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EMPLOYING DISABLED PEOPLE A win for businesses and individuals

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Jurdy Warnock of Leeds has cerebral palsy, uses a wheelchair for mobility and is legally blind. Yet, she's worked at the Greater Birmingham Humane Society for nearly five years and successfully manages a volunteer program between the Humane Society and the local United Cerebral Palsy organization. Her manager, Jacque Meyer, says Warnock "gives us faith and courage in the human spirit" and is one of the organization's most loyal and dependable employees.

Her disabilities do not set Warnock apart. Rather, due to the support of her local community, employers and lawmakers, she is being empowered to focus on her abilities - and getting paid a livable wage to boot.

Unfortunately, Warnock's story is the exception, not the rule.

According to the U.S. Census Bureau's 2008 American Community Survey, the national unemployment rate of people with a disability is 60.9 percent. The same survey shows the numbers in Alabama are even worse: More than 66 percent of the disabled people in our state face unemployment.

The numbers paint a disappointing reality, which is why Warnock's story offers hope to other disabled people - a story that earned her the Governor's Committee on the Employment of People with Disabilities' "Supported Employee of the Year" award for Birmingham.

It is encouraging that when Alabama businesses like GBHS create opportunities, and individuals with disabilities achieve their employment dreams, everyone benefits.

State government agencies are also doing their part. For example, Alabama's Department of Rehabilitation Services provides supported employment, including job coaching and work-site and longterm support that allow employees with disabilities to maximize their skills to the benefit of the workplace.

Additionally, Alabama's Department of Mental Health has recently launched a new program to assist in job placement. That means Alabama now has two state agencies - not just one - working on behalf of Alabama's disabled people in the area of employment.

Programs like these make businesses aware of the benefits of hiring workers with disabilities. Not only are employees with disabilities some of the most loyal and diligent workers because they want to work and live independently, but businesses can also qualify for special tax benefits for assisting disabled people.

At the same time, individuals and families of those with disabilities also need to be made aware of the opportunities.

It's a trend the Full Life Ahead Foundation sees regularly when we take someone through our "HOPE Team Planning Process" - a process devoted to discovering and achieving their dreams.

Even when employment is desired, family members may believe it's impossible. Transportation issues, the loss of government benefits or physical challenges are often thought of as obstacles prohibiting the individual from working. But every obstacle can be turned into an opportunity.

The Social Security Administration, for example, has a program known as the Plan to Achieve Self Support. This program allows individuals to set aside earnings and qualify for additional disability income to fund

employment goals. Other examples of Social Security Administration work incentives include Impairment-Related Work Expenses (which allows work opportunity tax credits for costs associated with working) and Medicaid extensions (which allow those with medical disabilities to keep their Medicaid coverage). Using the services provided by federal and state agencies is one way to begin the process for employment. Another way is to take advantage of the private support groups in Alabama and across the country which can connect families with the government and private support networks they need to succeed. As more individuals with disabilities pursue employment opportunities and as businesses realize the benefits of hiring disabled people, more individuals who want to be employed will achieve their dreams.

Judy Barclay is president emeritus of the Full Life Ahead Foundation.

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