Let's Get to Work: Reimagining Disability Inclusive Employment Policy: Work as Recovery: Building Confidence, Community, and Choice

Barry Whaley
Hi, everybody! Welcome to the podcast series "Let's Get to Work: Reimagining Disability Employment Policy, brought to you by the Burton Blatt Institute at Syracuse University, the Disability Employment Policy Rehabilitation Research and Training Center, and the Southeast ADA Center. We're excited that you're joining us today because we have two special guests: Blessing Nwulu-Njoku I and Jacqueline Hinds from AHRC NYC Job Connection Center Clubhouse, or JCC.
The JCC Clubhouse is a community-based mental health program dedicated to supporting individuals living with intellectual and developmental disabilities and serious mental illness as they work toward meaningful and independent lives. Blessing is the clubhouse director with over 17 years of dedicated service at AHRC NYC.
Jacqueline began as a member of the clubhouse and recently took a significant step in her professional journey by stepping into the role of peer support specialist, where she can share her experiences and support with others on their path. As always, our host is Dr. Peter Blank, Peter's University Professor and Chairman of the Burton Blatt Institute. Peter is leading a team of researchers in cutting-edge research to rethink and reimagine disability employment policy. Here's your host, Peter Blank.

Peter Blanck
Welcome, Jackie and Blessing. It's such a privilege and pleasure to have you with us on the podcast today, and I look forward to a very interesting discussion. So perhaps we can start with a little background, Jackie, and then Blessing. Jackie, tell us a little bit about yourself.

Jacqueline Hinds
My name is Jacqueline Hines. I was born and raised in the United States. Grew up in Saint Vincent, the Grenadines, until I was about 910. Came back here to Brooklyn, and I've been in Brooklyn ever since. Right now, I am with AHRC New York City JCC Clubhouse, where I just took on the role as peer support specialist, and I'm having fun with it.

Peter Blanck
Tell us a little bit about what the clubhouse is, and then a little bit more about yourself.

Jacqueline Hinds
The clubhouse is working with my peers as members, where I help to tutor in reading and math, help to encourage in goals. And as for myself, right now I've been on the journey of recovering from bipolar

schizophrenia. My children are very encouraging. They help me a great deal, and so has my therapist. She's the one who suggested that I attend the clubhouse to help me get out of the house, to help me communicate more, to help me to be more productive in life, and so I've been here at the clubhouse since 2023.

Peter Blanck
Blessing, you want to tell us a little bit about yourself and how you got into this?

Blessing Nwulu-Njoku
My name is Blessing Nwulu-Njokuo. Originally, I am from Nigeria, and I came to this country in May 2000, when I came initially, I went back to school to study management information system. I was working at the bank too, so when the city crashed, I decided to join finance. So I graduated with double major. So and afterwards, I continued to work in the bank. I was not really satisfied with what I was doing, and I decided to change Klaviya.
So I started working with an agency, Vinfin, as a residential counselor as my part-time job. From there, I meet with the client. You know, when they are happy, I am happy. We solve problems together. From there, 2007, I moved to New York. I went back to the bank for one year. Still, I was not satisfied. So I said, "Okay, I have to change. So that was when I started work at AHRC. From there, I went back to do my masters, the first masters in business management.
I wanted to do family therapy, but because of the background and the. Liberty University, Lynchburg. So I did part of counseling and part of business classes. After that, still I was not happy. Even though I was working, I wanted to get more knowledge to be able to provide services to the people I am working with. So I did graduate certificate course in health management fall 2022.
I went back to Yeshiva University to do masters in social work, and I graduated this January. I'm happy that I did that because I acquired more knowledge on how to work with the people that I support, the clubhouse members to make sure they get the services that they need, the resources that they need, advocacy and everything. I saw an email by Amy and one of my colleague Matthew. So she was was like my son is working with the clubhouse.
She should have somebody, and he contacted me. So I told her, "Okay, I have somebody that I want to work with, Jackie. After we interacted, so she asked me, "What's the diagnosis? I said, "Mentor, had she was like, 'Oh, I don't think that was the professor. No, no, it has to be. So she said, "Okay, she was going to find out, and she found out and came back to me and said, "Yes, she is the perfect person. So that was how we came into this.

Peter Blanck
Great story. So Jackie, tell us about the importance of work to you sounds like you've worked your whole life. What were the jobs you started with that led you to be a peer support specialist?

Jacqueline Hinds
Well, my first job coming out of high school was in the insurance industry. I worked there for over 12 years. After that, I worked with New York Presbyterian as a ward clerk. I got sick there. I think I was overdoing it. I worked a lot. I had my children. We were partially without a home. I was living in my aunt's house, sleeping on the floor. It was rough for me mentally and physically, so I think that's what took a toll on me as far as getting sick.
Then after a couple of years, I came here. I was here before I started working. I love working here. I love being here. Being with the the members here is very encouraging because you see the change in them. Sometimes they just need somebody to talk to, somebody to just release some anger, release some stress. I am able to do that for them. Excellent.

Peter Blanck
It sounds like work has been a very important part of your life. Your work now sounds very satisfying. Has that been the case from day one when you were working there?

Jacqueline Hinds
Yes, yes, very

Peter Blanck
blessing. You told us a little bit about yourself, and now you're head of the of the clubhouse, what do you think is the importance of the clubhouse in relationship building and confidence, and people getting a voice to listen to, and eventually getting back into the workforce?

Blessing Nwulu-Njoku
The importance of the clubhouse and the life of the members is that we all know that the clubhouse is designed to serve people with serious mental illness, but ours is unique in the sense that we have people with dual diagnosis, mental illness, and co-occurring disorder. Once you enroll in the clubhouse, you become a member for members to be in the clubhouse. It helps them to come out of their comfort zone and socialize with people.
Employment is very important because it helps them to boost their self-esteem, self-worth, confidence, and also live independently, so we encourage them. We support the members. We work side by side with the members. That is the beauty of the clubhouse. You make the members feel like they are being heard. You make the members feel like they have a family outside their immediate family. That is where they come to show themselves, express themselves.
They are not alone. There are others that have the same problems or challenges that they have in life, and also see that there are people don't discriminate against them, because when we are working with them, we. Working side by side, we are like colleagues. There is nothing like, oh, she's the director of the clubhouse. We cook together, we clean together, we do everything, have meetings together, and they decide what they want to do.
This is where you give them the opportunity to be themselves and decide what they are going to do in the clubhouse. So the clubhouse is very beneficial in the life of somebody who has mental illness because they learn how to live independently. A lot of people in the house isolate themselves; they don't come out because they are afraid that people will not accept them or receive them. So you, we do get out that inclusivity is also in the clubhouse.
We get them out there; they become part of the community at large. While they are part of little community, which is the clubhouse, they get a gradual step learning how to be part of the community at large, and they are able to work with people and and get meaningful employment. Work with other people that don't have mental illness or don't have disability, and they see that people are not what they thought because they are afraid people will discriminate against them. So with the clubhouse, it helps also to let them get out there and be themselves.

Peter Blanck
If you were making policy or making changes in the employment structures or the benefits, particularly relevant to clubhouse members, what sort of things would you think be important to support more or get more people involved.

Blessing Nwulu-Njoku
If I were a policymaker regarding employment, I will make sure that people with disability or people with mental illness are being considered. Also, while we are considering them, that we have to have accommodation in mind, because sometimes we go through a lot that people do not understand, and

maybe we hear voices, you know, within us that's telling us to do one thing. We might just shout and say, "Get out of the way.
Somebody would think that it is them. But if you pay attention and understand them, you will know that they are not talking to other people. They are struggling to get out of that. But if you happen to work with them, you will say that they are very nice people. Once you receive them, accommodate them, you will get the best out of them, and you will say that they are one of the best people to work with.
That having mental illness or disability is not a barrier to anything. That they can do what somebody who does not have disability or mental illness can do, and it is important also to know that for them to gain employment, it helps to eradicate hospitalization of the people with mental illness. So, because they go out there, they socialize with people, they talk to people, they have something to go back to tomorrow.
The next day is a way of recovery. Having unemployment is a way of recovery for people with disability or people with a mental illness. So, those are the things I will consider because if we want the the country to move forward, we should also consider helping the people with mental illness, providing them with their own job, even if it is just part time job.
It helps them to relieve to live a comfortable life, an independent life because once they start making their own money, they are not dependent on the government. They look themselves and they have confidence in themselves, and they know that they can afford something. They worked for it, and they can afford that.

Peter Blanck
On a different topic, though related, Jackie, you were among the first in New York State to look at our digital psychiatric advanced directives, and you can tell people a little bit about your experience with that and how it might help you in the future to make choices and in employment and other areas as well.

Jacqueline Hinds
My first experience was this is a lot of questions. I have to take my time and understand what is being asked of me, and decide I'll go this way, I'll go that way. The questions seem to be quite helpful, especially asking, "What would I like done if I should get into a situation I had put to just quietly talk to me? Because I found that helped me before.

Peter Blanck
So just writing it down and reading it seemed to you empowering, just alone.

Jacqueline Hinds
Yeah. I didn't really get anyone else involved in it, justness blessing. But I wanted to make sure that whoever I was getting involved with was able also to be able to be helpful to me in that situation.

Peter Blanck
Excellent blessing. What was your take about how it could be empowering and give people more choice, and maybe they share it with their employers or healthcare providers? What was your takeaway?

Blessing Nwulu-Njoku
My takeaway is that this part is just like writing a testament. Your will. When I leave, this is how I want everything. So it helps people' voices to be heard. Like my members, most of them have speech problems. This is an opportunity for them to have instead of somebody making decision for them. A lot of people don't like to be touched. A lot of people don't like to be talked to in a harsh manner. A lot of people don't like certain things.
So if they can say, "When I'm sick, I want just to see this doctor. If this doctor is not available, he should give me somebody because he knows me, or I don't want anybody to touch me. Don't touch my hand. Don't touch my leg. Or I want people to pat my shoulder and said it will be fine with you. Everything is written

down.
They are not our family members deciding for us what needs to be done in our life when we can share with them and say this is what we want, because a lot of people, what their family members tell them to do or tell the practitioners to do, is not exactly what they want. So they they just take it like that, but they are not happy with the services they receive because they were not able to express themselves, so with this now you will hear people's voice. This is what I want. This is how I want it. This is who who I want to see. This is who I want to be there. I don't want this person to be around me.

Peter Blanck
Well, that's very helpful for our listeners who haven't learned about digital psychiatric advance directives. You can look at it online. It's called My Plan, My Voice PADS. We've talked about supported decision making as well. We have on the on this discussion probably the national leader in supported decision making from a law and policy point of view, Jonathan, and I wanted to turn it over to Jonathan to take a good bit of time that he may have to discuss issues with you guys.

Jonathan Martinis
Thank you, Peter, and thank you for those kind words. Let's talk about supported decision making and making your own decisions instead of having people decide things for you. Is that important to you, and if so, why?

Jacqueline Hinds
It is important because no one knows you like you.

Jonathan Martinis
That is a phenomenal answer. In fact, I'm probably going to steal it at some point when I speak with groups. But I'd love to talk to you about the clubhouse, because I'm a huge fan of the clubhouse model. Blessing, I was taken by what you said about work being a form of recovery. So, can you tell me a little bit about the work you do in your clubhouse to help people find and keep jobs?

Blessing Nwulu-Njoku
What we do is we help clubhouse members with resume building. We sit with them to find out what kind of job they want to do, and while we are at the clubhouse doing our work on daily basis, we also try to find out if that person is ready to work. Because every day people will be, I want to work, I want to work. You don't want to set them up for failure, you don't want to send members out there to work, and when they get there, they will just work today, and tomorrow they leave the job.
So it's important that they are ready, and that we know that they are ready. And before they go, I'm going to say, "Yeah, you want to work, but you are not ready to work. So, what are we going to do about that? You have to start doing things to show us that you are ready to work, so that we will start looking for jobs for you.

Jonathan Martinis
Jackie, can you tell me a little bit about how work or preparing to work is important to your recovery, and then bringing it back to no one knows you like you. How does making being involved as a clubhouse member and being able to decide what to do? How does that impact your recovery? How are those things important to you?

Jacqueline Hinds
Recovery for me is being active. I was always involved. In daily tasks, getting involved in the meetings, getting involved with the members, and that helped me. That helped to boost my self-esteem. It helped me

to say, "Okay, I could, I could do this. I could get back out there. It took me a while, but I just kept going at it. Eventually, I said to myself, "I'm ready to work, and I just kept continuing doing what I was doing, researching jobs, making sure my resume was built up, and so on.
Now, being at the clubhouse with the different members, it helped me to understand that I was needed, and the fact that I was needed that also boosts my self esteem, and I just kept working at it, helping them to write, helping them to learn letters, helping them to read, helping them with math, and just the different little things that I did around the clubhouse helped me.

Jonathan Martinis
Thank you so much, both of you. I'm going to turn it back over to Peter, but not before I say thank you for the work you're doing in the clubhouse to not only help people in their recovery, but to be a model for how others can recover too.

Jacqueline Hinds
Thank you.

Peter Blanck
Thank you, Jonathan. Thank you, Jackie, and blessing. What would you like to leave our listeners with about your experience and the journey you've been on to keep moving forward and participating in life?

Jacqueline Hinds
The journey might be a little rough at times because the doubt might come in because things may not go as well as you may think they should be going, whether it's because of negative words or negative actions coming towards you. But just to persevere, because there are kind people out there, there are kind words that can come to you to help you. There are places like the clubhouse where you can go and find directors and staff and members who will help encourage you.
And as for the my plan, my voice, I think it's a good idea because it can help a lot of people I know in this clubhouse can't remember their medication, can't remember what they did yesterday from today. Can't even remember their residence. Something should happen to them on the street. That will be very helpful. I think about the people who have passed because they didn't have something like pads, right?
If they had those things, indication on their wrists that they had pads, those incidents I don't think would have happened. I think about all those things, so I think it's important, and I'm thankful for the opportunity to get to understand it and be able to use it.

Peter Blanck
Thank you, Jackie. We are all so proud to learn with you, as we're doing today. Blessing. I guess I'll give you the last word. What do you envision for the future and what you're accomplishing with regard to helping people affected by mental illness and the clubhouse at employment,

Blessing Nwulu-Njoku
it's something that I am in love with. You know, helping people, putting smile to their face, saying that they are happy and that they get the services they need. So I intend to continue to support people with mental illness and let them know that they are not alone. Not only people with mental illness; it can be any form of disability. To let them know that they are not alone, and that there are people who care for them.
That there are people who empathize with them and are there to support them to make sure that they get all the resources or services that they need, and that there are places where they can go, especially people with mental illness who. Not know that the clubhouses exist, that they can go to clubhouses and get their footing and get back into the community and become part of the community and live a normal life, because I have experienced it.

I had somebody that came all the way from California. She was homeless, but she found herself here in New York. But she came to the clubhouse with the support she received and everything she was able to get her footing back, and she returned to California. So, and I am so happy that something like clubhouse people can go and get their self-esteem, get their confidence and self-worth.
That people can go and get help to get gain meaningful employment and work, knowing that employment helps in recovery. Because every time when you get out there and work, get yourself busy. You forget about depression, anxiety, and everything, and you are able to connect with people out there, see different faces, make friends, talk to people, and when you get home, you feel like you have accomplished something.
Also, I am glad that something like PAD is now in existence, so that people with disability will also know that their voices can be heard, not through their family members, not through their clubhouse directors, their program managers, their guardians, but through themselves. They just put their voice out there, and their wish will be respected.

Peter Blanck
Well, thank you, blessing. I, you know, I speak for all of us. That really has been a true pleasure and honor to speak with you. You are pioneers leading the way at this difficult time for many people, and I know that your comments will be appreciated and listened to by many people across the country, and will be inspirational for them as well. So, on behalf of all of us, thank you so much. I look forward to future discussions.

Barry Whaley
I want to thank you, Blessing Jacqueline, Jonathan, and Peter, for your insights, your perspectives, and your values. It's a tremendous opportunity for all of us, with you leading this new center, which will look at so many different facets of disability employment policy and help us all rethink and reimagine a world with more opportunities for economic gain for people with disabilities.
Thank you so much for sharing your viewpoints today, and listeners, I want to thank you for joining us for this episode, you can access all "Let's Get to Work" podcasts with archived audio, accessible transcripts, and resources on our website at bbi-dep-rrtc.org. Let's get to work: reimagining disability employment policy is a program of the Burton Blatt Institute at Syracuse University, the Disability Employment Policy Rehabilitation Research and Training Center, and a collaboration with the Southeast ADA Center. See you next episode.