ABLE National Resource Center

"Ready and ABLE to Work and Save: Part 1"

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>> Moderator: Welcome, everyone. We are so happy that you are here. For our event today, ready and able to work and save, a two‑part online event. "Ready and ABLE to Work and Save: Part 1". My name is Cheyenne, the project coordinator for ABLE National Resource Center. Listening to the webinar today, the audio for today's meeting can be accessed using computer audio or by calling in by phone. If you select computer audio, please make sure your speakers are turned on or your headphones are plugged in. If you do not have sound capabilities on your computer or prefer to listen by phone, dial 1‑929‑205‑6099. The webinar I.D. is 81712874178. Captioning ‑‑ realtime captions is provided during this webinar. The captions can be found by clicking on the closed captions Icon in your Zoom controls at the bottom of the screen. If you do not see the captions after clicking the button, please alert the host via the chat box.

Questions. For today's event, we will have the Q&A chat box closed during this webinar. Join us Thursday October 19 from 2:00 to 3:00 p.m. Eastern Standard Time for part two of "Ready and ABLE to Work and Save." This is of course our two‑part online event. We're offering a technical assistance office hour Thursday on ABLE accounts and employment. This is an opportunity for employers and service providers who participated today in the part one of the series to ask questions of our featured guests, panelists, ABLE subject matter experts and work incentive counselors. Register for part two, I will place the link in the chat window today as well.

Technical assistance ‑‑ if you experience technical difficulties, please email ABLE@NRC.org and in the subject line press help. Please note the webinar is being recorded and the materials will be placed on the ABLE National Resource Center Web site along with all other ABLE webinars. So, with that, introducing Tom Foley, Executive Director of the National Disability Institute.

>> Presenter: Thank you so much, Cheyenne and thank you to everyone for being here today. Super excited to talk about ABLE accounts, but, as Cheyenne said, thank you to all of you for being here today. I wanted to give just a little bit of quick background on NDI for those of you who may not be familiar with us, but we're the first and only national disability organization that works exclusively on issues of economic and financial inclusion for folks with disabilities. We are also disability‑led organization. I'm the Executive Director. I'm also totally blind. Just a heads‑up, you may hear a little bit of jaws in the background from time to time. If you're familiar with it, jaws always likes to get its attention as well. Kara, let's go to the next slide.

Today the National Disability Institute, we're bringing forth our ABLE National Resource Centers. I'm hear representing ABLE National Resource Center. ABLE NRC is the leading comprehensive source of state ABLE programs, in providing guidance about tax advantage ABLE accounts, 529 accounts. Our mission is to educate and promote and support the positive impact that ABLE can have. As a person with a disability, who's been on benefits in the past, really excited to talk more about what ABLE can do for people with disabilities to build a better economic and financial future.

Next slide. I would be remiss without mentioning that October is National Disability Employment Awareness Month. Really excited to be able to bring this presentation to you today. So can we go to the next slide?

So today the ABLE National Resource Center and access are brought ‑‑ whoops, and there's jaws ‑‑ are joining with AbilityOne to bring "Ready and ABLE to Work and Save" to National Disability Employment Awareness Month. So today is the first in the two‑part series. Cheyenne mentioned earlier, the second part, an office hour, where we can answer any questions you may have of the NDI staff or of any of our guests today. But, you know, in honor of National Disability Employment Awareness Month, I did want to just sort of take a pause here because, earlier on in the week, I was on a call with the Department of Labor, and, you know, somebody was telling me that there were 500 different registrants for today. So when I was talking with the Department of Labor, they were saying we are at the highest level of disability employment in the history of this country. The workforce participation rate for folks with disabilities is as high as it's ever been. So I just want to say thank you to everyone who's here today, and congratulations. That is quite an accomplishment. And it doesn't matter if you have been doing this work for 30 days or if you have been doing this work for 30 years, I just want to say thank you, and thank you for choosing to be part of the solution, building an employment and a financial future for folks with disabilities.

Can we go to the next slide. Speaking of employment and building a future for people with disabilities, our guest speakers today ‑‑ our first guest speaker from AbilityOne is Kim Zeich. Kim Zeich: It's nice to join in this webinar. I'm Kim Zeich, Executive Director of the AbilityOne Commission. The AbilityOne program creates and sustains jobs for people who are blind and people with significant disabilities, and we do that in the performance of federal contract work. In the AbilityOne program we have 430 partners nationwide. They're a logical partner to work with us to promote ABLE accounts because they employ individuals with disabilities including many, many people who are eligible for ABLE accounts. And in the AbilityOne program, we are emphasizing what we call good and optimal jobs, those include competitive wages and benefits. Job individualization and customization and career advancement planning. So as we work to increase wages, it's really important that we talk about benefits. And we see ABLE accounts as an excellent tool in that area. ABLE accounts can be leveraged by eligible employees to save and accumulate assets without jeopardizing benefits. We're working to spread the word across the AbilityOne network and beyond through national conferences, through webinars like this one, through radio and digital media, whenever we have the opportunity. We do a lot of work in the federal space in the AbilityOne program. So I have been fortunate to talk about ABLE accounts a little bit on federal networks, for example. I want to thank NDI, the ABLE National Resource Center, certainly Tom, Miranda, everyone on the team. I want to thank Kate McSweeney and Sarah and everyone at ACCSES for planning the webinar. Representatives from AbilityOne employers will be sharing practical experience. I'm looking forward to hearing about that. It's my pleasure to introduce to you Kate McSweeney with ACCSES. Kate, over to you.

>> Kate McSweeney: Thank you, Kim. So nice to be here today. I wanted to emphasize what Kim said, what a privilege it is to work with NDI and the National Resource Center with Miranda Kennedy and Tom and the whole team at NDI and Kim on this webinar. We have been meeting regularly over the last six months. It has been an adventure. It has been a friendship forming opportunity, and I have learned a lot about ABLE accounts. I first learned of ABLE accounts in 2016 when I joined access and attended the Virginia ACCSES conference in September of that year, and I came away with a lot of questions, and I have been able to actually learn so much just in the planning of this, but I'm still going to take notes today because this is a really important program and an opportunity and a mission, our collective mission was really to get the word out and to answer a lot of the questions people have or clear up any misconceptions. Access is national advocacy organization. We work with disability service providers from around the country. I want to thank Ken Crum who is with us today from Service Source, one of our members, and AbilityOne social enterprise and also a good friend. With that, I'm going to send it back to Cheyenne so she can get the webinar started. Thank you.

>> Moderator: Thank you, everyone. Yes, today's other panelists include Ken Crum, chief operating officer with Service Source. As a Service Source employee for two decades, Ken has expertise in management of large operational programs and community rehabilitation services. Over the years, he has been involved in many elements of Service Source programs including day and employment services, overseeing complex AbilityOne contracts and senior leadership. He has sewn success in building creative programs and partnerships to advance community‑based services to change the lives of program participants, their families and ultimately the communities in which they live. So welcome, Ken. And we have Missy Crawford‑Smith. Missy is a program manager with Service Source and certified as a community partner work incentives counselor. Missy has worked with Service Source for over 15 years. As an experienced work and service counselor she provides information about work and benefits and assists individuals with abilities to obtain self‑sufficiency and financial independence through work incentive counseling.

Passing it back on to you, Tom. I went to the next slide.

>> Tom Foley: Thanks, Cheyenne. Welcome ‑‑ again, welcome to "Ready and ABLE to Work and Save." Again, this is a two‑part event, today and Thursday. Today, we're going to talk about ABLE accounts and then really look forward to talking with Ken and Missy a little later. To let's go to the next slide. So today's presentation, we're going to introduce tax‑advantaged ABLE accounts and resources and hopefully answer some questions that we normally get when we start talking about ABLE accounts. We are going to answer what are ABLE accounts, who is eligible for them, why they are so important, and how they are opened, managed, funded and used, and then we're going to sort of wrap up by providing resources for both employers and service providers to be able to help them to integrate ABLE accounts into their offerings. Let's go to the next slide.

ABLE accounts. Here we go, next slide. ABLE legislation and financial independence. So I will never forget this day in December of 2014, when President Obama signed ABLE accounts into law. I often tell the story, I was with a different disability organization at the time, but the two, two and a half years previous to this, I remember, you know, running from one meeting on the hill to another meeting at the Hill, and I and NDI staff and lots of other disability advocates would just sort of cross each other in the hall. Again, this is a great time to say thank you. I know a number of people on this webinar and a number of people participating in this webinar from activists to advocates to employers did a lot of work to get ABLE across the finish lion, so thank you for that.

ABLE accounts allow an estate to create special tax‑advantaged savings accounts for people with disabilities. This involves many people with disabilities, sometimes for the first time ever, to save more than $2,000 and not ‑‑ and maintain their eligibility for needs‑based benefits. I mentioned I had been on SSI. I'll never forget when I was back in college in 19‑something, the one thing I had always wanted to do was buy a house, and this was long before ABLE accounts. I remember I was on SSI and working part‑time and just about every dollar I saved, I saved for a down payment for a house. And, you know, I remember about a year and a half later, you know, going to the bank. It was in February, it was dark and I was, you know, crossing the mean streets of Berkeley, California, with tens of thousands of dollars in cash because there was no other way that I could save money for a down payment and, fortunately, now, thanks to ABLE accounts, people don't have to do that. So ABLE accounts, I'm the guy you never want to be caught next to at a cocktail party. I'll talk to you about ABLE accounts until the cows come home, but a super exciting opportunity for people with disabilities, again, sometimes to save safely for the first time ever. Let's go to the next slide.

What is an ABLE account? An ABLE account allows a person with a qualifying disability that begins prior to their 26th birthday, they can open a tax‑advantaged 529 ABLE account in their own name, and it allows them to save and invest money, it could be their money, it could be employment money, it could be money from family and friends, and it could be income tax, it could be benefits, you know, any cash, use those funds to pay for a wide variety of disability‑related expenses and maintain those hard‑won disability benefits.

One note to this, I said with the disability prior to age 26, last December, a piece of legislation was passed called the ABLE Age Adjustment Act. So starting in January of 2026, the eligibility will expand to people with a disability onset before age 46.

So let's go to the next slide. So who is ABLE eligible? So these tax‑advantaged ABLE savings or investment accounts are owned by a person with a Social Security number or a tax I.D. number who has a disability or is blind and that those ‑‑ the blindness or the disability began before age 26. Two things I want to point out here, in addition to having a disability, if you receive supplemental Social Security or Social Security Disability Income, that is also dispositive of having a disability. So you can either be someone who is receiving these benefits or ‑‑ and this is really important that you have a written and signed certification from a doctor.

So the thing I want to point out here is one of the things I hear quite often from people in the community is, oh, I don't receive benefits, so I'm not eligible for an ABLE account. You don't need to be receiving any benefits to open an ABLE account, you just have to have disability onset, you know, before age 26 and, therefore, be eligible and have the letter from a doctor or self‑certified.

One of the things that we're going to talk a lot about today is also our ABLE decision guides. So, again, I'm here representing ABLE National Resource Center today or ABLENRC.org. We have a series of ABLE decision guides that really help take people through many of the decision pieces of opening an ABLE account. So am I ABLE eligible is one of the guides you can see at ABLE NRC.

So continuing who can open an ABLE account. Here's another piece of information people are always confused by. We said that the disability onset need to be before age 26, but if that is true for you, you can open an account at any point. You can open at 20, 30, 50, 60 years old, doesn't matter. So as long as the disability onset is before age 26, you can open an account at any point. You can only have one ABLE account, and they tend to be opened in this order: By the individual with a disability, by someone the person with a disability selects ‑‑ could be an agent under a power of attorney or some sort of legal guardian, spouse, parent, grandparent could open one as well, and even a representative payee can ‑‑ or organization can open it. Again, here is a really handy decision guide available through ABLENRC.org, selecting and opening an ABLE account can take people through the decision matrix.

Why are ABLE accounts so important? So, given what most of us do for a living that are on this webinar, this will come as no surprise, but there are extra costs that come with living with a disability. We did some research here at NDI a couple of years ago and, on average, people with disabilities spend about 29% more income than their non‑disabled peers to reach the same level of independence as their non‑disabled peers. Given median household income these days, it's more than $18,000. Obviously people with disabilities have additional expenses. Could be a personal assistant, guide dog, a modify van, it could be something as simple as living closer to your place of work, where it might be more expensive to rent or own. So people with disabilities, you know, run into higher levels of expense and, so, an ABLE account is something that can really help ‑‑ help offset some of these expenses.

Let's go to the next slide. So why are ABLE accounts important? So you can save up to $100,000 in an ABLE account, an those dollars will be disregarded as a resource for purposes of SSI. So let me say that again ‑‑ you can save up to $100,000 in an ABLE account, and they will not be counted as a resource for purposes of SSI. But even more importantly than that, depending on the program ‑‑ remember, these are state‑based programs, so some of these numbers differ a little bit ‑‑ but anywhere between $235,000 and $550,000, depending on the State program, you don't have to worry about any benefit effect for SSDI, housing assistance related to HUD, Supplemental Nutrition Assistance or SNAP, Free Application for Federal Student Aid, Medicare A, B, C and D or any type of Medicaid benefit including Medicaid waiver services. That was a lot but we have the handy decision guide about ABLE and public benefits you can check out at ABLENRC.org.

Next slide, why are ABLE accounts important? ABLE accounts are also tax advantaged. So the money that you put into an ABLE account are post‑tax dollars, and the money can accumulate interest or ‑‑ so the principal and interest can be invested and the earnings on those dollars is used what we consider tax free as long as they're used for disability‑related expenses. You can withdraw money from an ABLE account and these investments at anytime without penalty as long as you're using them for disability‑related expenses. This part is really cool. You can receive contributions into the account from family, friends, special needs trusts, pool trusts. Roll over money from a 529 college savings account. It is a great retirement vehicle.

For those of you who know a little bit about retirement planning, this basically operates like a Roth, so the money you put into it or after‑tax dollars, the money accumulates tax free and, as long as you use the money for disability‑related expenses, those dollars, you know, remain tax free. Let's go to the next slide.

So, who offers ABLE accounts? So much like 529 college savings accounts, these are offered by states and, right now, they are offered in 45 different states. So you can open an account in those 45 states. If you are ABLE eligible, you can open an ABLE account in any state that accepts outside residents. So I'm here in Washington, D.C. So if I wanted to open up a California ABLE account, I could do that because California accepts outside residents. Again, on the ABLE NRC Web site, we have a number of ABLE comparison tools so you can compare up to three different programs at the same time across a number of different variables. You even get to pick which variables are most important to you. Maybe it's investment options, maybe you want something in your own state that might have an extra state benefit to you, but lots of opportunities on ABLENRC.org to be able to compare ABLE accounts and find the one that works best for you and your family.

Let's go to the next slide. How do you open an ABLE account? So most accounts are opened online. Again, because these are set up by the State and usually run through the State Treasurer's office, you can go through them online. That being said, if alternatives are needed, you can contact individual ABLE accounts for alternatives if needed. Once the account is open, the person with the disability can allow other people to have basically varying levels of access to the account. You could have people authorized to take certain actions on the account. Again, for more information on this, we have a decision guide called selecting and opening an ABLE account. Another one called managing your ABLE account. And you can find those at ABLENRC.org.

Let's go to the next slide and get down to the nitty gritty. So how do you fund an ABLE account? Well, first of all, you can put up to $17,000 a year into an ABLE account, and it can be contributed by the person with a disability or their friends or family, again, a special needs or pool trust, 529 account rollover. That $17,000 is also tied to the gift tax amount. So whenever you hear about the gift tax amount going up, so, too, will the annual contribution to ABLE accounts.

But for those people with disabilities who have an ABLE account and are not parts ‑‑ and are working and are not participating in an employer‑sponsored retirement plan, they can contribute additional dollars. So, in general, in the continental U.S. that's about 13,500 in addition. Alaska and Hawaii have slightly different numbers because of the cost of living there. Alaska over $16,000 and Hawaii $15,600. Taking a step back, that would allow a person with a disability who is working to contribute more than $13,000 a year, have that money ‑‑ $30,000 a year, have that money grow tax‑free, you know, to build for, you know, a better financial and economic future.

We have a decision guide that talks a lot more about this as well, finding funds to contribute to your ABLE account. Lots of interesting opportunities in there, everything from, you know, employment dollars to family to crowd funding to even filing for their earned income tax credit. It's one of my favorite guides.

Let's go to the next slide. So we're putting money into our ABLE account. It's hopefully gaining some interest and growing over time. What can you save for or purchase? So this gets a little technical, but don't worry. It's not as technical as it first seems. So what can you save for? So ABLE funds can be used to pay for items or services that are related to an individual's beneficiary's blindness or disability or for the benefit of that person with a disability. Then check out this next line ‑‑ maintaining or improving his health, independence or quality of life.

So while these are the qualified disability expenses, so this is ‑‑ we're going to talk about a list in a minute, but, according to the regulations, this is something that should be broadly understood and not limited to, you know, just something that is medically necessity ‑‑ a medical necessity or something that doesn't provide a benefit to other people. So, again, anything that includes quality of life or for the benefit of the beneficiary improves health, independence or quality of life. Again, very broadly interpreted there.

One of the examples I like to have is, you know, even if somebody else receives a benefit from it ‑‑ if I buy a car and it's easier for me to get around and my wife wants to use the car, that would be a permissible expense.

Let's go to the next slide. Other things that you can save for. So enumerated in the statute are education, basic expenses including food and shelter. That could be anything related to food or shelter. Housing, transportation, rent, utilities, purchase of a home, property taxes, transportation, employment, training and support. Figure sort of related to assistive technology, personal support services and healthcare services. Legal fees, funeral. Again, we have a handy dandy decision guide that allows you to determine whether or not something is going to be a qualified disability related expense. So that is very much just a partial list. Again, we have the guidance that the statute should be interpreted broadly. And, so, you know, lots of things, you know, can fall under a disability‑related ‑‑ qualified disability‑related expense.

Next slide. Additional reasons to save in an ABLE account. An ABLE account would allow someone to spend down because ABLE deposits could reduce countable resources for SSI and Medicaid eligibility. There's also no lookback for contributions made to an ABLE account for purposes of Medicaid eligibility as well. Then, lastly, you know, not only is this a great way for people to, you know, save for the future and buy assets, you know, an accessible van or homeownership, something like that, but also to have, you know, emergency ‑‑ to provide for emergencies. We know from some of our data, particularly in California, that a lot of people with disabilities, in the event of a natural disaster, don't have financial resources they can fall back on when they really need it so ABLE accounts can really cover a wide variety of expenses and needs for folks with disabilities. In addition, it can provide other supports and services. Basically, you know, anything related to the person's quality of life.

So, again, personally, just a huge fan of ABLE accounts, particularly bringing them into the work environment. And, so, I want to invite Ken to join us. Let's go to the next slide. Let's hear from our panel.

So, Ken, welcome and we really appreciate you being here today and welcome.

>> Ken Crum: All right, well, thank you.

>> Tom Foley: Can you share a little bit more about your organization and mission for those who aren't really familiar and kind of highlight, you know, your intersection at service ‑‑ between service and employment?

>> Ken Crum: Sure. Before I do that, I want to give thanks for the invite to be here and be able to participate. Tom, we cerebral share your passion around ABLE accounts. I'm going to seek you out at that cocktail party and I'm sure we'll have some really robust discussions on ABLE and really want to thank your whole team at NDI and the ABLE National Resource Center over the years as we build a book of information for folks we serve to educate and promote ABLE accounts. I want to thank Kim and Kate for joining today and for their longstanding support of ABLE accounts. I truly believe they're a powerful tool to support the individuals we serve. So, you know, in terms of a brief overview of Service Source, we're seven non‑profit agencies that provide receivables and sources to people with disabilities and others we serve in the community. As part of this, we provide a whole range of services based on community needs, including direct employment, job development and place summits. Youth employment programs, supports to veterans, services to older adults, housing programs and many other specialized services based on community need. Last year in total we collectively supported over 32,000 people across our offices located in Virginia, North Carolina, Florida, Delaware and Utah, then we provide employment programs in many more states across the country. Much of what we do is anchored in employment, both through the federal AbilityOne program and working with others to help employers achieve job outcomes and success. Given that, you ask what makes Service Source unique? It's not only in our wide range of services but also our commitment to providing the full range of supports to help individuals thrive and be successful in the community. You know, as part of this, we've had a long‑standing commitment and ability to provide what I see is very sophisticated benefits counseling, whether the person is an employee of ours or not. We've committed and have many certified work incentive counselors also known as CWICS on our team. Missy who is on the panel and joining me is one of those. Also we have been providing work incentive planning services known as WIPA in multiple states in which we operate. So very well versed in financial planning and assistance. But we also support people we serve with other services that are also common barriers such as transportation, housing, peer supports, training, and really anything else that really could be categorized as a holistic need. So I would say that, in terms of the Service Source motto, we really stand out. It's one focused on supporting all of the components to help someone be successful both in the workplace and in the community.

>> That's great and we really appreciate what you do for so many folks with disabilities.

You know, you mentioned the services and the benefits planning and the WIPA. How did ABLE accounts get under your radar?

>> That's a good question. We've had a long‑standing relationship with might have had and worked closely with your predecessor Michael Moore since the late '90s. We're partnered with NDI on a number of programs to include financial empowerment, various training programs through the years, and I would say Michael really helped introduce us to the achieving a better life experience act or ABLE. And the impact, at that time, that we thought it would have on employees and the people we serve, and, so, we started tracking on it back in 2014, and tracked it through legislative advocacy work and we're thrilled when Congress did pass that ABLE act. At that point, we then engaged with your team at NDI to help train our team of benefits counselors to support what we see as a tool. So we helped developed resources and immediately incorporated ABLE into those discussions as we were going through benefits counseling with people and families that we were serving, as well as try to create more formal avenues for spreading the word about ABLE accounts such as benefits counseling and webinars and these types of things. So I guess the short answer is, as soon as Congress passed ABLE back in 2014, we tried to help start spreading the word on what we see as tremendous benefits and helping to connect people and how to establish and leverage these ABLE accounts as tools for savings.

>> Tom Foley: Absolutely. A related question, can you talk about how you and other leadership services, you know, saw a fit of ABLE accounts with your mission?

>> Ken Crum: Yeah, I think, you know, being an employer, that was pretty easy. There's a clear connection between the people we serve each day and the employment outcomes. And ABLE accounts being used as such a tool promoting self‑sufficiency while maintaining the quality of life. Specifically on quality of life, when you're supporting an individual who might be receiving Medicaid or a Medicaid waiver or SSI, as you mentioned in chairing your own experience, there are resources that come into play. By leveraging the ABLE accounts, it helps provide the opportunity to save while also maintaining the important benefits and the assistance that they very much need. And, so, you know, we saw and continue to see ABLE accounts as a powerful tool to help expand the supports for our employees as well as others we're serving in the community. See this as a way to enhance services, positively impacting quality of life and also financial well being.

We were excited about the opportunities ABLE accounts presented to encourage individuals with disabilities to save for future goals and provide for current needs. Overall, I see ABLE accounts as something that's very important and that, you know, as we educate folks, those individuals and families, they will also see how it can help support, you know, the people we're serving to work without impacting the supports and serves that are so essential for their well being. Holistically, I think it's quite a tool. The limits are quite high that allow for savings. It's not the full answer. I mean, there's still lots of work to be done in advocacy. I know, you know, Kate and the whole access team is tracking on, you know, earnings limits and how we can still continue to improve the system of Social Security benefits to help support working while also receiving those benefits that are much needed, but I do think that ABLE accounts are one leg of the stool that help provide supports for the individuals we're specific. You know, employment, savings and obviously working to raise those caps around earnings.

>> Tom Foley: That makes total sense. So, you talked about this a little bit, but can you share a little bit more about how you first, you know, got more info about ABLE and how you've sort of shared that information across your organization?

>> Ken Crum: Yeah, so I mentioned NDI, and I think much to have the success I've seen us have in helping promote the ABLE accounts has been in partnership with NDI and the ABLE resource center. And, so, through this partnership and the resources that you all have available, you know, I think we've really been able to educate folks on ABLE and leverage some of the collateral. You mentioned the Web sites and the videos, I know the webinar will be posted there. A lot of that is so helpful when you're working with an individual or family and Missy will expand more on this, but it's how you educate and how you help folks see the benefit. One of the things we've done, for example, is our Human Resources team. As we're onboarding new employees, we often refer folks who may ‑‑ we identified that may benefit from ABLE accounts over to the benefit counseling team and our internal counselors to help screen for eligibility and provide that information on ABLE accounts so that they know what the options are that may be able to help support them for savings. So it becomes part of that onboarding process.

Again, I mentioned earlier this holistic view of supporting your employees, and this becomes one of the tools, you know, along with retirement savings, which I do think it's somewhat of a balancing act. I mean, we have a strong commitment at Service Source to help support our employees for savings for retirement, but, at the same time, as you've talked about in your overview, ABLE accounts provide really an alternative approach to saving that, when you look at those resource limits, it's really important that folks understand how this tool can be used for managing savings and maintaining benefits. So I expect Missy will share more about the particulars of this, but it is something that, you know, our counselors are very well versed in, an it's part of that discussion that we have with folks when we're working with them on that decision‑making process.

I'll also share we've created internal resources such as flyers with ABLE information that we share with people, we're promoting benefits for ABLE accounts at town hall meetings and webinars, the operational perhaps, the AbilityOne contracts, supporting individuals out in the work environment with other employers, all with the goal of helping outline and answer questions they may have.

We leverage our team of rehabilitation staff that are supporting the people we serve, and they refer many of our AbilityOne employees to benefits counselors through the ticket to work program to address concerns they may have and ABLE accounts are often part of that discussion to open opportunities to help save for current and future goals rather than having, and you mentioned this, spend down savings to maintain benefits necessary for self‑sufficiency and quality of life.

So it's all about supporting the people we serve in that holistic way, you know, creating opportunities for information to be shared through materials and other platforms while also leveraging benefits counseling supports. So I think we've had some good success in sharing the information, I'd like to think, and it's really a way that helps promote the benefits of ABLE accounts in the people we serve.

>> Tom Foley: I love that. One of the things, even putting disability aside, that we hear from employers all the time is the focus on really supporting employees and supporting staff around making better financial decisions, saving for retirement, all the things you mentioned. I love the 3% match. Who doesn't love free money when you're saving for retirement, right?

>> Ken Crum: Right, exactly.

>> Tom Foley: Gosh, you mentioned so much. What sort of ABLE‑related outcomes are you seeing at this point or do you hope for?

>> Ken Crum: Yeah, it's a good question. I think, quite simply, we're seeing growth in ABLE accounts, which is a good thing, right. We've talked about all these benefits. Employees and others we serve are opening accounts. Our support team is recognizing the benefits of ABLE accounts and making those referrals, when we recognize that there may be employees who would benefit from the ABLE account. We've supported and referred close to 200 employees to ABLE accounts. And, so, you know, what excites me about our outcomes, I think, is that we're seeing the benefits of our education efforts, right, so that not only with the individuals and families we serve, but also within our teams to be able to identify and help provide the supports to prevent folks from losing eligibility for the programs they need, whether it's Medicaid, Medicaid waiver or SSI.

We're also seeing outcomes on collaboration around ABLE. For example, in Virginia, we have been working with vocational rehabilitation staff to cross promote the Virginia ABLE program which is a really powerful program when look at the 45 states. That was news to me. I didn't know 45 states now have programs, which is really great to hear. But through a platform that the state V.R. staff has called cafe VA, they can help individuals get set up and fund resources into their accounts and also provide financial empowerment training. So it's in partnership with state V.R. to help educate on savings accounts for people we are mutually serving. In North Carolina we are part of a benefits counseling expansion project where Service Sources providing benefits counseling training which is a train the trainer type arrangement and providing ongoing support to staff of other non‑profit agencies at no cost. So those trainings are provided by one of our experienced CWICs. So we're seeing good outcomes in partnering in programs.

We're excited about the ABLE Age Adjustment Act Congress approved last December which expands eligibility for ABLE accounts to an estimated 6 million more Americans which includes a million veterans by raising age onset from 26 to 46 starting in 2026. It's still a ways out but I expect it will fully increase the impact of ABLE, enabling people with disabilities to take advantage of these accounts. So I'm really excited about the progress that's been made since 2014 and, you know, really what I see is successful efforts to promote and expand use of these benefits through the ABLE accounts.

>> Tom Foley: That's great. Thanks and thanks for all you do for folks with disabilities and employment.

Missy, let's shift over to you. Can you share a little bit of an overview of the services that you provide and some of the jobs folks have acquired through Service Source?

>> Yes, hello. My name is Missy. I work with Service Source. I wear a lot of hats at Service Source and benefit counseling falls into a lot of different areas. So I am a certified community partner, work incentive coordinator, and I do benefit counseling for our employees, participants, families. I work a little bit on the North Carolina program where we're training their agencies, and also in the ticket to work programs.

Benefits counseling really consists of helping people understand how work may impact benefits and discussing work incentives which are really just special work rules that have been created that people can take advantage of. I work with a lot of people. So people can come with almost any job. A lot of our employees that we employ are going to be more on that AbilityOne mentioned earlier, so general clerks, general maintenance, food sevens workers, janitors, contract closeout, help desk, customer service, but, really, it could be any job out there. Someone could, if that you have the qualifications, get and come and ask about how it looks with benefits.

>> Tom Foley: Great, and thank you for that. So I'm curious, with all the different hats that you wear, can you talk a little bit about how ABLE accounts sort of fit into your work and, you know, how you sort of message that to employees that might be eligible for an ABLE account?

>> Missy Crawford‑Smith: Sure. Been in Service Source 15 years, benefit counseling for 13 years ‑‑ which seems like a lifetime at this point ‑‑ and as a benefit counselor I get referrals from a lot of places, so from VOC rehab, vocational rehab, Medicaid favors, I do favors through them and then internally through Service Source.

So I actually remembered pre‑ABLE. I was doing benefit counseling before ABLE was passed. As a benefits counselor, when it finally went through, we all rejoiced because finally we had a solution to a problem that was always continuing, an ABLE really solved that problem for us. So ABLE fits in. I talk about ABLE with everyone I work with, participants, service or staff people we employ, because it fits a lot into the benefits counseling piece.

>> Tom Foley: I'm curious, when you are talking with people about ABLE, how do you blend in ‑‑ when do you blend it in and how do you suggest to people that they use their account and how do you sort of introduce it?

>> Missy Crawford‑Smith: Sure. So I think you said a lot of what I'm going to repeat. But someone doesn't have to be working to have ABLE. But as a benefits counselor, the people I do see tend to be people who are working, planning for work. I get a lot of, oh, no, I have a job offer, can you help me, what's this going to look like, calls. So, also, as Ken was mentioning, our H.R. refers people over. So as the referrals come for our new hires, people are making a lot of decisions about life when they start a job. So we start looking at the wages, the benefits they're getting and what the job is offering also in terms of benefits. So ABLE typically comes into the discussion about the time you're talking about the benefits and the benefit income limits and resource limits.

So ABLE helps, as you mention, provide a solution to that resource limit for people with those means‑based benefits. And resources are really anything that can be turned into cash to be paid for food and shelter. So when you're looking at resources it can be cash, money saved in the banking account, it can be retirement accounts, stocks, land, life insurance, really anything that can be cashed out and turned into cash to pay for things, you know, SSI, supplemental security income, Medicaid, Medicaid waiver, SNAP, are going to look into. ABLE comes as we're talking about these benefits people are getting as a solution because, you know, Service Source, a lot of these AbilityOne positions, we're paying a very good wage. People want to save money and this is an option for them so that they can have savings and not get into trouble. It really provides that solution.

Another thing we do look at, especially with the Service Source referrals internally, is kind of comparing. Service Source does offer that retirement 403b account, but also ABLE, and they can do both. Depending on the benefits, they may need to choose which route they want to take. So ABLE doesn't offer the employee match like the retirement accounts do, but it does have places you can save money into various saving accounts or investing in growth portfolios. I can't tell you how many times I've brought up my State's ABLE account Web site and say here's where you can invest, it's not just a savings account. Depending on your risk tolerance, you can put it in the market. I do bring up the ABLE account Web site a lot during our meetings. Talking about, also, ABLE tracking, spending with the quality of disability expenses. But, really, what it really boils down to when I'm working with people is really looking at those resource limits and talking about the savings and this is a good option for saving.

>> Tom Foley: Absolutely. You said something that piqued my interest. You were talking about the good jobs through Service Source. In your experience, how can ABLE accounts support employment or, you know, employment‑related goals?

>> Missy Crawford‑Smith sure: Able accounts, as you mentioned in your intro, can be spent on qualified disability‑related expenses, which is very, very broad. I like to give credit to how broad that is. But as far as employment goes, it can be the transportation to and from work. A lot of people are taking specialized transportation for people with disabilities. It's a fair amount more expensive. Or Uber or things like that that are more costly. You can spend it on employment training or support. If somebody needs job support, they can use their ABLE account to fund that. Assistive technology, if it's not being provided by the employer or V.R., it's definitely something that can easily help support employment or success. Healthcare expenses, you know. When you start looking at employment, you realize there is a whole person, and maybe healthcare expenses don't relate to employment but they do because you need to be healthy and get the medications and therapies they need.

Cell phone bill is another thing that doesn't necessarily say this is employment related, but, honestly, we all need a cell phone to be able to talk to an employer, supervisor, those kinds of things.

The other thing is, like we mentioned, I've seen ABLE accounts being used to save for retirement as the option that helps support employment and employment‑related goals.

>> Tom Foley: Has there been one success story at ABLE employment that jumps out at you?

>> Missy Crawford‑Smith: Sure. I'm going to call him Arnold, referred to me from benefit counseling services from our vocational rehab. He accepted a position as job coach at Service Source. Helped him look for work, able to get him a job at Service Source and he's going to be a mail clerk or general clerk at the Department of Transportation. He was referred to me, which is kind of convenient, he had a job offer but wait awaiting his government clearance which is my favorite time to talk to people because you really can look at all the nitty gritties. I met with Arnold and Arnold wanted his parents to join because they help him with his financial decisions. So we met and the first thing we did was assess his work earnings. So we looked at the pay rate, how many hours was this job offered, and it came out that he was going to be earning around $1,400 a month, you know, 17‑some dollars an hour, 20 hours a week, so around $1,400 is what his earnings were going to be. The next thing is we assessed what Arnold's benefits were. Arnold was getting the supplemental security income, and he was on his mom's health insurance. After we assessed those things, I asked the family what their goals are for Arnold and what Arnold's goals are. One of the things they mentioned is, at this point, this is a new job, and they wanted him to be able to say open with Social Security. They didn't mind if the check wasn't coming, but they wanted that backup plan because this was his first job.

So he hadn't worked in a very long time. They weren't sure physically with his disability was he going to be able to maintain it, so they wanted to have the backup plan as they made the transition. The other thing, they wanted to be able to save for future expenses. A lot about what you're talking about, you know. It's not just retirement but what happens during a pandemic, what happens during a national disaster or a car breaks down or something. So just allowing Arnold to save for his future.

Based on that, I did make the suggestion to apply for the ABLE account. We looked, article is 27. He's still with us. Arnold is 27. But he has an intellectual disability, so his disability started before age 26. He was already on Social Security, so he really already met the two criteria to get the ABLE account. We looked at the ‑‑ we actually looked at this, and it's great you mentioned this, at the ABLE National Resource Center Web site to compare State plans. They wanted to know where they could invest the money and the different portfolios. So I pulled up the Web site and we looked at Virginia and D.C. and Maryland, an I sent all of that off to them to compare different plans.

They picked a plan, and they planned that, once he starts working, to do an auto transfer monthly. So, you know, his paycheck is going to get deposited into his personal bank account and, each month, they will have an auto transfer into ABLE to help him save for his future. The outcomes for Arnold is he's able to work, he's able to maintain eligibility for Social Security income, SSI, or supplemental security income through Social Security, and he was able to open an ABLE account to save for his future.

>> Tom Foley: That's great. ABLE to work and save. We should have a webinar about that.

[Laughter]

I love the story and thank you for it. It's also, like, the first time he gets to watch his money grow, right. And, boy, there's nothing like that to really ignite an interest in, you know, money management and financial capability, especially in young people. You know, having the opportunity to be able to watch that money grow, boy, there's nothing like it. That's a great example, thank you.

Gosh, I'm going to stay on time. I have one final question for you, Missy and Ken. I'll start with Missy.

So, given your experience in the ABLE space, what would you tell our audience that, you know, you've learned that you didn't know when you started?

>> Missy Crawford‑Smith: I would say the guides on the National Resource Center have been valuable. The guides the help compare states, the other decision‑making guides on there have been really a great ‑‑ really great to share with families so they can make decisions.

I would say, also, Service Source, we have this in‑house, this benefit counseling piece and it's great that I am able to do this an our team's able to do this, but if somebody out there, you know, isn't connected to a benefit counselor, there are free state programs called WIPA, work assistive planning programs that can help people. ABLE is a piece of a very large picture for people and everyone's picture is unique. So getting the one on one benefits counseling, I highly recommended connecting to your state's, with IPA so you can refer either your clients or if you need it yourself.

Lastly, I would say having the support of senior management, having Ken support this, really makes it easier for me on the ground to be able to provide these services for people. So having upper management involved helps support the mission.

>> That's great, thank you. Ken, I'll ask you the same question. What advice or first steps would you give to the audience that you wish you had known about ABLE, you know, before you got started?

>> Ken Crum: Well, I would say what I wish we had back in 2014 is the wealth of resources right that Missy just stepped through. Your team has really done a fantastic job, Tom, in compiling information through the ABLE national resource center. We do leverage those. I would encourage everyone who is thinking about ABLE accounts. You know, maybe this is new to folks. You know, use those resources that are out there to help educate people. I do think Missy's suggestion of getting engaged with the state in which folks reside as a starting point to at least understand what their ABLE accounts offer, they have information on their own state Web sites to help provide, you know, kind of a road map as to how to get started with ABLE accounts as an individual, as a family member, as someone who just wants to help support an individual with savings. And I do think there's also defenses between the state programs. And, so, there may be some consideration in working with a benefits counselor or the National Resource Center, that maybe there's a consideration of looking at some stronger State programs that have evolved over time. All that leads to a place now, when we started this process back in 2014 when this was all approved, things have really continued to improve and the options are greater, there's tremendous knowledge and support that can help folks who are serving people with decision‑making, and it's really all about that, right. We want to help support the people we serve with the full array of options, with all the information that's available so they can make educated decisions on how best to save and protect those important, you know, benefits and resources they rely so heavily on. That would be my suggestion is to get involved. They are great and powerful tools, ABLE accounts, and I would encourage folks to pursue them, get smart on them and help support the people we all serve.

>> Tom Foley: Thank you, that's great. First of all, thanks to both of you for being here today and talking about your ABLE journey, but even more importantly, thanks for what you do every day for folks with disabilities who are getting jobs and building financial futures. You know, I know that's what Service Source is all about, that's what NDI is all about. And, you know, as we said when we started, you know, I know we have a long way to go, but we're at the highest rate of disability employment in the history of the country, an it's because of folks like you and programs like this, so, thank you, it's really a privilege to be working with you.

>> Ken Crum: Same here, Tom. Appreciate your efforts. Tom Foley: Big shout out to the ABLE team. Marlene and Laurie and Ken do a great job. You think I'm passionate about ABLE accounts, these guys have done a great job. Check out the resources. We'll talk more about those as we move forward as well. So thank you again.

Let's prove to the next slide. So opportunities to share information. So we broke this down in a couple of different ways. Obviously, there are a lot of employers here. There are ways to provide ABLE information that Ken and Missy talked about that I talked about. You know, when information is provided to the entire workforce annually, you know, if there's an Employee Resource Group, disability‑related Employee Resource Group, we get a lot of traction around ABLE. For a couple of reasons. Obviously, there are people with disabilities in the Employee Resource Group. But sometimes it's a parent or a sibling, they have never heard of ABLE accounts. Sometimes it's a person with a hidden disability who hasn't disclosed their disability yet so that's a great place to talk about ABLE as well. Part of the onboarding process, letting folks know about ABLE accounts, really powerful savings tool. Up to $17,000 a year, tax‑advantaged, and you can tap it for disability‑related expenses. Anytime an employee might contact H.R. for, you know, asking for assistance changing or choosing an option, but, also, we want to make sure that we did some thinking about service providers as well. Again, as Missy said, obviously a great place to bring up ABLE accounts during any benefit counseling opportunities with folks dure a periodic wellness ‑‑ during a periodic wellness check or making sure an employee is progressing without problems toward their career goals. Anytime there might be a check at some sort of transition point, so maybe a promotion, increased hours, something like that, another great time to mention ABLE accounts.

If somebody is getting a promotion or earnings will be going up, may they would be able to better contribute to an ABLE account.

Obviously, remember savings to retirement ‑‑ obviously, regular savings to retirement accounts. Also, when encouraging people to file income taxes, one of the things we know at NDI is there are a number of people with disabilities who may not have a filing requirement but could benefit from filing their taxes for the earned income tax credit. So lots of opportunities to be able to mention ABLE accounts for folks with disabilities.

So let's go to the next slide. Here are a few changes. There are options that an employer could offer. The option to open an ABLE account, we have that at NDI. The opportunity to make a contribution to that ABLE account, that would be, you know, taxable income to the person with the disability, but if you go straight into their ABLE account and start earning interest or earnings oaf time. Allow a certain portion of wages to be directed every pay period to the ABLE account. Ken, both you and Missy talked about that. An, obviously, the option to offer benefits counseling to employees to make sure that they are supported in the choices that they make.

So let's go to the next slide. ABLE resources. We've got you covered on this. Let's go to the ABLE success slide. So one of the things that ‑‑ these are photographs of our ABLE ambassadors. These are a small sampling of them. ABLE ambassadors are folks with disabilities or family members who have ABLE accounts who really share their success stories. So we have folks that have bought vehicles, power wheelchairs, homes with their ABLE account, and it's really ‑‑ check these out ‑‑ it's really inspirational and exciting to see how people have used ABLE accounts to improve their lives in the way, you know, in the ways that are important to them. You know, maybe it's homeownership, maybe it's a really cool accessible van, but, you know, folks with disabilities get to pick what's important to them and stay toward that goal.

Let's go to the next slide. ABLE decision guide series. As we talked about the whole presentation, we have all sorts of ABLE decision guides to help you through various parts of the ABLE process. They go step by step, and they have multiple pathways to various outcomes. So it can really help people make better decisions that really work from them. ABLE eligible. Understanding benefits, managing an ABLE account, finding fund to save in an ABLE account is really important as well. Discovering whether something is a qualify disability expense. Lots of different ABLE decision guides that folks have access to.

Let's go to the next slide. Again, our Web site is ABLE national resource center or ABLE NRC.org. So, again, we have decision guides there. We have more information about the ABLE program and a lot of those comparison tools that I and Missy were talking about earlier, lots of FAQs. So there are FAQs for ABLE account owners, there are FAQs for family members. We even have podcasts around ABLE, webinars, as Cheyenne mentioned, this webinar will be archived and put up on the Web site. We also have a newsletter. So please, please, please, e one sign up for our ABLE newsletter. Our achievable newsletter. You can sign up for that on our Web site.

We have toolkits. We have a service provider toolkit, employer toolkit and an outreach toolkit to communities of color.

Let's go to the next slide. This is a one‑page flier on ABLE NRC. Through the magic of technology there is a QR code, if you hold your phone up to that, it will take you to that ABLE NRC flier. So it's a way you can download it to your device so you can ‑‑ let's go to the next slide ‑‑ help spread the word about ABLE.

Taking a step back, we've heard from Ken and Missy about how ABLE accounts have impacted people's lives. At ABLE NRC we've seen through ABLE ambassadors and countless stories how being able to save has helped people with disabilities be more financial resilient, build assets, build a better financial future. So, at ABLE NRC, you can connect with us through social media, you can seen up for our newsletter. I would be remiss ‑‑ let's go to the next slide ‑‑ if I didn't mention joining us Thursday for part two of "Ready and ABLE to Work and Save: Part 2" is from Thursday to 3:00 p.m., we're offering a technical assistance office hour. Everyone who spoke today will be there, also ABLE experts from ABLE NRC including Marlene and Laurie. So any opportunity for employers and service providers who participated in this to, you know, ask any questions that you may have. Please make sure that you are registered for part two. We really hope to see you there on Thursday.

Let's go to the next slide, and I'd really love to bring in Kate and Kim and Ken and Missy. I want to thank ABLE NRC for inviting me to be a part of this today, thank our funders Prudential and JPMorgan Chase & Co., but most of all Ken, Kate, Kim, Missy, thank you so much for being here today. But, also, again, thank you for what you do. Because of you guys, every day, we are changing the lives of people with disabilities. Hope to see all of you Thursday. Thank you, everyone, for being here today and thank you for all you do. Without all 500 of you doing what you do, the employment number wouldn't look like it does today. Please make sure that you know your work is important, your work is critical and your work is changing the lives of folks with disabilities. Thank you for being here today. It's been a pleasure.