Speaker 1:

Welcome to the Keys to Financial Inclusion Podcast, brought to you by National Disability Institute Center for Disability-Inclusive Community Development. Hear from thought leaders in the disability and financial communities who will share insights, analysis and emerging strategies to improve and increase investing, lending and service activities for people with disabilities. And now, here's your host, Michael Morris.

Michael Morris:

Welcome to the Keys to Financial Inclusion Podcast series. I'm very excited today to have not one guest, but three guests who have worked together in really demonstrating to people in St. Louis and really across the country, what is the meaning of inclusive community development. We have three guests today, Aimee Wehmeier, who is the President at Paraquad, one of the first grassroots and advocacy centers for independent living in the United States. We also have Jeff Mazur, who is the Executive Director of LaunchCode, a St. Louis based national nonprofit that is building the tech workforce by providing free training and job placement to individuals who may lack traditional credentials, including individuals with disabilities. And our third guest is from the financial sector, Kathy Lovell is with Regions Bank and the Manager of Disability Services and Outreach and part of the Community Affairs Department. Kathy has been not just a leader where Regions is based in Birmingham, Alabama, but really has been a thought leader inspiring and influencing bankers and others in the financial sector across the country.

Michael Morris:

So welcome. I appreciate all three of you being with us today on this podcast series. The first question to Aimee. Aimee, can you tell our audience a little bit more about Paraquad? What is it doing to promote careers and good paying jobs for people with disabilities?

Aimee Wehmeier:

Sure. First of all, thanks for the opportunity to be here today. Paraquad champions equity and independence for people with disabilities. And it's challenging to talk about equity and independence without talking about employment and the barriers to employment for people with disabilities. So many people are trapped in a cycle of poverty that really can only be impacted through education and employment. So we do lots of things, we are promoting careers in good paying jobs through advocating at the Capitol for system change that will allow people with disabilities to work and still receive the benefits that they need to manage their disability and to live independently. Just because you have a disability should not mean that you must live in poverty.

Aimee Wehmeier:

In addition, we provide skill building and job training opportunities for youth with disabilities and adults, which includes the LaunchCode program, and then we also work with individuals with disabilities and employers to match skills, abilities and interests with employer needs. People with disabilities are incredibly talented untapped resource for employers. And then probably maybe the biggest piece that we do is we educate the community about people with disabilities and the gaps in equity and inclusion. For me, the biggest barriers for people with disabilities are definitely low expectations and biases.

Michael Morris:

Excellent. I have a much better understanding of the important work you're doing at Paraquad. Let me turn to our second guest, Jeff Mazur, who is the Executive Director of LaunchCode. LaunchCode, as I understand it, although you're based in St. Louis you're working nationwide. Can you tell our audience a little bit about the very innovative and impactful work LaunchCode is doing?

Jeff Mazur:

Thanks, Mike. And it's great to be here with Aimee and Kathy to talk about this. LaunchCode is a non-profit organization just right about eight years old. And we were formed by a guy who found trouble in his own business. He was trying to hire people to do software development work in his hometown of St. Louis and found pretty quickly that he couldn't find enough people with the skillset that he needed to succeed and he ultimately had to move that piece of his business to Silicon Valley. But it spurred in him this really foundational fundamental question that led him to start LaunchCode, and that is, there's all this need among the employers of every region for people who have these skills and a lot of people who'd love to do this work, where's the disconnect? How can we do something that will allow people who perhaps don't have the traditional background for a technology career gain the skills that are necessary to move into those careers?

Jeff Mazur:

So he founded LaunchCode, the basic premise of which was work with employers to understand their needs for junior technology talent and then provide skilling in technology in ways that get around the traditional barriers to accessing those skills. And the big barriers are cost. The traditional ways by which someone enters these careers usually over history, a four-year computer science degree, very costly, takes quite a while, or maybe a bootcamp that costs not as much as a degree, but might cost $12,000, $13,000, $20,000.

Jeff Mazur:

And then the other issue is accessibility. How do you deliver skilling programs in a way that speak to people's actual situation in life? Many people can't take themselves out of the workforce or out of serving their family in order to go into a full-time learning program. So LaunchCode's model was built around delivering these skills in a format that would allow people to access them even if they had other responsibilities, other work they were trying to elevate from, other things that kept them from learning full time.

Jeff Mazur:

And over the course of our not quite eight years of existence, I was flipping through our dashboard today where we keep all our data and I noted that we just ticked over 2,600 careers started via LaunchCode over the course of our eight years of existence, which we're really proud of and which I think speaks to the power and importance of the skills that we're delivering and the need for that in the workforce community.

Michael Morris:

Wow, that's quite a success story. I think of different programs I've worked with across the country, those numbers are staggering, that's a tremendous success. All of the staff and you should be congratulated. I must ask you this question, I saw in your bio that you have a law degree from Georgetown University, that's something we share in common, I have a law degree as well. How in the world did you get from would have been, I guess, graduate from law school, practice law, to the head of this incredibly innovative nonprofit, LaunchCode?

Jeff Mazur:

It's a great question. I went pretty quickly from graduating law school and found that my true desire in the world was to help make changes in the world of public policy largely and I spent much of my career working in that space before I had the opportunity in 2015 to come to LaunchCode by virtue of some wonderful people that I had a chance to meet along the way in the early part of my career, who were involved at the beginning with LaunchCode. They said, "Here's this tremendous organization that is focused on helping empower people in ways that you care deeply about and that you've tried to do earlier in your career, why don't you give some thought to come and joining and helping them do what they want to do?" And so I'm fortunate for having had that opportunity and I'm also fortunate that I had the chance to learn in other skills that helped me become probably a better thinker and problem solver through my experience at law school.

Michael Morris:

Excellent. Thank you. Let me turn to Kathy Lovell. Kathy, I have been aware of your work for years now. As I said, you're not just a champion of inclusive community development in the greater Birmingham area, you have an impact throughout not just the footprint of Regions Bank, but other states. What drew you into this work and what really drives your passion around inclusive community development?

Kathy Lovell:

Well, Michael, first of all, thank you for the opportunity and for allowing me to share a little bit about the passion and commitment I have in the space. This started back when the ADA was passed in 1990, and working at a financial institution and figuring out things that we needed to be doing, we should have been doing but we weren't doing, and just along the way, along my journey, I realized that this was really a area that really needed a lot of work to be done. And I've met so many wonderful people along my journey and I just felt like it was one way that I could give back to the communities that we serve and do what is right.

Kathy Lovell:

I don't know, it just evolved and it's just been a wonderful experience. And you look at a job currently that I have and I really don't look at it as a job. It's every day I get up and I think, okay, what can I do to make life better for people with disabilities that should always be included in community? And it's just a passion, a love that I have.

Michael Morris:

Kathy, that's just wonderful. I want to clone you, I want to put your 10 twin sisters in other banks across the country to share that passion and diffuse it across the spirit and the culture of other financial institutions and service companies. Really what the three of you represent is such a unique collaboration which we hope won't be so unique in the future. So I want to ask you about this partnership. I'm going to start with Aimee, collaboration is a key component of inclusive community development, can you share with our audience, how did this collaboration come about between Paraquad and LaunchCode?

Aimee Wehmeier:

Well it's funny, so I didn't actually know all of Jeff's history, but I can tell you I've met Jeff at the Capitol, so I actually got to know him through advocating for the rights of people with disabilities. And so I was super surprised that he had transitioned to the leader of LaunchCode, but through this Jeff explained how he got there and I learned more about the mission of LaunchCode. It really was no surprise, of course, he was continuing the work of removing barriers and creating opportunity for people who have been historically under-representative. And so I was even less surprised when I learned that he would be interested in partnering with Paraquad.

Aimee Wehmeier:

And so our initial conversations, I will say, we didn't necessarily know the how, but we both had the will. We were both very interested in creating new opportunities for people with disabilities in the technology field. And so I think that shared commitment was enough to get the ball rolling. And I think for me personally, this opportunity was particularly meaningful because I've worked in pretty high level jobs and I have a significant disability. And for me, employment has really been the key to really choosing a life that anybody would want in being able to have a future that I'm proud of. And so I think that's where it started from.

Michael Morris:

Wonderful. And of course, this couldn't have happened without the support of Regions Bank, so I want to turn back to you, Kathy. Regions became involved in wanting to support this collaboration between LaunchCode and Paraquad, what intrigues you about this collaboration? And of course, as an example for other banks, this is something you earn Community Reinvestment Act, CRA credits for. What drove you into this partnership and got Regions involved?

Kathy Lovell:

First of all, I had the wonderful opportunity to visit LaunchCode personally and take a tour of their facility, so I was really impressed with their center. But serving on Paraquad's board, which has really been an honor and a pleasure, provided insight into how the Regions Foundation could make a difference in the lives of people with disabilities. And supporting a partnership between Paraquad and LaunchCode just really made a lot of good sense and it supports one of the three pillars that we like to support regarding foundation giving. And so the collaboration provided a unique workforce readiness program, also, the partnership is really solving one of many critical economic issues, providing people with disabilities the workforce readiness skills necessary to seek employment. So once they go through this program, they are ready and willing to launch their career in an amazing opportunity in the technology field. And in total, creating not only the shared value within our communities we serve, but it's really a win-win for all, not only for the bank, but then for Paraquad in LaunchCode. So it was a wonderful collaborative effort that was very unique and very different.

Michael Morris:

Fantastic. And Jeff, as again, part of this collaboration, what are the key lessons you've learned? Was it new for LaunchCode to work with people with disabilities? And did you have to change up your model? How did all that play out?

Jeff Mazur:

Sure. There have been a lot of really terrific lessons that we've learned about how to do things better as a result of this partnership. And I think when the conversation first got started, Aimee asked the question about what our history and our experience was working with people with disabilities in our program. And the experience was anecdotal and not programmatic. So we had experiences with individuals, some of whom had really acute challenges who had been successful in the program, but there was nothing in the program design that was geared towards specifically serving that universe. And so the Paraquad relationship gave us an opportunity really to do that and to figure out what it would look like. And I think one of the lessons or maybe it's a reminder that I'm constantly reminded of by virtue of this terrific Paraquad-LaunchCode partnership is that everyone who we serve has barriers.

Jeff Mazur:

And I say that not to minimize the challenges faced by people with disabilities, which we know can be extreme in some circumstances, but to speak about the fact that what we're really talking about is not something that's necessarily, we're going to do something that's very different for this subset of people, it's really about understanding the barriers that people have and then figuring out how we are best situated to help them resolve those things. And I will tell you, one of the things that I know about our organization, for all our strengths, our strongest suit is never going to be providing services that are specifically around supports for people with disabilities, our strength is always going to be around providing job focused training. By virtue of our partnership with Paraquad who very much does have that skillset, we're able to serve a universe of people who before we were not going to be able to serve very well without that partnership and without that support.

Jeff Mazur:

And so I will tell you that, that model of us working together to identify strong candidates from the Paraquad universe, us providing the job focused scaling and technical training, Paraquad providing other supports that help people overcome the challenges they've had, has been a really powerful model not just in the world of people with disabilities, but we regularly internally at LaunchCode now, we reference this as the Paraquad model and we deploy it with other organizations that have different service universes, right. So it may be people who are dealing with recent immigrants and they have a separate set of non-technical challenges that we want to help them address, and we work with a partner in the same style that we work with Paraquad to address those issues, or people who come from a certain very distinct geographic neighborhood in a part of a city that's underserved, how do we use the Paraquad model to serve these folks in partnership with a different partner?

Jeff Mazur:

And so that's been a really powerful lesson for us to both serve this category of people and serve individuals in powerful ways through the Paraquad partnership, but also learn really impactful ways to deploy that model in other circumstances has been such a wonderful thing for us. And I'm really, really grateful for that.

Michael Morris:

Wonderful. Let me switch our topic a little bit. Of course, the most pervasive issue that has impacted health, and the economy, and individuals and families in terms of their economic stability is COVID. I think at the point we thought we were going to be having this discussion, I was going to ask you about post-COVID and where we are. Unfortunately, we're still talking about COVID and it presents particular challenges to people with disabilities. I think there may be lessons to be learned from how Paraquad and LaunchCode working together to bring people with disabilities into the workplace and into workplaces that value inclusion and diversity. So let me first go to Aimee, and have there been particular challenges? And then how did you work with LaunchCode and perhaps Regions as well to tackle those challenges?

Aimee Wehmeier:

I think it's been really interesting. So I'm first going to talk just a little bit globally and then I'll talk a little bit more about the partnership with LaunchCode. But what started out as this challenge has really, I think, played out to be an opportunity for people with disabilities. Due to underlying health conditions, many people with disability had to work from home, but so did the rest of the world. And what we learned through that process is that people could work at home and that work could be done effectively. So while some people with disabilities may need flexibility from a typical 8:00 to 5:00 job, or a job that requires travel, or maybe a person with a disability communicates better through technology, and so instead of these requests being extraordinary and requiring an accommodation, it actually just became the way of doing business over the last 18 months. And so some of those barriers for people with disabilities really has been eliminated because of COVID.

Aimee Wehmeier:

And I think what's also been really unique is that really across the universe, in Jeff's world, there's been a real shortage of workers. And so for the first time, employers are looking at people with disabilities as a new resource and a new opportunity to fill that. So I think what's exciting for Paraquad, and LaunchCode, and Regions partnership is this new opportunity and this new interest. I will say this partnership is new, so we're still working out some of the kinks in terms of understanding what supports people with disabilities need to be successful in technology fields. And so I think those are things that we will continue to learn, and to grow, and to improve. But I think now is the time that we have new opportunities and this new ability to provide skilled employees to employers who are really, really pressed for good talented people.

Michael Morris:

Thank you, Aimee. I have to ask you, Jeff, that we constantly, at National Disability Institute, are talking with nonprofit community organizations who want advice on, how do we get our message, our ask, heard by banks? How do we get banks to engage with us, to invest their dollars, gain CRA credit for inclusive community development activity? You've been doing that and maybe you can share no secrets, but insights on, how do you get that conversation going? And I'm going to go from that and tee up Kathy to take it from the banker side as well. But first you, Jeff.

Jeff Mazur:

Sure. Well, I'll try and answer this intelligently and maybe I'll go from the general to the specific. I think the first thing I will reach into the experience from this conversation, and that was, be open to an understanding of how the power of what you do as a nonprofit organization meshes with or presents an opportunity for the impact that particular institutions are trying to make. I think the story of the Paraquad and LaunchCode partnership and its support through Regions Bank is one of organizations listening to one another and saying, "Hey, we each do this thing, what we do is powerful, both of us, but they're separate, are there ways we can do that work together in a way that's going to be really appealing to a funder, an institution that cares about that?" And to Aimee's great credit, she extended the opportunity and talked about what it could be. And she was open to hearing ideas that I had, some of which probably weren't great but that ultimately took us down a path towards coming up with an idea that could work.

Jeff Mazur:

So I would start there in just really being open about thinking about what you do and how that can be applied in maybe the way that's a degree or two off from what you typically do in order to create impact in a powerful new way. And then in a much more mechanical and nuts and bolts way, and I'm no expert on this by any means, but I will say, if you're really interested in this, one of the things that you should be exploring, and there are lots of institutions who are willing to help you with this is, figure out how you can become certified as a CRA organization or institution, that will make it easier for institutions to invest and be able to get Community Reinvestment Act Credit for what they do with you.

Jeff Mazur:

And the other piece is all sorts of organizational experiences with doing this. Some organizations do it really well, some do it less well, but that's really the intentional and thoughtful about data and collecting data, particularly data about the universes you're serving as regards low and moderate income communities, the financial position of the people that you serve in your service universe. I think, generally, if you can talk in an educated way and show data that talks about the financial position of the people you're serving through your programs, that's going to be really interesting and compelling to financial institutions as they think about whether or not to invest in your programs.

Michael Morris:

I'm so glad you've raised the topic of data. As I talk to banks, the issue you just touched on is one that comes up most frequently. My community partner, that non-profit they want to work with, doesn't have good data that can document for CRA purposes. We're working with low moderate income individuals in this case, individuals with disabilities, so that data piece is so important. And then the other side of it is keeping data as you do on impact. So what are the outcomes achieved? A bank wants to be proud and wants to see a return on the investment, and you're really doing both.

Michael Morris:

Let me shift to Kathy, because as a banker, what's the messaging that you can help community nonprofits think about in approaching and getting that conversation warm enough to actually come to a point of a collaboration? How do people do that?

Kathy Lovell:

Well, Michael, first of all, as I've mentioned previously, my mission is promoting independent living in allowing individuals with disabilities to live their life to their fullest potential, which also involves employment but also making wise financial decisions. And Jeff is extremely correct in data, data, data, data is so important and the impact. But then also the aspect of CRA credit, that's extremely important as well to tying it all together. Put simply, it's the right thing to do. And so my advice I think working and in trying to determine partnerships and how one's organizations can work together is, look for organizations that share the same values, the mission and the vision, and also look for ways to engage with the organization. Look outside the box, be innovative, be creative. Put it simply, starting a conversation and taking a deeper dive and simply listening to the needs and concerns with the community and determine ways that you can work together to make life better for all within your community.

Kathy Lovell:

And focusing on creating inclusive growth, you can devote your resources and program to not only address the community in general, but also address community customers' needs. But that's also aligns with the company's strength and core values, just determining the core value, the mission and the values with each. And Jeff mentioned something as well that's extremely important, we take pride in providing right financial wellness and workforce readiness, but Paraquad is the disability expert and LaunchCode is the expert in training individuals in the technology fields. So putting everyone together with their strength is just simply a win-win situation. So I challenge this to everyone is imagine if all the good work that we could accomplish if we all worked together creating this inclusive growth, what lasting impact this would be for the communities that we serve? It would just be a win-win and it would be just such a powerful impact for the communities and for all.

Michael Morris:

I'm going to stay with you for a second longer, Kathy. And that is from so many of the community groups we work with, they want to know, what door do I knock on? How do I start this conversation? For many, their relationship is with a local branch of the bank, but maybe there's not a magic words or a passcode, but is there an entry level conversation to start a community group off to get to this incredible level that LaunchCode, and Paraquad, and Regions have gotten to?

Kathy Lovell:

Yes, I think starting a conversation with a branch manager, starting a conversation with the CRA officer, starting the conversation with myself, being the Disability Services and Outreach Manager, I look for ways that we can partner and listen. So it's collaborative efforts so that if I'm working with a nonprofit and I hear, well, this is a need or a concern that they have, then I look for ways that we can partner not only with other community partners within our community, but also other ways, other programs that would maybe enhance what we're all trying to accomplish.

Kathy Lovell:

But I think just simply finding a contact person at the branch, whether it's an employee, whether it's a friend, whether it's a community partner, just starting that conversation. And yes, CRA credit is extremely important, but I always like to say that, yes, it's important but it's also the right thing to do is having that deeper understanding and knowledge that's needed within the community and listening to the community partners, because they know best what is needed, and then allowing a financial institution to come along side by side and work together to have an impactful outcome for the community.

Michael Morris:

Excellent. Aimee, let me come back to you. We've talked about this incredible program, Jeff shared amazing results, numbers of people that have moved through the program and I'm sure these are not minimum wage jobs by any means, these are good paying jobs. Aimee, can you share with our listeners just one example of someone who's gone through the program and now employed in a technology related position?

Aimee Wehmeier:

Absolutely. And this is a fun story and it's a story that's building, so it's at the beginning. We have a recent graduate of the program who is building their skills by working as a tutor for our program. So we have always had a staff that has helped us support people with disabilities through the LaunchCode Program. And we love this new relationship because it very much aligns with our peer model approach that governs all centers for independent living. The majority of our staff and board members are people with disabilities, and so we believe that really folks with disabilities are the best experts. As we talked about, Jeff knows technology, Kathy knows banking and we know disability. And so the person is Shaw. And LaunchCode is a tough program, anybody who says it isn't, they're not telling the truth. They teach you great skills and the folks who come out of that program, they're ready to work.

Aimee Wehmeier:

And so I think what Shaw can offer is a perspective as a person with a disability and he can help the students, especially as we're really rolling out this program and getting started, he can help them manage some of the pitfalls and he really understands the expectations of the program and he can assist students through his own personal experience. So he's new and they're going to help us make this program successful. So looking forward to seeing the results of this new class.

Michael Morris:

I'm going to go back to Jeff for a second. I'm trying to visualize, I must say, the last thing I could ever get a job doing is anything related to technology related skills, so I'm certainly left out here. And I am sure I could not get through the LaunchCode Program. But for you, maybe just for our listeners, what would be one or two examples, what's a job someone gets? What's the success story? What would they be doing and for what maybe different types of companies?

Jeff Mazur:

Sure. So we aim and our training program and the curriculum is built with, if you think about a target that has a bullseye at the center, we try and provide someone with skills that will allow them to step into usually a junior software developer or web developer role. So very frequently, this is going to be someone who will join a team at a company and go in helping build, maintain, manage and improve some sort of application that they use to run their business. So some businesses, big corporations, probably Regions Bank, they may use some off the shelf software but they probably have some tool somewhere within their architecture that is unique to them that they build and they have to maintain. When it breaks, someone has to fix it. And these people will go in and learn those applications and learn what technology it's built on and then figure out how to maintain it and improve it over time.

Jeff Mazur:

There are a variety of other roles that people move into as well that are maybe software developer adjacent but are slightly different. It may be that a person moves into a data analyst role, because very frequently you're using these coding languages to parse data. You may use Python, which we previously have taught in our classes, to do data cleaning and other functions of data. You may be a user experience designer helping create the front end interface that a customer uses to navigate your application or your tool. So there's a variety of different roles someone could go into and we seek to instill in people a skillset that can be further differentiated upon to move into a variety of different roles.

Michael Morris:

Yes, that painted a very clear picture for me and I'm sure it did for our audience. Let me go to I think really probably our final question, and want to come back through and have each of you answer. I don't have a crystal ball, none of us has an ability to see into the future, but our current work and what we're doing now can help us really project what's ahead. So maybe Jeff, let me start with you again. And if you were to project out five years from now, what do you think might be the plan set at your organization to even further workforce development activities that offer long-term possibilities of greater financial health and economic security for people with disabilities?

Jeff Mazur:

Sure. Let me address that on three different levels. I'll try to be quick about it. The first at a very granular level and a very much like next six months, I think something that Aimee talked about before is really important and we want to focus it, and that's, how does this late-COVID or post-COVID, hopefully, period and changing attitudes of employers towards remote work allow us to make greater connections for people who perhaps have mobility challenges or other challenges presented by their disability and have even greater opportunity to link those people with productive work opportunities with employers that perhaps in the past, in a traditional workplace model, may have been more difficult to make happen? So I think really seizing on that opportunity that Aimee fleshed out is a really important thing for us in the context of this partnership certainly, but even well beyond that.

Jeff Mazur:

The second thing is still programmatic but a little bigger picture. We're talking and working right now at the front end with a large global financial services company about what a program would look like that's specifically geared towards neuro-diverse populations. So really thinking about how we further identify barriers that are keeping people who have endless potential but who are kept out of these jobs for reasons that can be improved via intervention, and how do we build programs that allow us to do that? I think that's a powerful opportunity that will hopefully knock down another set of barriers that exist today to keep people out of technology roles.

Jeff Mazur:

And then maybe the broadest thing, and this is in the St Louis context, we were founded in St. Louis, I'm sitting in St. Louis right now, but I think a great opportunity exists in the fact that the primary civic and economic development conversation that's happening in the St. Louis region today is about this watchword of inclusive economic growth. Our economic and civic leaders understand, and they understand intensely, that the only way the region is going to thrive over the long-term is if we create pathways that genuinely allow a much broader universe of people to benefit from economic growth. And we talk about historically underrepresented communities from a racial standpoint, from a socioeconomic standpoint and certainly from a disability standpoint. And so I think the recognition of that and the investment in addressing those matters at high levels within specific architecture of St. Louis is a huge opportunity for programs and partnerships like the LaunchCode-Paraquad partnership to move people into advanced career opportunities and into middle and upper middle class careers.

Michael Morris:

Fantastic. And let me pose the same question to you, Aimee. Looking ahead five years, where do you think this partnership may be going or other looking ahead opportunities for workforce development to improve financial health and economic stability for people with disabilities?

Aimee Wehmeier:

Well, I think, I mean really, Jeff nailed it. I mean, I think there's a lot of openness at this point to look at people with disabilities as viable candidates for good jobs. One thing that I think about is Regions, and this is real personal, but they have been a champion for including people with disabilities in their efforts around equity and inclusion, and I think that's one of the biggest barriers that we need other banks and other business community leaders to extend their vision of what equity and inclusion is, and to really includes folks with disabilities in those efforts. We're not going to make progress if we don't create, again, what Jeff talked about, pathways and systems that really support people with disabilities in not only working, but in acquiring wealth and building a future that any person would want.

Aimee Wehmeier:

And so I think those are the things that I would like to see down the road is more inclusion of people with disabilities at the table. As we talk about equity, I would like to see more training opportunities like the LaunchCode Program and more support from community leaders like Regions who stand up and say, this is important and we're willing to not only verbally support you, but economically support you. I think that would really make a big difference.

Michael Morris:

Thank you. And let me turn last but not least to Kathy. From a bank's perspective, looking into the future five years from now, Regions has got well deserved compliments throughout this podcast conversation today, can you think even further where might you be five years from now?

Kathy Lovell:

Well, I would love to have a crystal ball. But I think COVID has taught us that we can work remotely and be very effective and efficient. Now I'm not in the HR area, so I have to keep my guard rails up, but I think that it is proven that we don't have to be actually in a city to secure a job. And then also keeping our current DNI culture growing and developing that. And I love what Aimee mentioned, Jeff nailed as well too, is including people with disabilities at the table when the decisions are being made in offering individuals the opportunity to work remotely or work in a field that they have a real passion for.

Kathy Lovell:

But then also, working within the community, getting out in the community and the grassroots groups and the centers for independent living, support the centers for independent living, and getting out in the community, working alongside the partnerships and thinking about, how are innovative and creative ways that we can work together to support the community and address the economic opportunities that we see before us? Because who knows where we will be in five years? But I'm thinking positive thoughts that if we can work together, we all have the common goal that we want the best for not only communities that we serve, but also for the people that are in the communities, that we can have a lot of impact being creative and innovative and supporting each other in these unique initiatives such as the LaunchCode and the Paraquad collaborative effort.

Michael Morris:

Thank you, Kathy. Well, let me thank all three of you, Aimee, Jeff, Kathy, you not only have shared with our listeners the extraordinary cooperation and collaboration that has resulted in a unique and impactful workforce development program that is changing the economic stability and security for individuals with disabilities, but you also have provided really lessons to be learned for others to replicate, banks with community nonprofits, technology related workforce development programs with centers for independent living and other disability related groups, and that is extraordinary.

Michael Morris:

I want to share with our listeners that this collaboration was the first recipient of the Inclusive Community Development Award from the National Disability Institute's Center for Disability-Inclusive Community Development. I think for those of you who have listened to this podcast, you will understand completely why this group was singled out, and we hope that you and others, bankers, disability community, other organizations can find ways to collaborate too in the future to advance inclusive community development and impact on people with disabilities and the communities that they live in. So thank you for joining us and we hope you'll join us again in the future.

Speaker 1:

You've been listening to the Keys to Financial Inclusion Podcast, brought to you by National Disability Institute. Please subscribe to the podcast on Apple Podcasts, Google Podcasts or wherever you listen to podcasts. To learn more about National Disability Institute, visit [www.nationaldisabilityinstitute.org](http://www.nationaldisabilityinstitute.org). Thanks for listening and we'll be back soon with a new episode.