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# AIR Informs Podcast: The Economics of the Coronavirus for People with Disabilities

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DANA TOFIG: Hello, and welcome to AIR Informs and our podcast series about the different ways that coronavirus pandemic is affecting our lives, and how we are handling the challenges that it presents. Brought to you by the American Institutes for Research. I'm Dana Tofig.

The COVID-19 pandemic is having a significant impact on everybody's lives. How they learn, how they work, how they purchase the goods and services they need, and more. And past experience tells us that people with disabilities will feel this impact more profoundly than other groups.

In this episode of AIR Informs, we look at how the crisis is affecting people with disabilities, specifically in the workforce and the economy. And what that may mean for the future.

Our guest is Michelle Yin, a principal economist at AIR, who, among other work, has conducted extensive research into the employment and income disparities that people with disabilities face in the American workforce. She and others in AIR's disability practice area work with industry leaders and other organizations to highlight challenges, increase opportunities, and improve conditions for those with disabilities in the workforce. She joined us from her home in Virginia.

The changes brought about by the coronavirus pandemic are certainly difficult for everyone, but it seems like it presents some significant challenges for people with disabilities in the workforce and as consumers. Can you describe some of those challenges?

MICHELLE YIN: In the United States and, well, actually, across the globe, people with disabilities are disproportionately represented among older adults. Over 50% of the world's population of people aged 65 and above has one or multiple disabilities. And this age group is at much higher risk in the COVID-19 pandemic, with a very high mortality rate, as we know.

And people with disabilities, both children and adults, often have underlying health conditions that require daily medications and in some cases, regular hospital visits. So they're at a higher risk of serious complications from COVID-19. And many of them may be also experiencing interruptions of their routine, medical cares, and supports because of the shortage of health care staffs and facilities and equipment, especially in some major metropolitan cities, as we know.

And people with disabilities are twice as likely to be poor and in poverty as those without disabilities. About 30% of people with disabilities are living in poverty right now in the US. And they have less means to sustain a shelter-in-place situation like this. And for people with disabilities who are in the labor force and have a job, a good portion of them hold what we call essential jobs, like truck drivers, store clerks, and janitors. So these jobs are low pay, with extremely high risk of contracting the virus.

So yes, as employees, they face greater challenges and are at higher risks during the pandemic. And as consumers of health care services and other public and commercial services, they face rising environmental barriers to access these services. For instance, there's rising lack of transportation, lack of social supports and personal assistance that they used to get, but are now very limited during shelter-in-place. And all of these limitations might, in turn, hurt their chances of maintaining or retaining their employment.

DANA TOFIG: The impact on businesses in the workforce has been severe, for everyone. People have lost their jobs and many are seeing significant income reductions. But if history's a guide, people with disabilities will feel this more profoundly, right?

MICHELLE YIN: So during the 2008 recession-- the great recession-- workers with disabilities lost jobs at a much higher rate than those without disabilities. The employment rate bounced back for people without disabilities by 2012, but for those with disabilities, they suffered a high unemployment rate for nearly 10 years after the recession. And are only now returning to the previous levels.

Let me just give you two numbers. During the final quarter of 2008, the unemployment rate for labor force participants with disabilities was 12.2%. And right before the pandemic in 2019, the number was 7.3%, almost five percentage points lower. It was still twice as high as unemployment rate for people without disabilities, but it was at historical low.

But we might lose all we had gained during the past decade in a matter of a few months.

We're just seeing the beginning of an unprecedented economic downturn. It will more than likely disproportionately hurt people with disabilities because the type of jobs they hold. And also, the possible lasting effects of the immediate medical needs right now during the pandemic.

And on top of that, people with disabilities also have to fight against employers stereotyping against them. We've seen a lot of great improvement in disability employment over the past decade. But many employers still see people with disabilities as an imperfect substitute for employees without disabilities, even when they have the same educational attainment and maybe comparable abilities to perform the job. This is reflected in the pay gaps between people with and without disabilities, regardless if we're in a recession or not.

DANA TOFIG: A lot of people are working from home right now, including us. We're recording this from our homes. Given that people with disabilities are more apt to need to work from home, is it possible there is a longer term benefit for them, even after the economy starts to open up, again?

MICHELLE YIN: So there's definitely a wild card here during this pandemic and economic crisis because we're also in the middle of the fourth technology revolution. The technology revolution might shift the medical and economic prediction curves in some unpredicted ways. And the Americans with Disabilities Act-- the ADA-- requires all employers to provide reasonable accommodations for employees with disabilities.

Some employers have quoted the cost of providing these accommodations are too high as a reason to not hire or promote people with disabilities. But now we're in this pandemic, employers across the fields and industries were able to build new infrastructures. Create technology-based virtual environment to accommodate the situation. To help other employees to telecommute and provide more flexible working hours. These accommodations are exactly what many people with disabilities need or accustomed to, to be productive employees.

So this is definitely a silver lining for people with disabilities in the future. Because providing reasonable accommodations shouldn't really be an excuse of not hiring or promoting people with disabilities. And, in fact, it might be time for employers to look into technologies and platforms and tools that have been designed and used by people with disabilities or vocational rehabilitation agencies to help their employees to work more productively in a virtual setting.

For instance, the speech-to-text, text-to-speech tools designed for people with vision impairments. That might come in handy to take notes or transcribe notes during virtual meetings. Or the virtual reality trainings or 3D trainings that are becoming more popular in the disability field. That can be a replacement of future in-person trainings.

So there are many everyday products that were actually evolved from technology developed by or for people with disabilities, like automatic doors, voice-control products like GPS, Siri, and Echo. So now if we design our future workplace or work environment with universal design and inclusive design in mind, I believe, we will all benefit from it.

DANA TOFIG: Any suggestions for people, businesses, and organizations as they look to the future?

MICHELLE YIN: Many scientists have predicted that we might be forced to perform this on and off social distancing for an extended period of time, maybe years. So we probably will never return to the old normalcy that we remember. Instead, we need to think about how to create a new normalcy, and fast.

Employers should think hard about how to take advantage of the current technology revolution to transform our workplace. And the communication platforms to create a more accessible, flexible, and inclusive environment for all employees, regardless of their disability status.

The priority of all priorities for businesses and people with and without disabilities is to follow the expert guidance on social distancing so we can contain this rapid spread of the virus quick. And when that happens, I think that's the time we can then discuss how to resume the economic machine in a safe way, not in any rushed away.

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The sooner we achieve priority one, the sooner we can reopen the machine and the more lives we will save in the long run.

DANA TOFIG: Michelle and her colleagues identified some additional information and resources about this topic that you can find in the show notes on our website-- www.air.org. There, you can also learn more about Michelle and AIR's work to improve workforce outcomes for people with disabilities.

In a future episode, we will look at the impact the pandemic is having on the education of students with disabilities across the country.

Before signing off, we're happy to announce that our show is now available on Apple Podcasts, and we hope to add additional platforms soon. So if you're on Apple Podcasts, subscribe today . And if you feel like it, leave us a review to let us know how we're doing.

That's it for this episode of AIR Informs. Thank you for listening. Until next time, be safe and take care.