking and problem solving and navigating challenges that come up. And so I hope it's okay to ask, because we've been talking so much about FISA Foundation's successes. Would you say that there are any challenges that you have encountered as you tried to implement any of the action items in the pledge? And how have you really navigated them?

Kristy Trautmann:

That's a really is a good question, Emily. And we believe in kind of learning in public, being willing to be transparent and vulnerable with our grantees and partners about the areas that we're evolving in and what we are learning about. Because the reality is that this will always and forever be a journey. I don't expect that we'll at some point arrive and get it right and just be able to do that forward. The world is changing.

And so for us, it's about not stopping when something doesn't go quite as we had hoped around the board. Diversity conversation is one. I think another thing that we're currently challenged by and thinking hard about is how do we be transparent in terms of being accountable about doing what we say we're going to do? And so really thinking hard about how do we report back what information, what our grantees and partners find interesting and useful?

How do we be transparent about the progress we've made, the areas we are struggling, knowing that we are on a journey? And so figuring out that piece of more public accountability is really important to us. And another area I think that we have been challenged by over the years, especially as I'm not somebody who currently identifies as a person with a disability, although frankly tomorrow I could be because of the nature of acquired disabilities and how common that is.

But for now I don't. And so how do we be the best possible ally and advocate, amplifying the voices of people who are leading with disability, identity and experience? And when we are in rooms, when there's nobody leading from that perspective in an overt way, giving voice and raising the questions and making sure the disability is part of the agenda, whatever the agenda is. And so continuing to find our way in that way too.

Emily Ladau:

I am so glad that you mentioned transparency, because I think that that is the key. And I love also that you called it learning in public and shared some of how you're doing that. I want people to understand that signing the disability inclusion pledge doesn't necessarily mean that you need to be perfect. That is not at all what we are asking. What we are asking is that you are committing to being a part of this journey. And that might include some bumps in the road, that might include some challenges, but it's also going to include a lot of incredible successes and progress and just overall an improvement of culture and an improvement of grant making practices.

So I suppose that that is a little bit of my pitch when it comes to convincing other foundations and philanthropy serving organizations to sign on to the disability inclusion pledge. But you have been absolutely instrumental, Kristy, in encouraging foundations to sign on. And you have been such a champion of the pledge and of this work in general. So I'd love to hear what your pitch is for why other foundations and philanthropy serving organizations can join us and sign on.

Kristy Trautmann:

Well, you're really generous in that. And so I want to add a little context I guess to this conversation for our listeners. So in Pittsburgh, our philanthropic community is really collaborative and vibrant. There are many relationships that go back a long ways. We're really fortunate to have kind of a, I don't know, a sister foundation kind of, the Staunton Farm Foundation who focuses on mental health disabilities.

So for many years we focused on cross disability things by co-funding. And we have a broader community of peers who invest really deeply in equity and have come to really see disability as part of their broader equity agenda. And so I want to call out the Heinz Endowment, who is also a member of the President's Council, the Pittsburgh Foundation, the Opportunity Fund, which is a local family foundation, Women and Girls Foundation, and our United Way that all of these folks in the Pittsburgh area have been in conversation with each other about equity and justice in a variety of different ways, and disability is just part of that.

And so as a group, we all signed and we meet every month to talk about what we're each learning. So while in some ways FISA's been thinking about disability issues for the longest with Staunton Farm Foundation and others are new to the disability space, we learn so much from them around equity and justice that it really becomes a community making progress together.

And so for instance, we spent last year collaboratively coming up with an accessible events policy that we all invested in what's the ideal for what we would want for the events that we organize and sponsor, as well as what kind of guidance do we want to give to those when we sponsor or co-sponsor events in the community? But that was really a collaborative effort and we have been able to take and adopt that internally as our procedure and to shorten it and give that guidance whenever we do sponsorship grants.

And so it's been a whole community approach to thinking about equity and justice. I think people recognize that people with disabilities are everywhere. Disability is a really frequently occurring natural common part of human diversity. And so it should be a regular thing that we think about and talk about in our grant making practice and in how we internally do our business.

Emily Ladau:

I really want to underscore what you said about it being a community approach, because I think that that is an essential part of the disability inclusion pledge. When you sign onto it, you're signing on to be part of a network and a community of support and practice that doesn't leave you alone in this work. This work is absolutely a community effort and require collaboration and conversation and learning from one another. So I am so glad that you talked about it in that way.

And I think that it is so abundantly clear that from the growing list of disability inclusion pledge signatories, we can tell that philanthropy is slowly but surely moving in the right direction towards disability inclusion. But I think we can also say very honestly that there's a lot more work that needs to be done. And so if you could leave your colleagues in philanthropy with a call to action today, what would it be?

Kristy Trautmann:

Emily, that makes me think of one of my very favorite quotes of all time, which is from Arthur Ashe, "Start where you are, use what you have and do what you can." That wherever we are, we can start and take first steps or next steps around disability inclusion. And I just really want to plug the Disability & Philanthropy Forum. If you're listening and haven't checked it out, Google it. You can sign up to be a part of it as an individual by just putting in your email address.

It doesn't require a whole organizational commitment like signing the pledge does, and it unlocks so many fantastic resources and learning opportunities. And so you as an individual, if this is something that you care about, you can join the Disability Philanthropy Forum. You can read the articles and watch the videos and attend the webinars and figure out what are some first steps or next steps for the work that you do.

And I want to end with a quote from one of my favorite people, Michelle McMurray, who is a colleague at the Pittsburgh Foundation. And she always talks about, regardless of whatever your role or position is, find the power that you have in the seat where you sit to make change and then use the hell out of it. And so I encourage you to use the hell out of the power that you have to make the world more accessible, inclusive, and welcoming of people with disabilities. Because disability is a us issue, not a them issue. This is about human experience and being welcoming, hospitable, and just.

Emily Ladau:

Amen to all of that. Truly, I could not have said it better myself. And also, I'm so glad that you made a plug for people to connect with the Disability & Philanthropy Forum. We have so, so many resources that are readily and publicly available, and we have some more resources that are available to members. And I also want to let everybody know to stay tuned because we are going to be doing a bit of a revamp of membership structure so that we can really make it a more robust experience.

But I am just so excited about the journey of the forum. I am excited about the journey that you have shared that FISA Foundation is on, and I'm excited to invite more foundations and philanthropy serving organizations to join us on this journey to disability inclusion. And I want to thank you again, Kristy, just so much for joining me today. I was nodding along vigorously at everything you were saying. And to wrap up, I'd love if you could let us know how we can stay connected with FISA Foundation's work. Where can people find you?

Kristy Trautmann:

Oh, thanks, Emily. Our website is www.fisafoundation.org. That's F-I-S-A Foundation. We try to keep current there about events and programming, our strategic plan and the things that we're learning about. And we also have a Facebook page. So we really appreciate the opportunity to talk about our work and love being in community with others who are working on disability inclusion and equity.

Emily Ladau:

Amazing. Thank you so much for everything you've shared with us today. And I just want to let our listeners know that if you would like to keep your learning journey going, or if Kristy and I have sold you on signing the disability inclusion pledge, if your foundation or philanthropy serving organization is interested in learning more, you can visit the Disability & Philanthropy Forum, it's disabilityphilanthropy.org.

Check it out. You'll find information about the disability inclusion pledge right at the top menu. And again, I want to say, I'm Emily Ladau. I'm so glad to have been joined by Kristy Trautmann, and this has been another episode of Disability Inclusion:Required. So thank you so much for tuning in, and we'll see you again next time.