**WorkforceGPS**

**Voices of Experience**

**Boot Camp**

**Boot Camp Opportunity**

**Joshua Rowe**

*Transcript by*

*Noble Transcription Services*

*Menifee, CA*

Joshua Rowe: So Maine has been focusing on how to improve employment rates for underrepresented individuals in Maine that typically can be left on the sidelines.

**Boot Camp Opportunity**

Older workers and immigrants formerly incarcerated and of course, people with disabilities. Before the pandemic, our unemployment rate was below four percent for almost two years and employers were really struggling to find qualified people. Now, as we start to come out of the pandemic, employers again are looking for reliable, qualified people and people with disabilities can be a critical component to meeting their workforce needs. So this project was a great opportunity to engage with some partners who don't necessarily have a background in disability, but that do have a strong background working with employers.

And so we engaged for our team, individuals from the Community College, one of our WIOA service providers, our Bureau of Employment Services, the director of our apprenticeship program, Economic and Community Development, and the Chamber of Commerce, in addition to vocational rehabilitation, because they really had a lot of strong expertise working with employers and brought a lot of really good information to the team. And this project's really allowed us to quickly focus in on the issues that employers are facing and identify some of the critical needs regarding employment of people with disabilities and then also affect some immediate results. And we were able to move really quickly in this short kind of time-limited project.

So in the last couple of years in Maine we've been focusing on improving our workforce system to support people with disabilities in their search for employment. And so this project we started looking at really the employer side; and its work we knew we wanted to do, and the boot camp became the opportunity and the push really to focus in on the work. And it also helped us get some buy-in from employers. And when we first engaged in the project, we were really focused on helping employers, hiring people with disabilities and how to reduce the barriers there and improve the unemployment rate for people with disabilities.

So as part of the project, we engaged with employers. We interviewed employers regarding their current needs, and one of the things that started to become real clear is that they had some support needs regarding their incumbent workforce as much as recruiting. Their employees either acquired a disability or their needs changed as they aged in the workforce, it became an issue of retention. Maine has one of the oldest workforces in the country, and so recruiting people to the workforce is critical, but so is maintaining the workforce that we have. So the project allowed us to look at how to support employers, both from the recruitment and retention sides and also build that support capacity within our our system.

And the other part with the boot camp is initially designed to focus in on a kind of a single element and pilot that. But we realized pretty quickly that there wasn't a single piece that was going to move the needle regarding on employment of people with disabilities that really are raising awareness of disability. Employment wasn't going to really help people with disabilities or employers if we couldn't back it up with better information and support. So as part of that, we we developed an overarching strategy is to start by raising awareness and performing outreach, but also developing the employer resources; and then how do we build our internal support and training for staff so that they're better able to serve employers in that need.

And from that, we decided to move forward and actually develop the training for our workforce staff and we'll be piloting that this summer. And the goal of their training is to how to help talk to and to work with employers specifically around disability employment. It's designed for a workforce that don't necessarily come from a disability background and maybe need some support not to talk about disability and some know-how to support employers in this area.

With the help of the community college we're going to be -- after we pilot it, we're going to be putting it on their learning management platform and launching it. It's an online training and everybody who completes it will receive a digital badge. The developing the training we're in the process right now, developing it. It's really helped us focus in on the critical resources employers need and the information and tools that our workforce partners need to help support employers.

**Lessons Learned**

As I said, we started developing an overall strategy, we elected to develop training and resources for our workforce partners as it allow us to then touch basically every employee that they touch. In his book, "Good to Great," Jim Collins talks about this "flywheel" concept and that it's hard to get a flywheel moving, but once you get it moving, it takes really little effort to get it moving faster and faster. This project was that opportunity to get it moving. And now we have that with that strategy, where we know how to integrate this work into the larger work of the workforce.

And so we're able to use it as a lens to as we develop initiatives and projects. And how do we include the work of employment of people with disabilities in that, whether it's serving the public or serving employers ad they evaluate how changes we're making in the system, impact those with disabilities.