

7 Key Takeaways: Building Stronger Workforces Through Disability Inclusion

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One year after Illinois' Dignity in Pay Act was signed into law—requiring companies to pay workers with disabilities at least minimum wage by 2029—business leaders, advocates, and policymakers gathered to discuss what inclusive employment looks like in practice. Hosted by Easterseals Serving Chicagoland and Greater Rockford and Social Responsibility Chicago, the conversation explored how organizations can build stronger workforces through disability inclusion. Here are seven takeaways worth bringing back to

your organization.

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Hosted by Easterseals Serving Chicagoland and Greater Rockford and Social Responsibility Chicago, the event affirmed a common belief: when every person is supported to reach their full potential, our entire community is stronger.

The conversation explored the practical steps to build stronger workforces through disability inclusion. HB Threads associate Carter Sanders stated it clearly: "To me, inclusive employment is about giving people with disabilities a chance."

The panel, moderated by Axios' Carrie Shepherd, included State Representative Theresa Mah, lead sponsor of the Act; Brad Cohen, Director of Growth at AutonomyWorks; James Emmett, founder of James Emmett & Company; and Carter Sanders.

Here are seven takeaways worth bringing back to your organization.

1. Disability inclusion is about all of us.

James Emmett asked the audience a simple question: raise your hand if you or someone close to you has a disability. Every hand went up.

He calls this the Rally Effect. When companies make their disability inclusion efforts visible, workers rally around it. People who have quietly managed disabilities for years start to speak up. Emmett has seen it happen across industries and he noted that 10-15% of any workforce has a disability. In most workplaces, inclusive employment is already the reality, but it just hasn't been acknowledged.

2. Retention is the business case.

Emmett described a client whose team of associates with autism has been performing the same precision work for the same client for a decade. "Just think for a second about how good they are at that service," he said.

Brad Cohen has seen the same at AutonomyWorks. People with autism often find genuine satisfaction in mastering a specific task. The result is lower turnover, deeper expertise, and a better product. "Most of the clients we had in the beginning are still clients," Cohen said. "We provide good service at a good price. It really is a win-win."

3. Inclusive workplaces are safer workplaces.

This one surprised a lot of people in the room, and it's backed by emerging research. Emmett described studies showing that workers with disabilities are statistically safer on the job than counterparts who do not disclose. Many pay close attention to safety protocols and hold peers accountable to them. In a manufacturing environment, it may be the employee with a disability who stops at the marked stop sign in the aisle and, six months later, prevents a serious accident. "That's surprising to a lot of our new customers," Emmett said, "that we can actually help them improve safety."

4. The right person in the right seat.

The goal is matching people to roles where they can genuinely excel. When companies approach inclusive hiring as a performance strategy, the outcomes are better for everyone.

For employers new to this work, Emmett's advice was to find a guide. Find an external partner who can help build systems for inclusive hiring. Cohen offered a simpler option: just ask. "Ask candidates and employees what they need. Most accommodations are very simple. Rather than having rigid rules about what accommodation looks like, just ask."

5. The companies doing this best are also the ones growing fastest.

Cohen pointed to the disability and autism employment roundtables with Microsoft, SAP, JP Morgan, Grainger, and Costco. "These are some of the leading companies in the world," he said. "They have proven that an effort toward inclusive hiring has huge payoffs. It's the forward thinkers that are the ones growing fastest."

6. AI in hiring is creating new barriers for people with disabilities. Illinois is responding.

Carter Sanders put a name to something many job seekers with disabilities have suspected: that no human is reading their application. "I don't think a person is even looking at my application," he said. "It feels like classic gatekeeping."

James Emmett agreed. AI screening tools can flag resume gaps that may be disability-related, filtering out qualified candidates before anyone ever reviews their file. Rep. Mah shared that Illinois is already moving to address this. Legislation is in process that would require a human to conduct the first phase of candidate screening before AI tools are used. It is an early but significant step.

7. The Dignity in Pay Act has a roadmap. Employers don't have to figure it out alone.

Rep. Mah first proposed the Dignity in Pay Act in 2018. It passed in 2024 and phases out sub-minimum wages for workers with disabilities by December 31, 2029. Illinois is among roughly 18 states to pass similar legislation, which means there is a tested blueprint and people who know how to help employers navigate the transition. The Illinois Council on Developmental Disabilities offers free technical assistance, and Easterseals, James Emmett & Company, and AutonomyWorks can serve as guides.

The Dignity in Pay Act asks Illinois employers to get where HB Threads already is: HB Threads pays workers with disabilities fair, livable wages and is building a workforce that reflects what inclusive employment actually looks like. HB Threads has done that from the start, employing more than 150 individuals with disabilities at above minimum wage.

Learn More and Get Involved

Work with HB Threads. HB Threads produces high-quality custom apparel, heat-pressed products, and branded products for organizations across Illinois. Every order supports meaningful employment for adults with disabilities. Learn more at hbthreads.org.

Read about HB Threads in Axios Chicago. [Chicago company offers model as Illinois phases out subminimum wages](#)

Connect with James Emmett & Company to build inclusive hiring systems for your organization: jamesemmettco.com.

Connect with Autonomy Works to explore outsourced business services staffed by adults with

autism and other disabilities: autonomyworks.com.

Learn about the Dignity in Pay Act and available employer resources through the [Illinois Council on Developmental Disabilities](#) and the [Illinois Division of Rehabilitation Services](#).

Connect with Easterseals to learn more about our workforce programs at eastersealschicago.org.