

Speaker 1: Welcome, and thank you for joining today's conference, Melwood USDA Disability Awareness Month presentation. Before we begin, please ensure you have opened the chat panel by using the associated icon located at the bottom of your screen. If you require any technical assistance, please send chat to the event producer.

Please note that all audio lines have been muted until the Q&A portion of call. We will give you instructions on how to ask a question at that time. To submit a written question, select all panelists from the dropdown menu in the chat panel, enter your question in the message box provided, and send. With that, I'll turn the call over to Todd Reed, FSIS Chief Operating Officer. Please go ahead.

Todd Reed: Thank you. Good afternoon, everyone and appreciate the introduction. To start, I'd like to thank the civil rights staff for organizing the webinar today. Always appreciate these events. We're here today to celebrate National Disability Awareness Month. People with disabilities face barriers that often start with the false assumptions of others. FSIS holds these special emphasis programs to recognize our differences and to empower all employees to reach their full potential. Together, we build a stronger workforce that better understands, represents, and serves the American public.

FSIS is committed to cultivating a collaborative environment in which employees are part of a vibrant and diverse workforce. The theme for this year's Disability Awareness Month is America's Recovery: Powered by Inclusion. We're fortunate today to welcome speakers from Melwood, a nonprofit organization that provides jobs and other opportunities for people with disabilities. We'll hear today from Larysa Kautz, the President and CEO of Melwood and Rebecca Cheraquit, the Chief Program Officer of Melwood.

Ms. Kautz has served as Melwood's President and CEO since 2020, bringing nearly 20 years of experience in law, business, advocacy and nonprofit management to the position. She previously served as Melwood's General Counsel and Chief of Staff.

As a first-generation American, a daughter of parents with invisible disabilities, and a mother of a child with autism, Ms. Kautz is passionate about Melwood's mission of inclusion and has been a fierce advocate for individuals with disabilities throughout her life. She founded Melwood's Advocacy department, which has significantly increased the organization's effectiveness at influencing policies and legislation that benefit the communities that Melwood serves, including people with disabilities and injured veterans. She has been instrumental in advocating for the abolition of Section 14(c) of the Fair Labor Standards Act, which allows employers to pay workers with disabilities below minimum wage.

Ms. Cheraquit serves as the Chief Program Officer at Melwood and was previously the organization's Vice President of Community Services. Over the last decade, her focus has been job readiness and job retention for young adults

and adults with disabilities. Her professional journey began in New York City, where she successfully managed alternative education programs in collaboration with the New York City Department of Education and demonstrated her ability to lead grassroots advocacy efforts to affect public policy.

She turned Melwood's Vocational Support Services program into an industry-leading operation with an emphasis on process professional development. Ms. Cheraquit continues to lead the development of new and innovative programs to better serve people with disabilities by growing opportunities for community integration. With those introductions, please welcome them today. Thank you very much.

Larysa Kautz:

Thank you so much for the warm introduction, Todd. I really appreciate it. As Todd said, I'm Larysa Kautz, and we're very excited to be here today in front of you with members of my team. With me today is Rebecca Cheraquit, our Chief Program Officer and Jewelyn Cosgrove, who is our Vice President of Government and Public Relations.

So why are we here today? This is October, which is National Disability Employment Awareness Month. As I think most of us know who have family members with disabilities, people with disabilities are chronically unemployed and underemployed in the workforce. Only 35% of people with disabilities are in the workforce compared to over 70% of people without disabilities. Surveys show that a huge number of those that are not in the workforce want to be, but they can't work usually due to perceptions about their medical conditions, their functional limitations and disabilities. In addition to that, there's barriers with limited access to transportation and other socioeconomic barriers to employment.

As of September 2021, the unemployment rate for people with disabilities was 9.7% compared to 4.5% for people without disabilities, according to the Bureau of Labor Statistics. I want to note that in addition to that, of course, the pandemic has had a significant impact on people with disabilities. Often people with disabilities are the last hired and first fired if there's a need for cutbacks in the labor force.

On the positive side, teleworking is one of the most commonly requested accommodations, but prior to the pandemic, it was one of the most frequently denied accommodations. The opportunity to telework, it means you have greater access to talent who likely have a lot of the necessary accommodations at home or for whom the cost of supporting those accommodations is lower because of the work from home dynamic. It's a really great chance to tap into this workforce in an expansive way.

COVID also expanded the ranks of people with disabilities, unfortunately. This summer, President Biden pointed out in his ADA anniversary speech that long haul COVID or the lingering effects for people who have had the virus and

recovered could mean millions of Americans will be dealing with a disability, tiredness, brain fog, headaches, and other significant and lasting damage to organs. That really means that for some Americans, COVID can become a disability under the ADA in the long run.

All of this is to say that there's this huge untapped resource in disabled talent. You just need to know how to find it, how to tap into it, and how to keep it. Easy, right? Well, the good thing is, is Melwood has been doing this for nearly 60 years and we are really happy to share our expertise and our stories and what we have found.

The easiest company accommodations, frankly, and often the most beneficial are patience and flexibility. To employ means to have representation, to change the interviewing process and to have people with disabilities in roles that are visible to other people with disabilities. You can help enable with accessible tools and training, engage your employees with inclusive culture recruitment and empower while they're your employees with mentoring, with skilling and reskilling programs, roles at all levels of the organization, to make sure that promotion and career development is an option for all.

There clearly have been documented benefits to companies and to organizations that have a neurodiverse and diverse workforce. You have increased innovation, improved shareholder value, improved productivity, access to a supplier ecosystem, diverse customer needs, improved market share, enhanced reputation. I can go on and on and on. As you can see in these stats, there are approximately 61 million adults in the US living with a disability. And one in 54 children is diagnosed with being on the autism spectrum, including my son.

This is a breakdown of the percentage of adults with functional disability types. As I like to say, ADA 1.0 really talked mostly to mobility and to physical disabilities. Now it's time to look at doing an ADA 2.0 that looks at all the other disabilities that exist with cognition, with developmental intellectual disabilities, to really look at how the best accommodations can be accomplished for all of those disabilities.

And here you see many of the other statistics. The 4.4 million workers with disabilities represent only about 3.2% of the total 140 million workers in the United States. And now with the workforce shortage labor shortages, it's an opportunity to tap into this workforce, and we want to make sure to help show the government and the private sector how this can be done and frankly, with not too much effort and not too high of a cost.

Companies that champion people with disabilities outperform other companies. There was an Accenture study that we quote here in 2018 that I hate talking about people with disabilities as having a return on investment, of an ROI, but honestly that is the way to convince a lot of companies to take a look at this. And it has been economically proven that they have 28% higher revenues, 200%

higher net income and 30% higher profit margins. These are companies that have invested in programs to hire neurodivergent individuals and to really create a neurodiverse workforce.

Let me tell you a little bit about Melwood. We are one of the largest nonprofits in the country serving people with disabilities in employment, job training, job placement, and recreation activities. Our mission is to advocate for and empower people with disabilities to transform their own lives by creating unique opportunities to work and play in the community. Our vision is a world that fully includes people with disabilities in all aspects of live, work and play.

We have been challenging for 60 years the outdated perceptions of people with disabilities and fostering new ways of thinking, collaborating and working inclusively. We stand as proof that people with disabilities can be reliable and a high performing segment of the workforce.

We were founded in 1963 by a group of parents, such as myself and Rebecca, who have children. And we see a future for our children that is open-ended. Back in 1963, people with disabilities were considered to be untrainable and unemployable. So these parents got together, they said, we've got young adult children, and we know that they can work. And we know that they can earn a wage.

They had federal surplus land across from Andrews Air Force Base in Upper Marlboro, Maryland. And they started growing plants. It started with just selling plants and flowers at metro stations. That has transformed over the last 60 years to today's Melwood, which has 1600 employees, nearly 1,000 of whom have a disability.

Horticulture is still a big part of what we do. Those same flowers are grown by our Melwood team at our current Melwood greenhouses can be seen at the Kennedy Center and at the USDA People's Garden. Those are plants that are grown by Melwood, by Melwood participants. And all of the landscaping is done by our employees, 75% of whom have a significant disability. We participate in the AbilityOne program, which is a mandatory source procurement program, which provides 45,000 people with disabilities jobs across the country, serving federal customers every year.

Here's a list of our programs and activities. We provide a wide array of services, and we're just one of 500 plus nonprofits around the country that do this type of work. We are at 62 federal sites across the DC, Maryland, and Virginia area from custodial and groundskeeping work to record keeping, warehousing and packaging, and new lines of work in tech and tech adjacent fields.

Specifically for the USDA, you can see our incredible workforce right there side by side with you guys. We provide landscaping and janitorial services, and we're honored to serve all of you in that role. And I personally, as the President and

CEO am always extremely happy to get emails and accolades from folks at the various federal agencies that we provide services for telling us how great our people are. So don't be shy about sending me an email if you'd like to. And please say hi and talk to our employees. They really love to know that their work is being appreciated.

We are actively working to expand and enhance opportunities for people with disabilities. And I'm so excited to be here to talk to you about the important work ahead of us to make sure that every person with a disability has a chance to succeed at work, whether it's with a nonprofit, a for-profit, or directly being employed by the government.

We have some amazing training programs that we've launched in recent years that are designed to train people with disabilities for critical growing fields in the coming years filling both the critical workforce need, as well as empowering workers who are too often locked out of the workforce with real opportunities for meaningful employment.

The first program that we piloted a few years ago is called a abilIT, and we help train and connect people with disabilities with careers in technology. Through this program, we've partnered with well-known entities, such as KPMG and Cybrary to provide professional soft skill development, along with critical IT certifications to help people with disabilities, specifically, autistic individuals gain meaningful employment in tech and tech adjacent fields.

In fact, earlier this year, abilIT and KPMG won an HHS competition for new program models to expand employment for workers with intellectual and developmental disabilities. More than 50 companies competed in the initial phase and a abilIT was selected as one of the winners, which we're very proud of.

We have countless stories of success. One of my favorites is a federal hiring pilot program with MITRE where our Melwood abilIT model helped several graduates become Schedule A hires by the National Geospatial-Intelligence Agency. And one special graduate who got a job directly with MITRE now earns over \$90,000 a year after having previously worked for \$10 an hour in retail. We are giving people a chance to succeed in a training program, in an interview system, and in a job search system that has not been something that has favored or been beneficial for individuals with disabilities, particularly those with intellectual and developmental disabilities.

We started abilIT because we saw there was a need in cybersecurity in tech and tech fields and that there's an increasing gap in the need for workers. Our second pilot is called Building Paths. It's a construction trades initiative in partnership with the College of Southern Maryland and the Maryland Division of Rehabilitative Services. We just launched this pilot this year, but we're already so enthusiastic that the doors that this training is opening for our participants. We teach a variety of certifications and skillsets to assist people with disabilities

become competitive hires in construction fields. Here you can see some of the certifications that our folks receive.

Again, this is an area in an industry that is in desperate need of labor and a workforce. I pledge to continue to develop pilot programs wherever there is an area, an industry where people with disabilities are interested in getting a foot in the door and where there's a need for workers. I love to marry those two together and do whatever we can to help smooth the way for people with disabilities to get those jobs.

So how can we help, particularly with federal government hiring, which is what we're here to talk about today? Over the course of many years, the federal government has made it a priority to try to expand the hiring of people with disabilities through the US AbilityOne program, through the Rehabilitative Services Act with 7% hiring goal for federal contractors and also directly by hiring by federal agencies.

Melwood's here as an expert at employing, training, and placing people with disabilities in meaningful employment. And we're happy to help USDA expand its direct hiring efforts and meet the 12% benchmark for people with disabilities in the federal workforce and the 2% benchmark for targeted disabilities, such as autism.

To successfully increase employment, we're going to have to look at recruitment, hiring, advancement, and retention of applicants and employees with disabilities. We have the EEOC regulations that require agencies to establish specific numericals that I've mentioned and MD-715, which requires agencies to describe how their plan will improve the recruitment, hiring, advancement, and retention of applicants and employees with disabilities.

Melwood is the right partner to help with that, and we're happy to continue this conversation in greater detail in certain areas but also to answer any questions at the end of this. The purpose of our presentation today is to really talk about the employment statistics, introduce the concept of neurodiversity in a work environment to explore what we have found with respect to hiring and retaining people with disabilities that can help to inform and equip management and coworkers, and basically to deliver the tools that are needed to reduce the environmental barriers that exist today.

We're going to assume that every single answer today that is asked is being asked with sincerity and with good intent. Please don't hesitate to ask questions. It's the only way that we're going to be able to continue this dialogue and also to bust some of the myths that are out there about people with disabilities and neurodivergent individuals. I'm going to pass it along to Rebecca for the next portion of the presentation.

Rebecca Cheraqu...: Thank you so much, Larysa. Before we start it's just to give an overview you of neurodiversity. It's just an awareness that before we start, we can't make assumption. But we want to start by saying that we always come from a strength-based perspective, always about what the person can do, not what they can't do.

There's a quote, the movement of neurodiversity is about uncovering the strength of neurodivergent individuals and utilizing the talents to increase innovation and productivity of society as a whole. When you give them the opportunity, you see, you tap in those strength, the great things about them, rather than thinking through the outdated perception, Larysa puts it. What can we do you to make sure that we can take advantage of those untapped talents?

What is neurodiversity? We're talking about how all of our brains function differently, how we think differently as human being. How do we think differently? Neurodiversity or people on a spectrum, neuroscience has come such a long way. I am a social worker. For the past 30 years, everybody was mentally retarded in the past. Because of more research, we know more, we are better at diagnosing people on the spectrum or other disabilities. The movement would say that autism is simply a variation of neurocognitive function. It's how we think differently. It is just that.

What is autism? Autism is a developmental disability. It affects how people communicate, interact, behave, may be different. The participants that we work with, they would say, no, you guys think weirdly. We are normal and you're not. So when we talk about what functional areas are impacted, communication skills, social interaction, you could see repetitive behaviors. Those are the core symptoms, but what we want to make sure people understand that it varies. If you know one person with autism, you know one person with autism. It's not all in the same box, and we want to make sure we highlight that.

There are some challenges and strength associated with people on the spectrum. The challenges could be, it's hard for them to get the big picture, it's hard for them to summarize information verbally. There's unwritten social rules. They could be very awkward. But all of these things you think as challenges can actually be a plus because they directly communicate with you. They tell you straight what the story is. They have a unique perspective and a sense of humor. They will tell you exactly. Great long term memory. When they special in something, they master the skills. Believe me, it's good to go. And as employees, very loyal, punctual. Those are the folks who would come to you. They look forward to coming to work.

It would allow you to be innovative. It would allow you to include diverse thinking in your team, independent thinking. As a manager, I want my staff, my colleagues to agree with me all the time. We fight all the time, but that's the great thing. We want people to say it as is. Nonjudgmental, they would tell you in very detail-oriented, they would break down something to the T for you. So it is important for us not to even think about hiring them, but also to think about

how do we make sure that we have them really included in the workplace. That's the important piece.

To give you guys an idea of how or the what to do or some of the tools or examples, let's start by talking about how do we recruit, hire people with disabilities. We want to highlight on the fact that the things that you need to consider. Any employer, I think it's important to be proactive, for you to a plan on inclusion. The plan on inclusion should also include performance goals for people with disabilities. A lot of time, as we talk, it's hard for them to express themselves, but if it's in writing and that type of discussion is promoted on your team, it would allow people to not be stagnant. They would be able to move towards the career ladder.

So don't make the assumption as we talked about the old Melwood, we did. And it's a great thing that we do. People love the horticulture piece, landscaping and custodial. But now people with disabilities, the young people, the parents, they want much more. The expectations are more it's not just to give them a job, but what does it look like five years, 10 years from now, just like anybody would want for themselves. We want to make sure that we highlight that.

And when we talk about self-identification, it really allowing them to self-disclose, really engaging that conversation for people to be comfortable to come to you and to talk to you about that. They may not want to. They don't have to. It's a matter of choice because there are restriction in the law to make sure that for them not to, but it is encouraged. Because if you built an environment they feel comfortable in doing that, it will actually increase their performance. It's good for your team. It makes you not only a better employer, you are a better colleague and you are leading force in the federal government when it comes to inclusion. And we want to make sure we emphasize on this.

The strategies and metrics when it comes to climate and culture, it starts from the top, from the C-suite to make sure that the discussion about inclusion is from top to bottom. You should also identify a disability champion to make sure that the conversation can go on, to make sure that people can share their ideas.

And when it comes to recruiting and training people with disabilities, we have the old ways I call it, the traditional screening and hiring processes. We need to rethink those. We need to rethink those, not just for people with disabilities. With COVID, it's a new life. Everybody's on video now. So we need to rethink this. And how do we make sure that we can take advantage as employers, how we take advantage of these things. And make sure that your plan include a disability-friendly environment for recruiters. Recruiters, also what Melwood has been doing, and I'm very proud to do this, we've been working with employers, just really give people with disability a chance.

We will come to you. We do trainings. We train your managers, we train HR folks. Security people, how do you make sure your clearance processes? We go over that to make sure that we can help you promote inclusion in the



workforce. And then of course, the workplace and technology, making sure that universal design principles are implemented, that it's for anybody.

Things that I'm saying, it's not just for this population because I don't want it to seem like they're getting a break. But it's for anybody. We want to make sure that the technology's there, you think through, and we going to talk a little bit about environmental pieces that can be great when it's adjusted, not just for people with disabilities but anybody who's working with you, anybody on your team. Larysa, you want to highlight the EEOC recommendations?

Larysa Kautz:

Sure. Thank you, Rebecca. The Equal Employment Opportunity Commission has very specific suggestions for agencies seeking to improve and enhance hiring and retention of people with disabilities. First, I encourage you to read through all of their suggestions and advice on how to review current practices and routinely update them to address any barriers, particularly those for targeted disabilities. Looking through all of the employment information and recruitment materials to ensure accessibility for people with disabilities, identify and revise criteria and standards that are unnecessarily restrictive, and potentially exclude people with disabilities.

Examples of potentially problematic standards may include blanket rules requiring certain levels of unaided hearing or unaided vision. Work with your EEO civil rights office to collect, maintain, and analyze applicant flow data and to examine existing recruitment practices and programs to identify, to eliminate any barriers to recruiting and hiring people with disabilities, in particular individuals with targeted disabilities. Proactively using Schedule A for people with disabilities, as well as other accepted service hiring authorities to hire people with disabilities expeditiously. Ensuring the job announcements include information explaining how to apply under Section A.

Section A hiring, which I must say is on fortunately not well known out there, even by individuals with disabilities and often in the federal government itself. It's a non-competitive hiring authority that allows federal agencies to forego the typical application process and to hire peoples with disabilities directly into the workforce. People hired under a Schedule A hiring authority, they receive an accepted service appointment to a position that's otherwise in the competitive service. So if a Schedule A hire has earned positive reviews for their job performance, they may be eligible for conversion to a career conditional appointment within competitive service.

Schedule A is a hiring authority. It's the most direct tool that you have at your disposal to tap into this incredible talent pool, to build out your workforce in an inclusive way, and to help Americans with disabilities join the federal government with their immense talent and skills. There are so few ways for the federal government to hire someone quickly, I think as we all know, but Schedule A allows you to do that and to do so particularly on behalf of a population of talent that's chronically under or unemployed.

Rebecca Cheraqu...: Thank you so much, Larysa. Really, especially for ending, we want to emphasize on the purpose of this is really to give you an idea on how you can give this opportunity to [inaudible 00:29:31] to an untapped talent group that we want to make sure that you understand they can fulfill your needs. Whatever you need, we can train them.

Companies like Melwood, this is what we've been doing and very good at it. We want to start by giving you an idea of what it takes to go through the interview process when it comes for people with disabilities. What you need to think through is from start to finish what the process is like. Really, you need to think through how do you organize the process. Organizing the process, it could be something as small as dress code, very important for someone who's on the spectrum, who's nervous. For anybody who's going to an interview, it's very [inaudible 00:30:16]. What do I wear? It's very important to be clear.

Give a candidate the opportunity to request reasonable accommodations. Maybe a yes, no, but we can't make the assumption that everybody's going to ask for reasonable accommodation. You can make sure that you keep communication through one single point of contact. It would be confusing if Larysa calls me and then Rebecca calls me. So just one person to be able to speak to the person. And more importantly would be helpful if that familiar voice, that friendly voice can be part of that conversation during the interview, whether it's web-based or if it's face-to-face, because it helps. It helps the person not being nervous. Oh, I've been speaking to Larysa, so I'm more comfortable in speaking to Larysa.

Large panels scares me because you have probably five people, three people asking you questions. When you do that, I put myself in this predicament. It could be very intimidating. So if you want to get the best answers, we avoid large panels or large hiring panels. Considering conducting a tour of the place prior to the interview. In doing that, it's really you're building the comfort level of the person to help them familiar with the way finding. That's that building I'm going to. So you talk to them beforehand on what's going to happen. They can process it. As we mentioned on top, information processing is very important. To be able to give them that it's very important to allow them to see things before, if possible.

The interview process, the interview setting itself, once you get there in terms of a face-to-face, with COVID, we all virtual, but when it's time to for us to come back together, have a room without distractions. Noise, because as you're speaking to somebody, a noise out there and some people are sensitive to noise, it's not something that's just close. It could be something not too far from your office or the room, the conference room.

Be mindful of distraction. Be mindful of the sensory piece that we highlighted up there. If you have plugins, because a lot of time, things that are smell and good make smell good for you but not for everybody. We need to make sure. And not good not just for people on the spectrum. It's medically for people who

have asthma, so we want to avoid that. It could be just plain annoying to just have things that are smelling good in the office. And then from the sensory pieces are very important and we wanted to highlight that. But I wouldn't want to say that for you to take that, it means people with disabilities, it would be impossible to hire them.

This is what folks like Melwood, this is what we do. We come in a place and we help you with the assessment. We help build a profile for the person. What do you want? What is the ideal job is for you? And then we match. We want to make sure the employer is also happy. We just don't try to do the training, but we help you through the process. This is what we've been doing with MITRE. This is what we are doing from the small corner jobs to the federal government. So we can have that conversation.

If it's a web-based interview, ask about the light, the sound, are you good? Just to check in to make sure the person is comfortable if they need help. Once you start the conversation, it would be hard in the middle of the conversation to say, you good with the light? Not that it can't be done, but if you set that environment for them to feel comfortable, it would be great to be able to do that.

Help them relax by offering them a glass of water, a bottle of water, just to make sure that their throat, they're comfortable. Ask them where would they like to sit because you want to make sure the person is comfortable. If you're in a conference room, they may be comfortable facing a window. So allow them to have that choice or that voice because you want to maximize the opportunity for them to ask as many questions as possible.

When it comes to conducting the actual interview, treat the candidate with the same respect you would for anybody. Don't ask them questions that are irrelevant to the actual your job. You wouldn't ask Rebecca, do you have a child? There's some questions that even in small talk, you want to be able to avoid. Ask job-related questions.

If you can have written copy of the questions ahead of time, that's very helpful because it actually helps with the processing piece that we talked about, so they can think through the answers. Once you're asking questions, whether they're repeating the same thing, it's not to be rude or to be defiant, but it's really because it's taking time to process and to better understand and to give you the best answer. So just to be mindful when it comes to conducting the interview.

Knowing your interview staff, you need to know who you are. If you are a chatty interviewer, it's so ineffective because you run your mouth and happy going great, but it's not working. You're not going to get your point across all the questions that you need to ask. Be prepared because if you all over the place, you can even ask the question, the person will feel nervous like, what am I getting myself into? Anybody will feel that way.

Make sure that we are effective when it comes to interviewing people, specifically people with disabilities. Be prepared in advance. Don't have 10 pieces of papers and try to figure out what questions you had. Remember to be specific, concrete, and concise. You don't want to be all over the place. And then make sure that you are a great listener. Listener speaker training is very important. You have to be able to listen so if you have follow-up questions, you take time to be able to do that. So make sure we think through this. [crosstalk 00:37:14]-

Larysa Kautz:

Rebecca, let me make one quick point, which is because I mean, we know that self-identification of a disability is a problem and is something that there's still a lot of concern and distrust with being able to do. The thing about these, these interviewing techniques and the other techniques we talk about, is they're universal and they really will make any candidate more comfortable, more forthright in their answers, and will get substance in the interview that will really help determine whether their skills meet the job rather than just how good of a rapport can you establish with them, which is something that will be a barrier for a lot of folks on the autism spectrum. This is universal and really helps improve the whole process for anybody, frankly, who's applying.

Rebecca Cheraqu...:

And at Melwood, we have this self-advocacy program at Melwood where we help them go through the process of asking for reasonable accommodation. I call it a healthy dosage of fear of systems. People are generally fearful of, what if I tell them something is wrong with me, then I'm not going to get the job. So we want to be able to open up the opportunity to self-disclose.

Some of the techniques when it comes to the interview process, is really to be in the present. Use questions that you don't have the ifs. What did you do in that job? Those are the types of question you ask. But if you say, what would you do if, it's so open-ended, it gives people room to give you a little bit too much that you don't want. There could be people on the spectrum think literally, so it's important to be precise in asking your question. You wouldn't ask, tell me about yourself. What do you want to do in 10 years? It's not time for that because in 10 years is a long time. In 10 years, I don't even know.

The processing piece we are talking about, it's a little bit too overwhelming, if you're asking. You got to ask about X, Y, and Z, very concrete. And when it's time for the candidate to be all over the place because some people may be all over the place in terms of responding to the questions. So what you do, you redirect them. You ask them, that's great, I'm happy that you are able to do that. Let's talk about this a little bit more. Let's get more information on this. That's the way to redirect them and to make sure that they're focusing on the questions that are being asked of them.

Be mindful that especially for people on the spectrum, the traditional screening and interviewing skills, they don't work. It's hard for strong eye contact for some people. They may not show that they are enthused by the opportunity to be sitting with you. But in fact, they are, but it's hard to actually display that. Some

candidate who on the spectrum, they may repeat the questions of the interviewer. But by doing that, it's that processing piece again, to make sure am I getting it right, to make sure that you get the best and out of them.

They are brutally honest. Be prepared for that. But I love it because that's what makes your team a better team, because they would tell you exactly what needs to happen in order for you to improve your processes at work. Keep the interview questions relevant to the job. The small chatty talk, refocus and make sure we gain whatever we need to get out of it.

How to retain people with disabilities, how to be a good colleague. Microaggressions are not helpful. It's when people say, oh, you look a little autistic, but you so good. We don't want that. Avoid that. The social interactions and processing information, sensory sensitivity communications, those are the things that you may see in terms of symptoms that we talked about, but it doesn't mean that those things cannot be addressed to maximize opportunities for people with disabilities. And we wanted to make sure we highlight on these things.

Some of the things that we can do in terms of reasonable accommodation, noise canceling headset, assistive technology, modify break schedule, flexible work schedule when you can. But we strongly encourage that. Especially nowadays with COVID, it would be most helpful to be able to do that. And of course, agencies like Melwood, that's what we are here for and to support people in making sure that we have this inclusive workforce.

Larysa Kautz:

Rebecca, I just wanted to add a little bit some specific examples. I think the social interaction barrier is huge, particularly for colleagues in the workforce. There are simple ways that I think help the entire workforce and not just the individuals on the spectrum or with other disabilities. So explaining expectations for business social gatherings, engaging by asking specific questions about topics of conversation, giving direct and concise and clear feedback on social communication is key and I think actually it helps a lot of folks, even those who are not diagnosed with a particular disability.

Being clear on agendas, on topics, on expectations, on key performance indicators, it's really something that makes an office run better and makes people work better if they understand all the expectations and there's really clear and specific details about tasks, visual charts, visual supports like charts and diagrams to facilitate understanding. Making sure you're meeting regularly to review status and progress and timelines. Those are all the ways that I wanted to mention.

Rebecca Cheraqu...:

Thank you so much, Larysa. But ultimately it's the hiring process and making sure that you keep those great talents. In keeping them, it includes promoting them. Career ladder is very important. We collected some resources for you just to make sure. The Job Accommodation Network is great to ask. You can go and play around with it. It would tell you what tool. You don't put your diagnosis. It's

easier from what I understand to put your limitations. And it would say exactly what you would need. So very helpful information.

And of course, we are here for you. If you have questions, like Larysa said, our email address will welcome comments, questions, and kudos to our employees who are actually working with you already at the USDA. Thank you so much.

I think now we are going to talk about the questions. I can't see the chat box, but I'm sure that the questions were monitored.

Larysa Kautz: Okay. I can read them. One of the questions is from Chad. Would you mind sharing some of your favorite successful methods of recruiting and retention?

Rebecca Cheraqu...: It's a process in itself. It's not just a tool. In terms of recruiting, there's an assessment piece that we do because we don't want somebody who really wants construction, who wants to work at Home Depot, and we put them at USDA. So there's that assessment process. And really working with the potential employer to see what do you need. It's a conversation in itself.

When it's time for retention, we stay longer with them. A successful one that Larysa pointed out is this young man who was working in retail now making \$90,000. But we had to make sure we prepare him, we assessed him to see what he wants. And moving forward, we're able to help him get the job with the skills that he has. And we kept him for a short period of time to make sure that he was doing okay in terms of retaining his employment.

Larysa Kautz: Yeah. I mean, really the more you can do with the outset to make it clear that you're a disability-friendly employer, the more likely you'll be to attract and also to encourage self-identification and disclosure of disabilities. We, as an employer, have had success with job fairs that we sponsor and run at Melwood locations or in connection with other partners.

Because if we can really get out there ahead of time and pinpoint and get the information out about the job fair to as many members of the community as possible, particularly the areas that we know people with disabilities are likely to get information from, that's been very successful. The question is, as a supervisor, can you ask people if they're interested in a reasonable accommodation? And if so, can you do that without offending?

Rebecca Cheraqu...: I think there's a legal component to this and there's a social part to this. I think it depends on at the onset of your relationship, to come and ask during the interview process, do you have a disability? What reasonable accommodation? The person, like we said, may choose or choose not to tell you. And at any point of employment, I believe they can have that conversation with you.

It depends on the relationship you have with the employee because some people may feel a little bit more comfortable with you to say that I need this, or

to go to HR, to be able to ask, I need support. I need help in this. That's why I think there's a legal context, but there's also a social piece, like the engagement of the rapport you have with them. But legally, if they need reasonable accommodation, it's really to go through the process of that legal piece that you have in your organization to make sure that you can do it. That's why it's reasonable, that you can actually do it.

Larysa Kautz: It's really important that HR teams particularly are trained to proactively ask all new hires if they need reasonable accommodations in the post offer and pre-employment stages. This really does ensure that there's no gaps in providing services from day one and goes a long way to protect the employee experience. Really having that reach out to everyone proactively first ensures that you're not discriminating against folks just because they are showing certain proclivities or actions, but it brings a lot of faith and trust in the new employer with that being one of the first conversations because you've already given them an offer, you're in the pre-employment stage. And the question is about reasonable accommodations as opposed to being something much earlier that you discuss about disability or accommodations.

Creating a climate or a culture where you have an employee resource group or affinity group that is specific with respect to disability and having annual budgets that actually allow them to take visible and impactful action with respect to education and reaching out to individuals to make sure that they know what a reasonable accommodation is, and also what you actually do or do not have to disclose to get that reasonable accommodation.

There are still so many questions from employees that are concerned that, well, do I need a doctor's note or do I need to disclose my specific disability? And the answer is no. You can ask for a reasonable accommodation by stating that you need an accommodation due to a medical condition. That is supposed to be the end of it to be able to really get the accommodation.

There is a question that I don't know the answer to, but maybe somebody else on this call does about whether there is a pool of... I've lost the question. Is there a list or a pool of Schedule A applicants for hiring managers to review? I do not know the answer to that question and specifically how it works.

Rebecca Cheraqu...: Yeah. Usually for us is the person would come to us. There's no list or a pool per se. I haven't seen that for myself, but it's something that we can get back to you. And if it exists, we'll share with you guys.

Speaker 1: Next question is, as a supervisor, can you ask people if they're interested in a reasonable accommodation. If so, how do you do that without offending?

Larysa Kautz: I generally talked a little bit about how in a perfect world, it would be the HR team that's having this conversation after somebody has been given an offer and pre-employment. I think there has to be some thought about whether the

supervisor is only asking specific people whether they need an accommodation and not others. I think the best practice would be to make sure that there's a process and a practice where there's a time and place that HR may have that conversation. And then there could be general education and conversations between a supervisor and their employees.

I'm kind of going to put on my lawyer hat from my prior career. I feel like you start kind of stepping across lines a little bit if you single someone out particularly to ask if they specifically need a reasonable accommodation. I think it's always safer to do it in a group as an education session, as an email, as a discussion that's broad and goes to everybody but that hopefully will spark in that individual the idea that there are reasonable accommodations available because sometimes people don't even know that it's not a big deal and that it's not a very expensive accommodation to be able to be helped, to be more productive and just more comfortable in their work environment.

And really just to re-emphasize what Rebecca said earlier, which is thinking about universal design principles. As we're building new programs, new facilities, new regulations, new policies, just making sure that the environment, the processes, the technologies from the beginning are designed in a way that they include people with disabilities.

I always remember a cartoon that I saw where there were people trying to access a building, where there was a need to get to a higher level. And there was a thought about, well, let's build the stairs first so we can make sure to get people access. And then after that, we'll decide whether we need a ramp or not. Meanwhile, if you're starting from scratch, just putting a ramp in means everybody can get up where you definitely need stairs. That's the concept.

Speaker 1: Moving to the line of questioning, you may enter the question queue by using the WebEx raise hand icon. You will hear a beep tone when you're unmuted. At that time, please state your name and question.

There are no questions in the queue.

Larysa Kautz: Okay. We've been very comprehensive.

Speaker 5: Yes. Good afternoon, everyone. I would definitely like to thank Melwood's President and CEO, Larysa Kautz and Chief Program Officer, Rebecca Cheraquit, for providing us with that great presentation and discussion. In addition, I know he dropped off, but thank Todd for his opening remarks.

Lastly, I want to give a special thank you to all employees that was able to attend this today. This event was recorded and will be provided later on the civil rights staff. But just as a note, if you have any questions regarding the reasonable accommodations and/or HR, please reach out to the respective department. Thank you so much. Everyone have an amazing day.



Rebecca Cheraqu...: Thank you.

Speaker 5: Thank again, ladies.

Larysa Kautz: Thank you.

Speaker 5: Thank you.

Speaker 1: Thank you for using Event Services. You may now disconnect.