

Employment First Podcasts

Tips from the experts. News from the field. Success stories.



Oregon ABLE Savings

Jan. 7, 2020

Oregon Employment First. Supporting people with intellectual and developmental disabilities to work in community jobs. Learn more at iworkwesucceed.org.

Angela Yeager: Hi, and welcome to the Oregon Employment First podcast. I'm Angela Yeager with Employment First. This week, we are talking about the Oregon ABLE Savings Plan and how Oregon ABLE makes it possible for people with disabilities to save money without risking their benefits. Joining me today is Kaellen Hessel, advocacy and outreach manager of Oregon ABLE. Welcome to the show.

Kaellen Hessel: Hi, Angela, thanks for having me.

Angela Yeager: Thanks so much for coming. Really excited to have you on today and learn more about Oregon ABLE. So, first question, easy one, or it should be, so what is Oregon ABLE?

Kaellen Hessel: Uh, Oregon ABLE is a new savings program offered through the Oregon State Treasury specifically for people with disabilities. Uh, it's an opportunity for them to save their own money without losing state and federal benefits. The best part about ABLE is that any money that you put into it doesn't count against the asset or resource limits for any state or federal benefit out there. So, oftentimes, like someone will be receiving SSI and then they say if you have more than \$2,000.00 in your name, you get disqualified. So any funds that somebody saves in Oregon ABLE doesn't count against that \$2,000.00. So for instance, somebody who's on SSI can save up to \$100,000.00 and keep getting that benefit. So it's really this game changing empowerment tool for the disability community.

Angela Yeager: That's awesome. And who qualifies for Oregon ABLE?

Kaellen Hessel: So to qualify for ABLE, there's two criteria that somebody has to meet. First is age of onset, second is severity of disability. So age of onset means that somebody's, uh, disability started before their 26th birthday. Um, so sometimes that's clear, but other times not so much. So, for instance, let's say someone is diagnosed with autism at the age of 40. We know by the nature of that condition they've always had autism. The doctor just didn't know what to call it until that person happened to be 40. So that person's able to qualify for ABLE. The second criteria is severity of disability. So somebody's disability has to impact them enough that they qualify for SSI or SSDI. So if someone is already receiving either of those benefits, you know, it's easy. They can check a box and move on. But if they're not, uh, that doesn't mean that they should give up hope. Um, we just have to meet the same disability criteria that they have. So, if you're not receiving either of those programs because you have too many assets or too much income, but you would otherwise be qualified because of your disability, you can open an ABLE account. So, if people aren't sure about that or they want to be extra sure, they can get what we call a disability certification form filled out by their doctor.

Angela Yeager: Hmm.

Kaellen Hessel: So, if they go to our website, oregonablesavings.com/forms, they can look for the one that says physician, print it out, taken it to their next doctor's appointment to explain to the doctor what ABLE is, what the criteria is and then they can just sign off on it and keep a copy of it in their files.

Angela Yeager: Wow. So, if someone is getting SSI or SSDI, though, they are, it's sort of an automatic qualification? Is that correct?

Kaellen Hessel: As long as their disability started before the age of 26.

Angela Yeager: 26, okay.

Kaellen Hessel: Yeah.

Angela Yeager: Great.

Kaellen Hessel: And that includes if they started receiving SSI at 50, as long as they can trace back their disability before 26, they can have ABLE.

Angela Yeager: Okay.

[Need help planning your road to work? Go to road2work.oregon.gov and create your customized course to a job using available services and supports. That's road2work with the No. 2, dot Oregon dot gov (road2work.oregon.gov)]

Angela Yeager: And how does a person go about setting up an Oregon ABLE account?

Kaellen Hessel: Yeah, so the only way to get an ABLE account is through the State of Oregon or one of the other states that offer the program. So in order to set up the account, you need to go to oregonablesavings.com. If anybody goes to their local bank or credit union, everybody gets very confused because they have no idea what you're talking about.

Angela Yeager: Hmm.

Kaellen Hessel: But this is a real thing. Uh, you just have to go to the website and then you click open an account in the upper right-hand corner. You fill out the form. Uh, we strongly recommend attaching a traditional checking or savings account to it and then you're done. It takes most people about 10, 15 minutes to open an account.

Angela Yeager: It's pretty easy then, so a person can set up their own account.

Kaellen Hessel: Yeah.

Angela Yeager: Are there options available if a person needs support to set up an account? Maybe they don't have website access, or they just find the process intimidating.

Kaellen Hessel: Yeah, absolutely. And so, we think it's really important that we built out this program, we started with the, uh, presumption of confidence that someone with a disability can manage this account independently, but we knew that that was not gonna be, um, realistic for all of our savers out there. So there's kind of a whole range of needs and a whole range of what you –

Angela Yeager: Mm hmm.

Kaellen Hessel: – can do to meet them. Um, so, let's say somebody just needs help understanding the form or using the computer, our customer service is available in a number of different ways. You can call our customer service line, you can email them, or you can actually do live chat on the computer, so if you don't want to call someone you don't have to but you'll talk to the same person who would pick up the other line. And then, Internet access is definitely an issue. We've tried to make sure to reach out to everyone who can find that is supporting a person with a disability across the state, so many of the DHS workers, the county workers are well versed in ABLE and many of them are also willing to help people walk through that process.

Angela Yeager: Okay, so someone's case manager could, you know, potentially assist them or support them if they needed to.

Kaellen Hessel: Exactly. But then, uh, they're also people who might not want to or might not be able to handle their account independently with those accommodations, so we have what we call authorized legal representatives who can manage the account on their behalf. There's only a few people who fall into those categories. So it'd be parents of minors, guardians, conservators or someone with power of attorney. So those folks can automatically open one of the account and manage it on behalf of a person with a disability, but if there's anybody else, like a sibling, spouse or a rep payee, the only way that can, they can manage the account is if the person with the disability decides to give them power of attorney to do that. So that choice is always gonna belong to the

person with the disability, um, and it's not permanent. If, you know, life changes as it does, or they want to start managing their own account after a couple years, they can fill out different forms and take back that authority. Um, it's very flexible to try and meet everyone's needs.

Angela Yeager: That's awesome. So, of course this is Employment First, so we like to talk about employment and, and working. So how can Oregon ABLE help someone with a disability who is working and earning a wage?

Kaellen Hessel: There's so many ways that we can help people who are working. You are able to save your own income in an ABLE account. You can also save money from friends, family, pretty much any legal source of money that you have, we'll accept. But of course, if you are working, you can save more of your own paycheck. Uh, so we do have opportunities for direct deposit so you could even put your entire paycheck into the ABLE account, or you can set up, um, monthly contributions. So a really popular saying in the personal finance world is to pay yourself first. You know, put some money aside in your savings account at the start of each month, uh, to make sure that you put it there because studies have shown if people decide they're gonna put whatever's left at the end of the month in, uh, a savings account, they tend to run out of funds –

Angela Yeager: Mmm.

Kaellen Hessel: – and, you know, use it for other things. So, look at your income, figure out how much do you think you can save, uh, each month without being a hardship. Maybe that's \$10.00, maybe it's \$100.00. You can tell the account, you know, on the 3rd of each month, move \$10.00 into my ABLE account, and we can do that. So little by little, we can help you build up that emergency fund, save for retirement, whatever, um, your dream is there. And while you're working and putting aside more of your paycheck, um, you can continue to get SSI, Medicaid, SNAP, any other benefits that you might be receiving.

Angela Yeager: Right, and it wouldn't count against that because that's how Oregon ABLE works, right?

Kaellen Hessel: Exactly. You're getting it.

Angela Yeager: Yeah.

[The Oregon Employment First podcast explores topics centered on employment for Oregonians with intellectual and developmental disabilities. Field staff, providers, Oregon employers, people with disabilities and their families may be interested in topics ranging from the history of Employment First in Oregon to how to have the employment conversation from a case management perspective. The Oregon Employment First podcast airs bimonthly on the first and third Tuesday of each month. Tune in.]

Kaellen Hessel: Um, so for those who are working, there is extra benefit for them in using this account. You can save up to \$15,000.00 a year in an ABLE account, but if someone's employed, they can save more than that. Uh, so if they're employed, have an ABLE account and they're not saving for retirement somewhere else, they can make what we call an ABLE to Work contribution. So that's named after a law that was passed at the end of 2017 that allowed for this change, but essentially, if someone is working, they can save up to \$12,490.00 in 2020 or the total of their wages, whichever is less. So, if someone is only making \$5,000.00 a year, they can save an extra \$5,000.00 on top of that \$15,000.00 standard contribution. But if they're making \$30,000.00 a year, the most they can save in 2020 is \$12,490.00. That's a really weird number. It is tied to the previous year's federal poverty level for one person which nobody has memorized. So each year, we're just gonna let people know what that new limit is. It's going to change a little bit each year with inflation but not drastically. Uh, but I wanna stress that even if you directly deposit your paycheck into ABLE, uh, we can only help you with any asset or resource limits. If you're receiving a benefit that has an income limit, ABLE's never gonna be able to help with that. So the asset or resource limit says you can't have more than this much money in your name at one time. The income limit is what says you can't work more than this many hours or make more than this much money. So I just wanna make sure that everybody understands that key difference.

Angela Yeager: Right. And of course, if people have questions about how much they can make while working, they can always contact Work Incentives Network or a benefits counselor because people would be

surprised how much they can work and how much they can earn without risking their benefits.

Kaellen Hessel: Yeah, and those are fantastic resources.

Angela Yeager: So, can you point to a success story, um, where a person has used an ABLE account to save work earnings for something, you know, really cool, a car, a house, what, you know, whatever it might be?

Kaellen Hessel: Yeah, so, one of the great things about ABLE is that there're so many things you can save for. It's really anything that improves your health, independence or quality of life. I know a lot of people are saving for housing, but there're also people who are saving for better gaming equipment because that's their hobby, that's what gives their life meaning. I just found out a week ago that one of our savers used, uh, some of the money in his account to help pay for his wedding –

Angela Yeager: Oh, that's exciting.

Kaellen Hessel: – which I thought was great, yeah. Um, and now they're saving up for a down payment for a house. Uh, so they're working on those very big long-term goals. Uh, I know of another woman who told me she wanted to open an account, and even though she wasn't receiving benefits at the moment, she was gainfully employed and making more money than she could, um, and get either of those. She knew that her condition was going to progress to the point where she wouldn't be able to continue doing that, so, you know, she was saving up, you know, for a rainy day, emergency fund or even retirement fund with this. So no matter how big or a small goal, we're just really excited to help doing that. There's also a young man up in the Portland area who loves all things media and photography, and he's taking classes with that and so he both, uh, has been working for, I believe, Portland Parks, um, and using his funds to fund his ABLE account, and then using his ABLE account to pay for a nice fancy camera so he can go and take more photos.

Angela Yeager: Nice.

Kaellen Hessel: So it can both help lead to employment and be a good result of employment.

Angela Yeager: Nice. Yeah, that's really exciting. Well, thank you for joining us on the show today. Um, Kaellen, is there anything else you'd like to add about Oregon ABLE, anything I didn't touch on so far?

Kaellen Hessel: Yeah, so we have lots of great information, uh, available at our website. It is www.oregonablesavings.com. You should be able to find pretty much anything you could ever wanna know on there, uh, but if not, feel free to reach out to us. Uh, we're also available to answer your questions, come and do presentations around the state to help make sure that everybody knows what they need to know about ABLE.

Angela Yeager: Great. Well, thanks again for joining me. I really appreciate it. We're really excited to be able to feature Oregon ABLE. It's such a great resource for people to have. So, thank you again, and this has been the Oregon Employment First podcast, and we'll see you next time.

Kaellen Hessel: Thanks for having me. Bye everyone.