
THE Hire News

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GRASSROOTS CONFERENCE FOCUS: DISABILITY EMPLOYMENT

BY APRIL WHITE



September 9-12 in Washington D.C.
Visit: SourceAmerica.org/Grassroots2024

SourceAmerica’s most recent 2024 Grassroots Advocacy Conference, held this past September, brought disability employment issues to Capitol Hill as more than 60 self-advocates, family members, and nonprofit leaders met with lawmakers to share personal stories and push for inclusive hiring policies. Among the attendees from PCCS were Lawrence Silva, Chief Operating Officer, and Shawn Jones, Mailroom Supervisor, who joined colleagues in highlighting how federal programs and policies affect job opportunities for people with disabilities on the West Coast. Jones, a keynote speaker, shared his personal journey as an AbilityOne employee, illustrating how hard work and dedication led to upward mobility through a series of merit-based promotions.

Over several days in Washington, participants met with members of Congress and their staff, providing first-hand examples of successes and barriers in the workplace. With the employment rate among Americans with disabilities at only about 22.5%, the conference offered a critical platform for raising awareness of inclusive employment needs. “We are thrilled to bring so many self-advocates together to help shape public policy that impacts employment opportunities,” said Richard Belden, SourceAmerica’s president and CEO, underscoring the importance of the event.

SourceAmerica, established in 1974, is one of two national nonprofits authorized to administer the federal AbilityOne Program, which connects government agencies with a network of more than 420 community-based nonprofits employing people with significant disabilities. Through these contracts, nearly 60,000 people with disabilities are employed nationwide—a reflection of SourceAmerica’s mission to increase

economic and social inclusion by creating meaningful job opportunities for an underutilized workforce.

PCCS, a trusted SourceAmerica affiliate based in California, exemplifies this mission at the local level. The nonprofit helps people with disabilities gain training and find meaningful employment, and it reports that about 80% of its clients have secured jobs through AbilityOne contracts—a success attributed to SourceAmerica’s support and advocacy. SourceAmerica not only connects agencies like PCCS to federal contract work, but also provides training grants and guidance that build capacity for these organizations.

Silva and Jones’ attendance at the Washington D.C. conference underscored the partnership between PCCS and SourceAmerica. They and other representatives used the opportunity to brief legislators on their programs and community impact, emphasizing the value of inclusive hiring initiatives. “The conference provides our organization with the opportunity to meet with our local legislators and provide details on our programs and services,” Silva said in a message prior to the event. He added that during their advocacy meetings, they planned to “champion policy and employment opportunities for our local disabled community”—a goal very much in line with the conference’s spirit.

For advocates like Silva and Jones, sharing personal stories with policymakers is key to showing how federal decisions shape opportunities on the ground. Organizers say the Grassroots Advocacy Conference is not just an annual meetup, but part of a sustained effort to ensure that people with disabilities have a voice in policies that affect their employment and a fair shot at meaningful work in their communities. ■

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MESSAGE FROM LEADERSHIP: LAWRENCE SILVA



PCCS looks forward to 2025. We will continue to provide industry-standard employment and training services, develop new and innovative programs with our valued community partners, and increase job opportunities for our clients. PCCS is launching new training programs and developing strong relationships with community partners and companies that will lead to successful outcomes. Additionally, PCCS continues to strengthen programming and funding with existing partners, including REAP Climate Center, Elegance of Berkeley, and the Native American Health Center.

PCCS has also benefited from SourceAmerica as a resource for training and development. Using various grants during the past year, PCCS was able to build out additional classroom and training space, enable the leadership team to attend conferences including Xforce in May 2024, and expand social media and marketing platforms. PCCS has submitted proposals for 2025 grants focused on continued growth, modernization, and training.

PCCS and the REAP Climate Center will be partnering to develop new training programs, grant opportunities and workforce initiatives. PCCS will also partner with the REAP Climate Center and Greenbelt Alliance on a Catalyst Grant funded by California Jobs First through the Bay Area First Collaborative to build pathways for regenerative jobs. Additionally, PCCS and the REAP Climate Center plan to roll out new training programs and curriculum focused on

nature-based systems work, including urban habitat restoration and sustainable farming.

PCCS has also begun to offer computer training courses in digital literacy and CompTIA A+ certification. These courses are designed to enhance computer skills and help participants obtain the certifications needed to enter the workforce. PCCS continues to offer training in call center/telephone services (customer support), inventory control/logistics, landscaping and gardening, and food service.

Community activity programs remain strong at Elegance of Berkeley and Lincoln Senior Center. PCCS is also developing new art and music programs at Ability Now, with plans to launch in early April. PCCS has also expanded job placement and work experience opportunities to include RN Sound, Calidad Industries, Eden Housing, KPFA, Hopalong Animal Rescue, and Neologix Engineering Labs for job seekers within our employment and training programs. Additionally, the PCCS job club and job leads list continue to be offered weekly to all clients as valuable resources to job development services.

PCCS is optimistic about the future success of our programs and services. Our primary goals and objectives remain centered on the success of our clients while continuing to align with our mission statement. Our qualified and dedicated staff deserve much of the credit, as they are thoroughly invested in supporting every client to reach their vocational goals. ■



**Pacific Coast
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Editor in Chief: Lawrence Silva

Writers: April White, Lawrence Silva, Otto DeLeon

Distribution: Terrance Brennan | **Graphic Design:** Otto DeLeon

PCCS CLIENT SUCCESS JOURNEY: SERENA OLSEN

BY APRIL WHITE



When Serena Olsen earned her graduate degree in 2006, she envisioned a career in international development—building communities, shaping policy, and working abroad. She did, for a time, carve out a path in the nonprofit world. She worked with organizations that served the blind community—a community she was part of and deeply familiar with. But discrimination and ableism were persistent obstacles, limiting her opportunities beyond that niche.

Still, she pushed forward. In 2014, she joined the Peace Corps and served in the Kyrgyz Republic. This was an achievement that required navigating a variety of institutional hurdles as a candidate with a disability. She connected with a local effort to establish a training center for blind adults, contributing her experience and support to help bring the vision to life. When she returned to the Bay Area, she took a position with Lighthouse for the Blind in San Francisco, coordinating social and recreational programming. For five years, she brought people together through outings, arts, and community events offering connection and joy. “It was exciting,” she recalled. “I wasn’t doing skills training or Braille; I was taking people to the theater, building community.”

Then the pandemic hit, and with it came deeply personal challenges that forced her to step away from work entirely. What she thought would be a temporary disruption stretched into four years. “I just assumed I’d bounce back into the workforce when I was ready,” Serena said. “But it wasn’t that simple.” Her confidence eroded. Her job search stalled. Over time, she realized that trying to do it alone wasn’t working.

“I needed external accountability,” she said. “Someone to hold me to the process, to help me rebuild the habits I’d lost.” Through her Department of Rehabilitation counselor, she was referred to Pacific Coast Community Services, and that’s when things shifted and a new journey unfolded.

Collaborating with her PCCS Job Developer, Serena began to reframe her approach. They overhauled her resume from reverse chronological to one that highlighted transferable skills. “It was overwhelming at first,” she said, “but once I saw her method, I thought—this is brilliant.” They also revamped her cover letter technique into one that is particularly effective at generating a response. The structure gave Serena a way back in. More importantly, it helped her believe in her value once again.

Attending the Job Club twice a week helped solidify her progress. The sessions, facilitated by Otto DeLeon, offered both encouragement and accountability. “Otto was a sweetheart,” she said. “Kind, compassionate, and supportive.” And showing up regularly meant she had to report on her efforts, which kept her moving, even when momentum was hard to find.

When Serena shared her interest in food justice and urban agriculture, PCCS listened. She became the first program participant placed at the UC Gill Tract Community Farm in Albany. This farm is a site deeply rooted in community empowerment, land rematriation, and feeding the community. Serena split her time between administrative work and hands-on fieldwork, growing seedlings, harvesting vegetables, and tending the pollinator patch. “It was a magical summer,” she said. “That farm reminded me of what I had to offer...I don’t know that I had ever felt so valued as I did there.”

Today, Serena is once again fully employed. “Not having a steady paycheck really chips away at your confidence,” she said. “I have that back, and it’s extremely empowering.” While no one knows what the future may hold, Serena is certain that she now has the tools, and the confidence, to secure a rewarding career. “PCCS helped me feel empowered again,” she said. “I don’t have to deplete my savings or doubt my worth. I can stand on my own two feet. That means everything.” ■

ARTIFICIAL INTELLIGENCE (AI) AND THE EVOLVING JOB MARKET

BY OTTO DELEON



Artificial intelligence (AI) is reshaping nearly every aspect of the job market, from resume screening to interview preparation. For job seeking individuals with disabilities, veterans transitioning to civilian employment, and those re-entering the workforce after an extended absence, AI-powered tools provide tailored support, breaking down barriers that once made job searches more challenging and time-consuming.

With rapid implementation, AI has become an integral part of modern job hunting. Whether welcomed or resisted, the job search process has become increasingly digital. Employers now rely on applicant tracking systems (ATS) to filter resumes, AI-driven chatbots to answer candidate questions, and machine learning algorithms to match applicants with roles that align with their skills and experience.

For job seekers facing unique challenges—such as employment gaps, the need for accommodations, or translating military experience into civilian job qualifications—AI offers solutions that streamline the process and improve accessibility.

A 2023 McKinsey & Co. report found that AI-powered hiring platforms can reduce bias in recruitment by as much as 30% when properly implemented. This is particularly beneficial for individuals with disabilities and veterans, who may face unconscious bias in traditional hiring settings.

AI-driven resume optimization tools have also proven valuable. Many job seekers are unaware that 75% of resumes never reach a human recruiter because they are filtered out by ATS software, according to a 2022 study by Jobscan. AI-powered resume builders help candidates tailor their applications to meet ATS criteria, increasing their chances of advancing in the daunting and competitive hiring process.

For individuals with disabilities, these tools can also highlight transferable skills and suggest alternative phrasing to emphasize strengths without disclosing private disability-related information—unless and when the applicant chooses to do so.

Veterans transitioning into civilian careers can benefit from AI-powered military-to-civilian job translators, such as those offered by Hire Heroes USA and O*NET OnLine, which convert military occupational specialties (MOS) into relevant civilian job descriptions.

AI also enhances interview preparation. Platforms such as Big Interview and MyInterview provide virtual coaching by analyzing a candidate's responses, body language, and speech patterns in mock interviews. These platforms offer real-time feedback on tone, eye contact, and clarity—helping job seekers refine their presentation before meeting with a recruiter.

For individuals with disabilities, these tools can be especially useful for practicing disclosure conversations around accommodations and gaining confidence in discussing work history. Often, rehearsing responses and identifying key talking points in advance builds muscle memory, reducing anxiety and stress when the actual interview takes place.

Job seekers re-entering the workforce after extended absences—such as caregivers or formerly incarcerated individuals—can use AI coaching to frame employment gaps effectively and build confidence. Following the pandemic, work gaps have become less of a hiring deterrent, provided job seekers can articulate their experiences and any personal or professional development undertaking during that time.

Traditional job boards can be overwhelming, but AI-driven job matching services like LinkedIn's AI-powered job recommendations and Pymetrics analyze

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user skills, preferences, and experience to connect job seekers with relevant opportunities. For individuals who struggle with in-person networking, AI powers platforms like Handshake and Mentra, which help neurodivergent job seekers and those with disabilities find inclusive employers and job opportunities.

Despite its benefits, AI-driven hiring tools are not without challenges. A 2021 Brookings Institution study found that AI algorithms can perpetuate societal biases if not properly trained on diverse datasets.

For example, individuals with non-linear career paths—such as those re-entering the workforce—may find that AI ranking systems prioritize continuous employment over other valuable experiences, potentially disadvantaging them.

Additionally, while AI can improve accessibility, it can also create new barriers. Voice recognition software may struggle with speech impairments, and automated video interview tools may unfairly score neurodivergent candidates based on nontraditional body language.

To maximize AI's benefits while avoiding potential pitfalls, job seekers should:

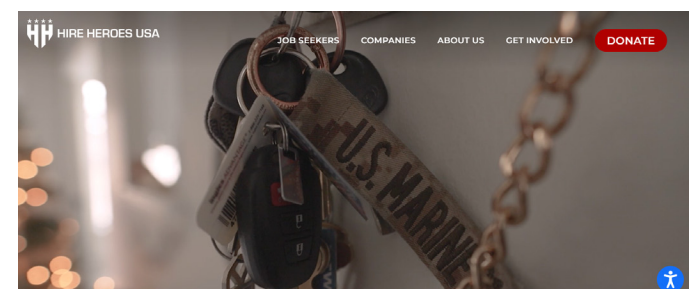
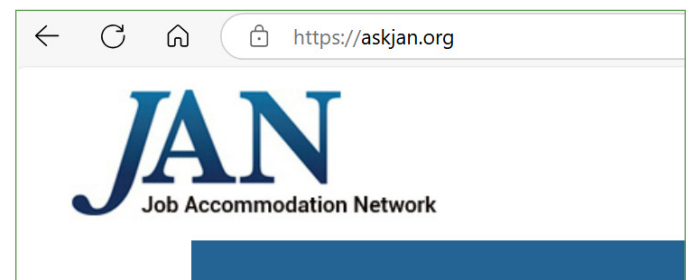
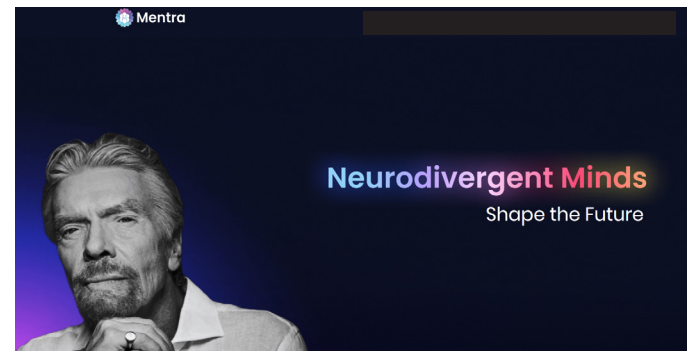
- Use AI resume scanners to ensure their job applications are customized to the job description and are optimized as ATS-friendly.
- Practice with AI interview coaching tools but seek authentic human feedback as well.
- Leverage AI-driven job matching platforms while maintaining traditional outreach efforts.
- Advocate for accessible AI hiring practices by providing honest feedback to employers about any barriers encountered.

AI is transforming the job search landscape, offering powerful tools for individuals with disabilities, veterans, and those re-entering the workforce. While it can help bridge employment gaps and improve accessibility, job seekers must remain proactive in navigating AI-powered systems to ensure they take full advantage of available opportunities.

As AI continues to evolve, its potential to create a more inclusive hiring process will depend on both technological advancements and the advocacy of job seekers pushing for fair, equitable employment practices.

Job searching is about effective storytelling. The more authentic, honest and confident you are in conveying what you bring to the workplace—enhanced with AI-powered resources—the stronger your chances of securing meaningful employment where you can contribute, grow, and succeed.

For those seeking AI-powered job search tools, resources like JAN (Job Accommodation Network), LinkedIn Learning, and Hire Heroes USA offer free training and support. ■



ADA TITLE II: EQUAL ACCESS TO PUBLIC SERVICES

BY OTTO DELEON



In 2024, we launched our series on the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA), kicking things off with an introductory overview. Then we followed with a spotlight on Title I, focusing on workplace rights and responsibilities. Continuing this series, we now turn to Title II—an essential provision for individuals with disabilities actively seeking employment.

Access to public services can be a determining factor in a person's ability to secure meaningful employment. From navigating public transportation to enrolling in government-funded job training programs, individuals with disabilities must be able to engage with these services without barriers. Title II of the ADA mandates that state and local government agencies provide equal access to their programs, services, and activities for people with disabilities.

Many are familiar with the ADA's role in protecting workplace rights under Title I, but fewer recognize the impact of Title II on the job search process. Whether it's commuting to an interview, applying for a government job, or accessing workforce development resources, Title II ensures that individuals with disabilities have the same opportunities to benefit from these critical services.

So, what does Title II cover? It prohibits state and local governments from discriminating against

individuals with disabilities in various profound ways. This includes:

- **Public transportation:** Ensuring that buses, trains, and paratransit services are accessible, allowing individuals to travel to work, job interviews, and employment-related appointments.
- **State and local government offices:** Guaranteeing equal access to employment assistance programs, public libraries, DMV offices, and vocational rehabilitation services.
- **Digital accessibility:** Requiring that websites and online portals for job applications, unemployment benefits, and workforce training programs accommodate assistive technologies like screen readers.
- **Law enforcement and emergency services:** Mandating that individuals with disabilities can access emergency services, including 911 call centers, and interact with law enforcement without barriers.

How does Title II support job seekers? It plays a crucial role for individuals who are actively engaged in finding meaningful and productive work. For those re-entering the workforce, Title II helps remove barriers to employment. Some of the most common ways it supports active job seekers include:

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• **Access to vocational rehabilitation and job training:** State-funded employment programs must provide reasonable accommodations such as American Sign Language (ASL) interpreters, accessible training materials, and alternative communication methods—to help assess participant competencies and skills.

• **Navigating public transportation challenges:** If job seekers rely on public transit, Title II ensures that transit systems—including schedules and service announcements—are accessible. If fixed-route systems are not an option, paratransit services must be available to eligible riders.

• **Applying for government jobs:** Title II ensures that hiring processes for state and local government jobs are inclusive. This means that online applications, interview locations, and onboarding materials must be accessible.

As a job seeker, understanding your rights is critical. If a government agency fails to provide equal access to a public service due to a disability, individuals have the right to file a complaint under Title II, particularly when a public entity:

- Refuses to provide reasonable accommodations
- Fails to meet public transit requirements or

• Creates taxing barriers in workforce training or hiring programs for individuals with disabilities.

If you believe your rights have been violated, complaints can be filed with the U.S. Department of Justice, which enforces compliance with Title II.

The job search process is challenging enough without additional accessibility barriers. Title II of the ADA ensures that individuals with disabilities, veterans, and those re-entering the workforce have equal access to public services that support employment success. Knowing these rights empowers job seekers to advocate for necessary and reasonable accommodations and hold government agencies accountable.

For assistance or to learn more about Title II, visit resources like the Job Accommodation Network (JAN) and the ADA National Network. In today's modern society, ensuring accessibility in public spaces and services is just as critical as workplace protections—because true inclusion extends beyond the job itself.

For more detailed information and resources regarding Title II protections, visit the ADA website (<https://www.ada.gov/law-and-regs/regulations/title-ii-2010-regulations/>). ■

The screenshot shows a web browser window with the URL <https://adata.org>. The page header features the ADA National Network logo and the text "Information, Guidance, and Training on the Americans with Disabilities Act". A navigation bar includes a home icon, "THE ADA", and "THE NATIONAL NETWORK". The main content area displays the ADA.gov logo (U.S. Department of Justice, Civil Rights Division) and the title "Americans with Disabilities Act Title II Regulations". Below the title, the date "June 24, 2024" is shown, followed by the subtitle "Part 35 Nondiscrimination on the Basis of Disability in State and Local Government Services." A footer section contains a magnifying glass icon and the text "Law, Regulations, & Standards" and "Read this document to understand your legal rights or responsibilities under the ADA."

BUILDING DIGITAL SKILLS FOR THE FUTURE

BY APRIL WHITE



Pacific Coast Community Services makes it easier for motivated job seekers to gain the digital skills they need to succeed in today's workplaces. The Digital Literacy & Technology Skills certificate program is designed for people who may not be comfortable with computers or need to refresh their skills after time away from the workforce. Veterans, people with disabilities, justice-involved individuals, and seniors reentering the workforce are among those who can benefit.

The course covers computer basics—everything from using a keyboard and mouse to navigating email, spreadsheets, and presentations. It also introduces students to different operating systems, helping them understand the differences between Windows and Mac. Some participants come in with a bit of experience, while others are starting from scratch. “We try to give an all-around introduction to [computers],” said course instructor, Felipe Sosa. “Not everyone has the same comfort level in interacting with electronic technology.”

While the course is primarily offered online, in-person instruction is available for those who prefer it. Most students select online study, allowing them to learn at their own pace with personalized support. Weekly check-ins and scheduled office hours with an instructor help ensure students understand the material, can raise questions, and gain confidence with their new skills.

This course was designed with the understanding that building familiarity with current office technologies can open all kinds of career opportunities. Sosa described

the course as a “bridge” between job seekers and where they would like to be in their lives—whether that means seeking employment directly or pursuing further study. As Sosa explained, “The best thing about this course is that it is [...] a stepping stone for a lot of people—and a great example of well-applied value.”

Digital literacy is a must-have skill in almost every job these days. Whether someone needs to send emails, download files, create spreadsheets or documents, these are tasks that come up in nearly every industry. Many learners taking this course reenter the workforce after an extended period and find that the technology they knew has changed drastically. The ability to tailor instruction to individual needs makes this course especially valuable for those reentering the workforce or learning new tools for the first time. The goal of this course is to help students become familiar with the most frequently used and current office technologies, making further learning or job training feel more within reach.

By expanding access to digital skills training, PCCS is helping people build confidence, find better jobs, and move toward a more stable future. The Digital Literacy course runs on a rolling basis, so students can fit the training into their lives and start when they're ready. With flexible learning options and one-on-one support, it's a program designed to meet people where they are and help them take the next step forward in a world that is becoming increasingly digital. ■