

Interviews

MERISTEM

Meristem is a Sacramento-area based service provider that is “...a unique program dedicated to preparing neurodiverse young adults for a life of greater independence and fulfillment. (They) are located near Sacramento on a 13-acre campus in Fair Oaks (and their) students are young adults between the ages of 18-28.” CPCIDD is fortunate to partner with them in an IDD employment pilot program along with the California Retailers Association. The following interview between two of their key staff leaders and our Director of Outreach and Engagement Dave Manson took place January 25, 2024.

- Dave Manson: So first of all, I really am grateful to both of you for your willingness to be highlighted in our upcoming newsletter and for carving time out of your day today to help with this by doing this interview. So thank you both for that.
- Dave Manson: Excellent. So let me just start off, tell me a little bit about Meristem. Tell me what your mission is. Tell me a little bit about how long the organization's been around, who do you serve?
- Harry Lane: So Meristem has been around since 2015. It's a transitional school for young adults with autism and neurodiversity. We say neurodiversity, because it covers more people than just autism. A lot of what we do is loosely based off of Waldorf education if you're familiar with Waldorf education. **(EDITOR'S NOTE: at its roots, Waldorf education's learning process is threefold – engaging head, heart and hands – or thinking, feeling, and doing).**
- So we do things such as woodworking, metalworking, textiles, different things like that. All things that are done with the hands, they take time. We don't use too much electricity, electronics, things that plug into a wall when you're cutting wood. We saw the wood by hand, things like that, and it really helps. It is an amazing program that is able to help neurodiverse individuals gain skills and

even transferable skills to the workplace, even if they're not going to be a woodworker, just the patience of sanding down a piece of wood or working on shaping a piece of metal. It can be transferable. We have a whole farm, so we're on 13 acres of land in Fair Oaks.

Dave Manson: Wow. I want to hear more!

Harry Lane: I would say right now I consider it a farm program. We just got chickens again, but it's really broken down into two sectors. You have the garden and then you have the landscape. And that's actually a Transformative Autism Program (TAP) thing. When we get to that, we turn that into an internship. But basically, the landscaping is working the perimeter of the property. Anywhere there's tall grass that needs mowing, just maintaining it, making it look pleasant for guests and also dealing with fire hazards. And then the garden specifically is actually a regenerative garden. It's actually a seed to plate program. They actually plant the seed. They have a greenhouse, so they plant the seed in the greenhouse and then they transpose it to the garden. And when the vegetable grows, we use it in our kitchen. We have a whole culinary arts program.

Dave Manson: No kidding. Let me stop, because what you've just shared with me is so rich with so many different things. My head is about to explode.

Harry Lane: I'll slow down.

Dave Manson: So first of all, let me circle back to something that you said earlier. For those folks who are reading our newsletter who may not know, you mentioned that neurodiversity is more than just autism. What are some other conditions or terminology? What would folks see other than autism that fits under the umbrella of neurodiversity that you folks serve?

Harry Lane: So this is not an exhaustive list, because I'm not an expert, but neurodiversity, are things like auditory processing disorder. I've got a friend of mine who has auditory processing disorder, never been diagnosed with autism or on the autism spectrum, but he has an auditory processing disorder. I've even heard of things like dyslexia, which is with writing, right? Dysgraphia, which is with math, you get your math numbers mixed up. Even ADHD, or anything like even OCD or OCD-like tendencies.

Eric Steward: Anxiety is a huge one, Dave. How anxiety manifests in you. So on a cognitive level, you might be operating as good as anybody else on the planet, but being able to manage how the world moves towards you, the anxiety makes it to where your characteristics might come across. You're dealing with autism, so you're not actually diagnosed with autism, but then anxiety can be so crippling. That's a big one.

Harry Lane: For older people, people that are a little bit older, it can be tougher to get that autism diagnosis. So they might be seeing a psychologist, but they have another

thing like ADHD or there would be anxiety. So then the question is, can they get the supports like somebody that has autism, but they've never been diagnosed when they were five and now it's real challenging to get the diagnosis. So by using the word neurodiversity, it's a fine line of maybe they even do have autism, but they've never been formally diagnosed.

Dave Manson: That's such a super-helpful thing for us to be able to share with the general public! It helps folks to be able to recognize that neurodiversity is a pretty large umbrella. It covers a lot of area. The second thing that popped into my head is you mentioned that a lot of the skills that are picked up in everything from the woodworking to the vegetables, all of those different things are not just workforce skills, but they're useful in processing everyday things. You want to talk a little bit more about that?

Harry Lane: So an easy one, like I said, is patience. An example is - you have a piece of metal, which is very hard to move. If I take a piece of metal with my hands, it's not really malleable. And so, they light it with the blow torch and it's easier, but in order to shape it to the way that they need it, to make a key-chain or whatever, to make a spoon – this actually takes quite a lot of patience. And I personally went through the program, I graduated from Meristem after three years, and in some of these experiences, I didn't have patience. I would get a little frustrated, because it does take time.

Dave Manson: Harry, that's an amazing, that's an amazing and very helpful example.

Harry Lane: And if you look at workplace deadlines, we have all these things. So coming up, we're going to be having a spring fair. So if somebody was going to make a product for the fair, they might get frustrated, because it's going to take time, but the fair might be in a month or two, and can they complete it on time? We'll depend on things that are transferable to the workplace. Are they there on time? Do they have enough time in the session, because they were there or do they have the patience for it? A lot goes into that.

Dave Manson: So the general focus of Meristem then is getting people prepared for success in the workforce. But underlying that, is a recognition that all of the different things that you do are helpful to folks in general and are transferable to other areas of their life.

Eric Steward: Yeah, yeah. I would say, because going back to your question about the mission statement, workforce readiness is really just a part of the overall scope and idea meant in this design that is Meristem, which is extremely unique. You're just not going to run into another day program that can do what Meristem can do as a result of the land that we're on. But then another big part of what we have is it almost feels like a transitional college here, Dave, because we have dorms on-site.

Dave Manson: I did not know that! So folks live on the farm?

Eric Steward: Yeah. So students can elect to basically do full-time Meristem. Some students just come during the day like you would at a college. I go on the day and then I go back and stay with my family or in my apartment, but you have certain students at any college that move onto the college campus. And we've got dorms down here with 48 individual bedrooms and shared community space and the learning that they do in that environment, how to share space with other, how to be a part of a community, how to have my responsibilities within that community, some would say is the most vital thing that we're doing for folks that come here. And our instructional system is just as important on that side of the campus as it is on the side of the campus where Harry and I are focused on workforce readiness. So you've got that part.

Another big part of what we focus on here is just the entire idea around movement. One of the things that I feel like I've learned really, really clearly being here, Dave, is that many of the folks that come to us, they're 20 years old and they've got areas that they're struggling with or they're challenged by. And when you go back and you track how did life happen for them during those 20 years before they got here? There's a lot of things that they might not have done, and just those things that we would consider natural life, developmental milestone type stuff they might not have done or they might not have done as many times as somebody who is "neurotypical." And by building an environment here that focuses on a lot of that stuff, we're able to help them catch up.

And so, the movement part, so much of what we do here, when I think about transferable and occupational, and I'm just going to use the same example that he says. When that person's working on metal, I'm looking at them gaining the hand strength and the hand coordination to take the ability to move into, let's just say they get a job at a local movie theater, and they get the job to open up a certain thing that requires some pretty strong strength within your forearm muscles and your hands. And by being here at Meristem and working on metal, they don't even realize, but we help them develop the strength to get to that spot to where when it's time to open that they have the strength, because during their regular developmental time, they didn't do the same things that a lot of us were doing that when they moved towards something like that, they just know they got that strength. So there's a whole of those different transferable things going on.

Dave Manson: Excellent. And Harry, you mentioned that you are a graduate of the program. Did you live on campus?

Harry Lane: Yes, I did for three years.

Dave Manson: Talk a little bit about how the unique perspective that you have with the skills and experiences and perspective that you bring as a person on the autism spectrum helps you in the role that you play there at Meristem.

Harry Lane: That's a great question, because I can just see my own experience in my own life. So all of the struggles that I've had, just to name them, time management, organization, anxiety, I can see it in other people. Not to mention now, I would say that any staff member works at Meristem is qualified to speak on this, because they have seen, right now we have 50, we're going to have 53, I believe students coming up. And I've been here for three years. Eric's been here for three, four years. We've been a program for eight years. So if you've been here for the entire eight years, you've seen 60, 70, 80-plus people with autism come through and other forms of neurodiversity. That's a lot of experience, personal experience. But I also can use my own experience of, I see where you're coming from, because I have a lot of anxiety based on this issue too, and here are some things that I've done to deal with that.

Dave Manson: Thank you for sharing that! So let me shift a little bit. You helped to clarify earlier about the difference between Meristem writ large as an organization versus TAP. Tell us a little bit about TAP.

Harry Lane: TAP for the Transformative Autism Program. It began back in 2017. I was a second year student at Meristem, and I'd heard about this bill in the state legislator name of the bill was "Breaking Workforce Barriers" (**EDITOR'S NOTE: CA SB866, 2018**). It was breaking workforce barriers for a large group of different groups of people, including people for example, with domestic violence abuse, people that needed more support or would need more support in the workplace. And now I say neurodiversity, but it's called Transformative Autism Program. So anyway, so the bill passed and we were a big advocate for it. They looked at our website, I guess, and said, "Hey, it says autism on your website. Can you help build out the program for people with autism?" It was originally a class on the Meristem campus with 10 to 12 students in the room.

What it turned into was a 105-page manual, and video modules on a website that are best practices for an employer to hire and retain somebody with neurodiversity in their workforce.

Dave Manson: So, did the two of you play a role in putting that manual together?

Harry Lane: So I was a student in the class where we were working on it, and Eric was one of the two instructors that was teaching the class.

Dave Manson: What are each of you proudest of in terms of the organization's accomplishments. You guys have accomplished quite bit in a relatively brief amount of time. What is the thing that stands out most in your mind - that you're most proud of in terms of your accomplishments?

Harry Lane: I'm going to give you two. I want to give you the two side by side, like the Meristem answer and the TAP answer. They're a little different. But in Meristem, I think that connection would be one thing. A lot of people, well, for me, I found my best friend at Meristem. Well, now he's my roommate. But you

do find that people, I guess they find themselves at Meristem, maybe they become more aware of who they are. We have helped people. So I think that the ability to find oneself is probably the proudest thing of Meristem. With TAP, my proudest moment would be helping individuals.

Harry Lane: I always tell them, "I can't guarantee I'm going to be able to get you a job," because I work with a lot of job seekers in person or on Zoom, but a lot of times they tell me like, "Oh, you were listening to me and not a lot of people listen to me."

Dave Manson: I love it.

Harry Lane: And I think some of that comes from the fact that even if people aren't listening to them, they feel like they're not, because that's how they look at the world, because they feel like they've been attacked a lot or whatever for having a disability. So that would be that. Yes.

Dave Manson: Excellent. And Eric, for you?

Eric Steward: Well, for me, for Meristem, so I've been in this field since 1996. So for me, being able to get in kind of on the ground floor of Meristem trying to become what it's starting to become. So I got here early enough to where it was still very like, "what are we doing and how do we do it?"

And now that I've been here for five plus years, I'm able to see us really start to get a rhythm and understanding how to do what we're trying to do as effectively as possible. And I get to be a part of that, because Meristem is unbelievably unique and watching us really start to get it dialed in. I think a huge reason for that is our current executive director, Erin Schirm, like that head coach that fits correctly. And so, on a Meristem level, that's pretty awesome. I would also say on a Meristem level, and Harry's kind of close to this, is on a work skills level.

So I get to "run" the work skills department of Meristem, and we have our own team. We're a part of the Meristem community. We're ingrained in everything, but everybody knows that we've got our own responsibilities around supporting students in the workforce. And so, there's a unique responsibility that we have and our team has bought into this really special group of people we're all in. You know what I mean? It just feels right. And that could change at any day. It's hard to keep a team totally together. So I would say on a Meristem level, I don't know if you would call that greatest accomplishment, Dave, is just what I feel greatest about every day.

Dave Manson: I got to tell you, Eric, that resonates with me, because I feel the same way about my role with my organization where I'm at. I'm excited about the fact that I'm a part of launching a critical think tank that's specifically focused on intellectual

developmental disabilities, and that I have the opportunity to work for an amazing executive director/coach. I feel the same way.

Eric Steward: All right! So yeah, we resonate together on that.

Dave Manson: Absolutely.

Eric Steward: So on the TAP level though, Dave, when we put this together, and it was a monumental task that a part of this grant is our team had to be intricately involved in developing a training that we're going to move towards employers throughout California. That was hard to do. None of them had ever been involved in a project of that magnitude and keeping everybody together. And the fact that we were able to pull that off in and of itself is you can't overstate how big of a deal that was. But now this is what happened, Dave. We were given basically an initial grant and told to put this training together and get it out to a group of employers and pull this all off in two years. We pulled it off, we put it in front of employers, and here's the thing that everybody should be proudest of.

We got it in front of about 30 employers and the impact that this training had on them and the feedback that they gave to the third-party auditor was able to secure us a grant almost triple in the size to really, really take off with this thing. And that's when I got to, because Harry graduated from this program, went and got a full-time job being a job coach for a really great agency in town. But for us to do such a good job on that front end to where the state comes back and says, "Hey, we're going to really, really up the ante on this. We want you guys to take off. We want you to touch everybody in California you can," and then to be able to call up Harry and say, "Harry, I think that I've got the perfect job for you. I hate to ask you to leave what you're doing, but would you be interested in being all in with me on this to take it to the next level?" And that happened at the beginning of 2022.

And here we are in everything that we're trying to do or that we're expected to do, we're doing, which is phenomenal, we're meeting those marks. But we're just getting more and more solid feedback from everybody we work with on what do we really need to focus on to continue to try to move this needle? And more and more people that we used to look at like, "Oh, we'll never be in the sandbox with them," are coming to us and saying, "Please be in the sandbox with us." And that feels awesome to know we're having that much of an impact.

Dave Manson: So if I can encapsulate that, it sounds like your initial success led to raised expectations, additional funds, and the ability to steal Harry.

Eric Steward: Exactly.

Dave Manson: That's awesome. Talk a little bit about both the joys and the challenges of working with neurodiverse folks, people with intellectual developmental

disabilities, finding their path through life. You do it, you use the vehicle of employment, but clearly you've already shared the fact that one of the things that you are proud of is the fact that it's not just employment, that you are providing pathways to, it's independence and feeling confident in who you are and learning you are and so forth. So talk a little bit about what are the joys of working in the environment that you're in, and then what are some of the challenges?

Harry Lane: The joys. Oh, this is seeing the individual succeed within their workplace. So that's that. I mean, I could give you 10 different examples, but I'll say, Dave, one of the things that we got the pleasure of doing with this grant, we were trying to get people a job out in the workplace, out in the world. And the state of California came back and said, "Oh, you saying that people with autism and neurodiversity, they are employable, prove it." And so, we did prove it. We hired them ourselves. I was one of the interns, the first group of interns. We partnered with local businesses, but we became the employer of record. So that's actually one of, that could go back into the proudest categories. I was the job coach in the cafe right before I left Meristem.

By coming back, we ran these internships and some of them, we usually have a big thing in the summer. We partnered with a preschool last summer in the area. But a lot of the internships that we do are onsite and just in general, we have five to seven individuals that are non-Meristem students that are participating in the internship. Actually, we were having a work skills meeting yesterday with the lead cafe instructor. She's also the lead of our internships for the cafe. And her statement on the matter was that she is grateful, because she has at least four people in the cafe that are non-Meristem students. She loves that. So I also run a bed and breakfast. I am the supervisor. We have an intern in there that I've seen her grow unbelievably since we've started. It could bring you to tears, this stuff, I'll say something.

And then also an individual in the cafe and then two former Meristem students that have come back that work in our garden, to think about some of these individuals they wouldn't have a job without me. I mean you want them to get a job in the real world, but this is-

Dave Manson: The World.

Harry Lane: Right. Onto your second question of what are some of the frustrations? So the joys, one of the things that I find frustrating is the individuals themselves.

Dave Manson: Say more about that.

Harry Lane: I'm told in a lot of the work that we do to be person-centered and to be there, to listen, to understand the individual, to do what the individual wants. But a lot of times the individual, they just put up a lot of barriers, whether it's anxiety, what we have found, we have a number of individuals that are struggling and

they're either struggling in their current job day or they've lost that job, they're unemployed right now and they're struggling, I think it's because of their neurodiversity. They have perceived something within the management of the company. I'm always employer forward, so I'd always like to do an investigation if possible. Maybe they blame the company or whatever for the reason, the manager's upset with them about something they don't know why and it is hurting their job. That's one. Another one is just so much anxiety, they don't want to do it. For example, "There's an opportunity coming up, I think it would be great for you," and this individual has so much anxiety, they can't even make it to the interview.

They will make it to the interview with Eric and Harry doing a lot of work. Sometimes that would require Eric driving to the house, taking them up by their hands and putting them in this car, driving him. But they have so much anxiety they don't want to do it. And that's probably one of the most frustrating things is for me, that's something that I've succeeded and I feel like I still have my issues around my neurodiversity. But that anxiety around, well, I do go across the state of California, public speaking, I do. So just that would be my answer. Eric?

Eric Steward:

Yeah, there's tons of joys that we get to be a part of, because we are so intimately involved in people's lives that it is just the list would go forever. I'm going to focus more though on where we struggle, because I think that more and more people need to be honest with themselves about really what's going on. Why does this continue to be the reality that it is, especially when you have a certain part of the public that says, "Wait, the workforce needs these workers, why isn't this just a perfect marriage?" And it's like, it is not that easy. It's not fair, not fair to anybody.

So I would start with one of my first struggles is that there's this inclination towards employers that they aren't genuinely ready and willing and open to being highly inclusive. I think overwhelmingly Dave, employers are ready to do this. They're not discriminating against people, they're not using the R word and they're not saying, oh, they've got "handicaps." There's legitimate reasons that an employer is having a difficult time bringing and keeping people that are IDD on.

And I think one of our biggest systematic struggles is we're not realizing that the employer needs and deserves the same level or maybe even more support than we put towards the job seeker. And this is not to put the job seeker down, because depending on the job seeker, that support is very clearly what they're going to need. And what's happened is we're so job seeker-focused and job seeker-centric that we miss that the true inclusion is only going to happen when the employer gets to the point where they realize, "you know what? We don't need a doctorate in this. We don't need some professional special education teacher. We have the capacity to absolutely support this person effectively. We need to be shown how to do it. We need support in getting there. And if we're given that support and shown how to do it, we can do it." And our system is not

designed to do it that way. Our system overwhelmingly is designed to just help that job seeker get the job, provide the support via an external job coach directly to the job seeker (new employee), and then get the job coach out of the picture once the new employee "is trained".

And although that's wonderful, the person with IDD is working at the local grocery store and they feel good they're making a paycheck, but in reality, they're there, because they've got this external agency that's supporting them. And the people that are at the grocery store, like the person, they're friends with them, but they haven't learned how to effectively just support them.

But now specifically towards job seekers though, there are a lot of job seekers out there, Dave, that don't understand, they're not able to articulate and show a self-awareness of what their capabilities are and are not. They do not have an accurate assessment of self. And so, we allow them to move towards something that they're not realistically ready for. That's not fair. So our system needs to do better from our end. And this goes back to what Harry was saying about person-centric. We're told, "Oh, you got to be person-centered. You got to be person-centered."

Well, if you're not careful with that and you don't help guide somebody that needs some serious guidance, all you're doing is setting them up for failure over and over and over again. I need to help you understand what you're capable of. I need to help you answer questions that you might not cognitively be able to answer. I got to help you understand that you're not ready to work 40 hours a week. You're not able to articulate the difference between full-time, part-time, temporary, just on a cognitive level, you don't even know what that is. I need to help you understand that. And I need to help move you towards something that fits what I've learned can fit what your lifestyle needs are, what your physical capacities are. There's a lot of work that we have to be willing to do from our end. And sometimes if we're doing too much person-centered stuff, we're walking up to an employer saying, "Hey man, remember you said you're going to be inclusive, so you should just take this guy for what we're saying." And that's not fair to that person or the employer.

Dave Manson: And Eric, I have a follow up question to that, because for somebody who may not be familiar with the person-centric movement, I guess I'll call it that, what you just described sounds to me, very person-centric. It is very much about understanding and identifying what the individual's needs, challenges, barriers, talent skills, so forth is, and then really shaping a pathway to understanding. So how is that not person-centric? And how does that not fit with the, and again, for lack of a better term, the person-centric movement?

Eric Steward: Yeah, that's an awesome question. I mean, I can answer it, but I'm just answering it from my own experience and my own philosophy, because what we're dealing with is that depending on the room that I'm in, some would say, "That's not actually person-centered, Eric, because I've listened to your whole story and you've basically made 17 of the 27 decisions. And so, that's not

person-centric." And then I look at them and I say, "With all due respect towards you, I know because I'm the one that spends time with this individual, every area that I'm helping, decisions need to be made. I want him or her to be a part of those decisions." But I know, because he's shown me in terms of how he processes information and moves through stuff that I've got to help him make these decisions based on what I know - at least on the front end - because this is the beautiful thing about where we're working in the world we work in Dave, today, I know where you're at. I cannot predict how you're going to grow over the next week, month or year.

And so, my job is to get you started on something that I know you're going to be able to do with support, and over time you're going to show us, you, the job person that we're helping, you're going to show us where you're ready to grow and start making some decisions that you weren't able to a year ago, because you've grown into that, and we need to be very open and ready to receive that from you, but we're not going to not move, because you can't do it today or even worse, I'm not going to let you tell me that you're supposed to be a pilot at Southwest Airlines and build an entire job plan around being a pilot. My job is to help you get realistic that maybe the best thing we can do right now is head out to Sac Airport, start talking to some of the companies that are at the airport, get you working at the airport.

It could end up being in food service. It could end up being in baggage and this kind of stuff. And over time, maybe we can get you closer to things that bring you closer and closer to being a pilot. But I know from working with you that any of the collegiate things you might need or even the particular private school systems for a pilot license, that at this point we can give you a couple assessments and show you, even though you might not be able to receive that information, you're not ready to even start on the most basic level. So let's get you close to the airlines.

Harry Lane: I think that is a debate within this person-centered thing. Some people would say, "Oh, Eric, you better let him apply for such and such and allow him to fail." That can be person-centered. But another one, Dave, that I've seen, this is a big one. We have a lot of, and I can say a lot, because I've seen it. So when I'm helping somebody with getting a job where sometimes there's an email that they have to send, they can experience anxiety about the email and so they don't send the email. So sometimes I might be with them supporting them and I write the email with them in the room, or sometimes Eric and I have done it. It's just been so much easier. We're filling out an application this individual needs to fill out for this job, and it is so much easier for me to just fill it out.

Dave Manson: So Harry, it sounds like you share the same perspective as Eric on this question.

Harry Lane: And another thing that we've seen with this application, so we've seen a number of people that will have the application and I'll let them know, "I'm going to sit down with you on Wednesday at noon and do the application with you." Do you have time on your schedule? We schedule it, and I find out that

Tuesday night they did the application on their own. Although we are proud of them for having the courage to move on their own - they really needed help. Instead,love the application was submitted incomplete or incorrect and the receiving employer didn't even open it.

Harry Lane: And some people will say, "Oh, well, the employer just had to deal with it and they have to be inclusive." We need to... have grace for the employer, because if we don't, then how are we going to build business relationships?

Dave Manson: I like that.

Eric Steward: People need to come to terms with the fact that there's a reason why we're all in the business of helping IDD folks. It's about there is a need for a certain level of support and until we can all get really transparent about what those support needs are, and that transparency needs to move towards the employer, because employers are also sometimes being asked to like, "Don't ask, just let them in." How are we going to build a sustainable support model if the employer is not fully aware of where this person struggles in certain areas or doesn't know how to do things? The employer's saying, "I'm ready to do this. I'm ready to adapt and modify and etc. Oh, but we don't want to tell you what needs to be adapted."

It doesn't work that way. We need to be unbelievably transparent with the employer and for the job seekers that aren't able to understand what their supports are and what they need, we have to be willing to say, "We're going to build this for you. We know what you need to be successful. We're going to help you build this. We're going to help communicate it with the employer. We're going to sit with you and help you through this application, even though your mind tells you that you're doing the application right."

Dave Manson: So we've got about six minutes left and I'm thinking, I'm loving this conversation so much, I wish it had been a two-hour one. Let me finish up with one last question: What do you wish were different? If you were king for a day, what would you change?

Harry Lane: One thing is that I would make it easier for individuals to get the supports they need, because sometimes it can be a lot of, maybe it's money related to money, they don't have enough or they're worried about money that's it, whatever. But sometimes it can be challenging for individuals the older they are, like I've said before, that weren't diagnosed or they didn't get, for example, a regional center support or they didn't get, I guess maybe department of rehabilitation would be easier to access to become qualified for, but they didn't do it when they were younger for whatever reason. And it can be challenging for them to get support. So I would say that's number one. And then number two, this whole idea and concept that me and Eric have been talking about support is sort of getting the support networks, like the job coaching agencies and everyone that's working with this individual together in a room along with the employer, because so

many times we work in siloes with the individual, we don't really communicate with the employer.

Dave Manson: Excellent.

Eric Steward: Yeah, I'm 100% with Harry on that. I would say maybe if I'm just going to go a little bit finer line on this is we have a lot of money that moves towards the job seeker right now. So job seeker needs programs with vocational training. Job seeker needs a job coach that will follow him or her, Harry and I can tell you about all of the holes that happen within that system, but how about we allocate funding towards employer coaching and support? And so, instead of having all of it go to the job seeker, there's actual funding and then the people that earn the right to move into an employer's home, because this is a big thing that happens, Dave. An employer cares about his home, her home, which is their business, and you have people that move into it that don't respect that.

Then the employer is like, "You know what? I love the person with the developmental disability, but this person (the job coach) that's coming into my house (my business) acting like they can do this or do that... I'm not ok with this person (job coach) doing that. If we can't change this I'm not ok with moving forward."

The importance of who those people are (the job coaches) and how they're trained and how they're supported to go in and be an employer coach, because they understand, our idea is to get in there and help this company learn that they can fully support anybody. Empower the employer to see and understand that they don't "need" a job coach. We need to do this in a very elite and intimate and respectful way where our time is focused on them as an employer and the people working around and with the individual with IDD we've helped move into that employer space. I would love to see that, because I think that that's ultimately what can move the needle more than anything else.

Dave Manson: So if I can summarize that it's funding resources and focus that would be driven towards the employer side of this equation.

Eric Steward: But it would have to be protected, Dave, because supposedly it's out there, where people are like, "Well, my job includes..." And it's like if you actually watch what they're doing all day, it's like, okay, you have 30 seconds where you're "helping the employer."

What I'm trying to say is the employer needs your time and attention days before the person gets employed. And then once they're there, there's very specific things happening within the system that this new employee is in to where if you're really good at it, you recognize where's the support and you're there to support those people that are working with, you're not standing next to the job seeker saying, "Put the can there now, put this can there. Now, clock out

now," because it's the folks that he's working with that are going to help him or her learn.

Dave Manson:

Listen, I appreciate both of you so much, not just for your carving the time-out today and your willingness to be highlighted in our newsletter, but for the work that you're engaged in every single day - you're heroes, and I appreciate you.