Research on Equity and Accommodations for Employees with Disabilities

Multnomah County

> " We are a diverse group, with different talents, interests, needs, and experiences. We are likely working next to you. "

Acknowledgments

We are incredibly grateful to current and former IDEA leadership and membership for their dedication, time, and effort on this project, as well as their wonderful friendships. We also appreciate Anais Keenon, Marjorie McGee, Mavel Morales, Nickole Cheron, Emily Purry and many others for sharing their expertise with us. We are thankful for Multnomah County Leadership, including Chair Kafoury, Marissa Madrigal, Travis Graves, Ben Duncan, and Anna Plumb for prioritizing and supporting this project. Finally, and most importantly, we are deeply grateful to the participants who generously shared with us their time, experiences, knowledge, and guidance in an effort to improve the experiences for employees with disabilities at the county.

IDEA Employee Resource Group Leadership,
(Left to right): Ashley Carroll, Jill Jessee, Angel Harp, Dawn Martin

Preface

We are at a very exciting time at Multnomah County as we embrace the opportunity to learn about historical biases in our organization and purposefully work to make changes in our policies, procedures, and culture to create a work place of safety, trust, and belonging for all staff. I am one of the Co-Chairs of Including Disability in Equity and Access (IDEA) Employee Resource Group and we represent and advocate for employees with disabilities.

Who are the disabled employees of Multnomah County? Some of us have mental health issues, arthritis, hearing loss, vision loss, scent sensitivity, migraines, cancer, mobility issues, alcoholism and addiction, chronic pain, and a variety of other conditions that affect our day-to-day life. Some of us were born with a disability and some of us acquired a disability later in life. Some of us have a single disability while others of us have multiple disabilities. And some of us have a temporary disability while others of us have a permanent disability. Most importantly, we want you to know that we are your co-workers and we are a diverse group, with different talents, interests, needs, and experiences. We are likely working next to you.

In the 2015 and 2017 Countywide Employee Surveys, employees with disabilities reported low job satisfaction across all areas of the survey. These results prompted the Office of Diversity and Equity (ODE) and the Evaluation and Research Unit (ERU) to engage with IDEA to design and engage in a research project to better understand the experiences of employees with disabilities with the hope of addressing disparities and improving their work experiences. *Research on Equity and Accommodations for Employees with Disabilities* was the product of the partnership between the ODE, ERU, and the IDEA ERG.

Due to a culture of misunderstanding, stigmas surrounding disabilities, fears of being labeled, and other factors, employees often do not feel safe revealing they have disabilities or sharing their experiences. However, this project helped change that. The partnership between ODE, ERU, and IDEA resulted in ensuring that employees who wanted to participate could do so in the way that felt most comfortable for them. In fact, it was a one-on-one interview from this project that caused me to learn about the ERG and join its membership. I now serve as co-chair for the group. I struggle with multiple hidden disabilities and had been having difficulty sharing with my supervisor and co-workers how this impacted my day-to-day work life. The interviewer made me feel empowered by listening to my stories. I realized that I was not alone and that other employees were having the same or similar difficulties. As a result, my fears have lessened and communication has become easier in regards to my disabilities. On a larger scale, knowledge of this project has helped some employees become familiar with the IDEA ERG and participation in this project has encouraged others to join our ERG. Consequently, IDEA has been able to help build connections and support between even more employees with disabilities. In the words of my co-chair, Angel Harp, "I have learned that using a network of support is the key to success." This idea resonates through the report of this project. The result is many voices being heard that

> In the 2017 CWES, 1 in 3 employees with disabilities reported that their disabilities negatively affect how they are viewed in their work environment.

traditionally would have not come forward to have their experiences be shared. Some stories were disheartening while others were heartwarming, exemplifying the range of experiences and, at times, highlighting the disparities that exist across the county, within Departments and sometimes within the same division.

We hope the process for this project, which emphasized engagement with our ERG, as well as the findings and recommendations, provide a foundation for the work ahead to shift the policies, practices, and culture at the County for employees with disabilities. In addition, we believe these findings and recommendations come at a pivotal time in the development and adoption of the countywide Workforce Equity Strategic Plan (WESP). We are hopeful that these findings and recommendations will contribute to the ongoing work to improve our organization to be more holistic and inclusive and to creating a work place of safety, trust, and belonging for all staff.

On behalf of IDEA and in solidarity with all employees with disabilities,

Jill Jessee,
Co-Chair, IDEA
Administrative Analyst,
Multnomah County DCHS Director's Office

IDEA Employee Resource Group

Approximately five years ago, the Abled and disAbled Partnering Together (AdAPT) Employee Resource Group (ERG) was formed to create a space for Multnomah County employees with disabilities to come together on a regular basis and support each other. Recently, the group rebranded to be called Including Disability in Equity and Access (IDEA) to more accurately reflect our mission, vision and values:

Mission
The mission of IDEA is to promote a culture of inclusion by providing leadership, raising awareness, valuing differences, identifying barriers, and encouraging an accessible workplace that fosters equity, dignity, and respect.

Vision
Create a Multnomah County workforce that reflects the community we serve, drawing on the principles of universal access to ensure welcoming spaces that benefit people with and without disabilities.

Values
Creating a sustainable, equitable and inclusive work environment through:
- Offering Peer Support
- Providing Representation
- Acknowledging Intersectionality Across Identities
- Supporting Allyship
- Attaining Agency Accountability
- Promoting Best Practices

This rebranding was largely the result of this project, Research on Equity and Accommodations for Employees with Disabilities.

Introduction & Background

This report is a result of collaborative work to respond to troubling trends in employee experiences that were identified in the 2015 Countywide Employee Survey (CWES) and continued in the 2017 CWES. Both surveys revealed that employees with disabilities had consistently low satisfaction in all areas of the survey, results that were unique to employees with disabilities.[1] For example, in 2015, half (50%) of employees with disabilities did not feel they had opportunities to advance at the county and 26% of employees with disabilities felt that their disabilities negatively affected how they were viewed in their work unit. In 2017 these patterns increased, with 53% of employees with disabilities saying they did not have opportunities to advance and 30% who felt that their disabilities negatively affected how they were viewed. As a result, and after gathering input from various stakeholders via listening sessions and other meetings, the Office of Diversity and Equity (ODE) and Evaluation and Research Unit (ERU), with support of county leaders, decided to pursue a more in-depth understanding of the experiences and needs of employees with disabilities.

The method and design of this project were informed by our commitment to embody and model promising practices of equity work and decolonizing methods,[2] including Community Based Participatory Research (CBPR).[3] While CBPR encompasses a range of approaches, an essential and unifying element is that research is most meaningful and powerful when it is anchored and driven by people who are most negatively impacted by the policies and practices being used. In this case, the leaders and members of IDEA were uniquely and best situated to guide the work.[4] As such, they were essential to and consistently engaged in all parts of the process and project. The goal of this project was not just to acknowledge, but to honor and value the experiences, perspectives, and wisdom of employees with disabilities by truly partnering with them.

The research methodology for this project was designed in collaboration with IDEA leaders and members. In particular, the methodology was designed to alleviate what IDEA leaders and members identified as employees' potential hesitation to participate, based upon a fear of disclosing their disability status due to potential stigma or negative consequences. ODE and ERU researchers and IDEA leaders performed written and in-person outreach, most notably advertising the project and related participation opportunities at multiple IDEA-hosted parties across the county. Employees were also able to participate in the project in whatever manner they felt most comfortable, including in-person interviews, in-person focus groups, or an anonymous questionnaire that was available online as well as in electronic or paper form. Despite concerns about participation, 54 people were full participants in the project; half of whom participated in in-person interviews or focus groups and half who completed anonymous questionnaires.[5]

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[1] Employees of color, employees who are immigrants or refugees, and employees who identify as LGBTQ had low satisfaction primarily in the work climate section of the Countywide Employee Survey in both 2015 and 2017.

[2] See Smith, Linda Tuhiwai, *Decolonizing Methodologies: Research and Indigenous Peoples* bit.ly/decolonizing-methodologies

[3] One resource for information about CBPR is: https://www.fsd.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/05/Research-Toolkit.pdf

[4] IDEA is the ERG for employees with disabilities. It was formerly known as AdAPT (Abled and DisAbled Advocates Partnering Together) and is currently known as IDEA (Including Disability in Equity and Access).

[5] One additional person provided partial information (i.e., only answered 2 questions via the anonymous questionnaire), and we did not include this information in analyses. Therefore, the data reflects nearly all people who volunteered to participate in the project.

Demographics of Participants

Participants reported having a range of disabilities, including visible and non-visible disabilities.[6] Half of the participants (50%) have multiple disabilities and the majority of participants (70%) have non-visible disabilities. Over 20% of participants (22%) have both non-visible and visible disabilities and 7% of participants have only visible disabilities. As can be seen in Table 1, the three most common types of disabilities identified were mental health or psychiatric disorders (43%), chronic illnesses (35%), and mobility challenges (26%) (see Table 1 for other types of disabilities).

The majority of participants indicated they acquired their disabilities as an adult or an older adult (67%), while 20% said they acquired them as a teenager/adolescent, 19% acquired them as a child, and 17% said they have had their disabilities since birth. A small number of participants acquired their disabilities from military service (4%).

In addition to information about their disabilities, we also asked participants several other questions about their demographics. The majority of employees who participated identify as White (74%), while 19% identify as People of Color.[7]

Table 1

Types of disabilities participants reported having

Type of Disability	Percent of Participants*
Mental Health or Psychiatric Disorder	43%
Chronic Illness	35%
Mobility	26%
Physical Health	17%
Chemical Sensitivity (write-in category)	15%
Neurological Disorder (write-in category)	15%
Cognitive Disorder (e.g. memory, thinking, attention)	11%
Hearing	11%
Visual	11%

Other types of disabilities with fewer than 5 participants:
     Autoimmune (write-in category)
     Autism Spectrum
     Learning Disability
     Acquired/Traumatic Brain Injury
     Asthma
     Temporary disability due to surgery (write-in category)
     Decline to State
	22% total

*Percent does not add up to 100% because many participants reported having multiple disabilities

[6] The terminology used throughout the project was chosen and guided by IDEA leaders.

[7] We use the term "people of color" to be in alignment with the county's Employee Resource Groups (Employees of Color and Managers of Color). For this project, this included participants who self-identify as African, Asian, Black or African American, Latino or Hispanic, Middle Eastern, Native American or Alaska Native, Native Hawaiian or Pacific Islander, and/or Slavic.

The vast majority of participants (85%) said that they speak only English, while 13% indicated that they speak or use a language other than English. The majority of participants identify as female (74%), while 24% identify as male. Over 75% of participants identify as Heterosexual. There were 19% of participants who identify as LGBTQ.[8] A small percentage of participants (7%) indicated that they currently serve or have served in the U.S. military. Participants ranged in age from their mid-20's through mid-60's, and the majority of people were in their 40's. Since the majority of those who participated are White, cis-gender, and heterosexual, despite their broad range of experiences and perspectives, the group also reflects patterns of privilege with regards to race, gender, and sexual orientation. As such, due to a lack of representation and small sample sizes, we were unable to explore the role of intersectionality in the disability community at the county.

Participants also represent a range of departments, positions, and work types at the county. There were some participants from every county department except for the Department of Community Services.[9] Participants included regular employees, limited duration employees, volunteers, and contract workers (as well as one person who applied for a county position). Some participants said that they have desk jobs, others work out in the field or with clients or customers. Some participants have worked at the county for over 10 years (22%), some have worked for the county between 6-10 years (28%), and many have only been with the county for a small amount of time (41% for 1-5 years and 7% for less than one year).

To have a sense of the interests, worldviews, and experiences of participants, we began each in-person interview with an open-ended question: "Tell us about yourself." Responses to this question emphasize that, while disability is an important part of their lives, having disabilities is far from being the only important perspective that employees bring to the workplace. Respondents are tennis players, knitters, and dragon boaters. Several participants are parents, some have spouses, and some are single. Some employees love to travel, while others are self-described homebodies. Some recharge by socializing and hanging out with friends, and others prefer quiet solitude. Importantly, these employees also said that they want to bring their whole selves to the workplace but often find it difficult, and sometimes impossible, to do so.

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[8] We use the broad category of LGBTQ as a way of balancing the need for confidentiality with providing demographic information. We recognize that this category does not fully capture the distinction between sexual orientation and gender identity.

[9] For the most part, the percentage of participants who work in each department reflects the percentage of overall county employees who work in each department. For example, almost 30% of participants said they work in the Health Department, which matches the percentage of overall county employees who work in the Health Department. Participants were slightly over-represented from the Department of County Human Services and were under-represented from Multnomah County Sheriff's Office and the Department of Community Services.

Findings & Recommendations

Building Safety, Trust, and Belonging at Multnomah County

As part of the county's current focus on workforce equity, county leaders are being asked to consider whether their decisions and activities instill trust, promote safety, and foster belonging for employees. However, employees with disabilities have reported (in the CWES as well as this project) that work environments at the county do not always live up to the values of safety, trust, and belonging, affecting both their work environment and their ability to do their work. Factors including the physical environment, technology, departmental norms and practices, as well as experiences with management and co-workers, affect the experiences of employees with disabilities, often in a way that makes employees feel unsafe, fearful, and unwelcome. This project is an initial step towards a deeper understanding of the challenges, dynamics, and possible solutions to better align work with creating environments of safety, trust, and belonging, as well as ensuring employees can effectively do their work.

Three Major Themes

The findings of this project are based on analyses of the qualitative data from interviews, focus groups, and anonymous questionnaires. Our work revealed three main themes, which informed our recommendations. These themes are:

1. Need for Organizational Change and Culture Shift
2. Impact of Leadership, Co-Workers, and Other Staff
3. Requesting and Implementing Accommodations

These three main themes overlap and are interconnected with each other, working together to influence the range of experiences of employees with disabilities at the county. These results offer a snapshot of the variety of experiences that employees with disabilities have at the county.

Need for Organizational Change and Culture Shift

There are a range of ways that disabilities affect employees in the workplace, and myriad opportunities for shifting organizational and departmental cultures to be more inclusive and equitable for employees with disabilities. When asked if their disabilities affect their experience of the workplace, over 95% of respondents said that their disabilities do affect their experience at the workplace at least some of the time, and 90% said that the effect is negative. Respondents described fear of being stigmatized; difficulties navigating work environments, policies, and procedures that are not supportive of employees with disabilities; and other challenges related to having disabilities. In fact, many employees who participated used the words "stress," "fear," "scared," "scary," "afraid," and/or, to a lesser extent "stigma" in their interview, focus group, or anonymous questionnaire. (See word counts in Table 2.)

Some participants said they feel they have to prove themselves and work harder than other employees without disabilities so that managers, supervisors, and co-workers will not view them as "less than." Related to this, many participants mentioned struggling with work-life balance.

Table 2
Word Counts from Interviews, Focus Groups and Anonymous Questionnaires

Word	Times Mentioned in Research
Stress	69
Fear, Scared, Scary, Afraid	50
Training	50
Awareness	40
Stigma, Stigmatize(d)	28
Education	22

In some cases this was described as "bringing the stress of work home with them," but others mentioned actually taking work home with them because they lack the accommodations that would allow them to complete it during the work day. Many participants discussed experiencing a fear of stigma, feeling embarrassed or self-conscious because of how they might be viewed by managers, supervisors, co-workers, or patrons, and/or feeling stressed, sad, and anxious about the difficulties of being employees with disabilities. Several participants also said that they have experienced challenges, or feel that they will have challenges accessing promotional or professional development opportunities.

Many participants also said that hostile or inappropriate comments or treatment from
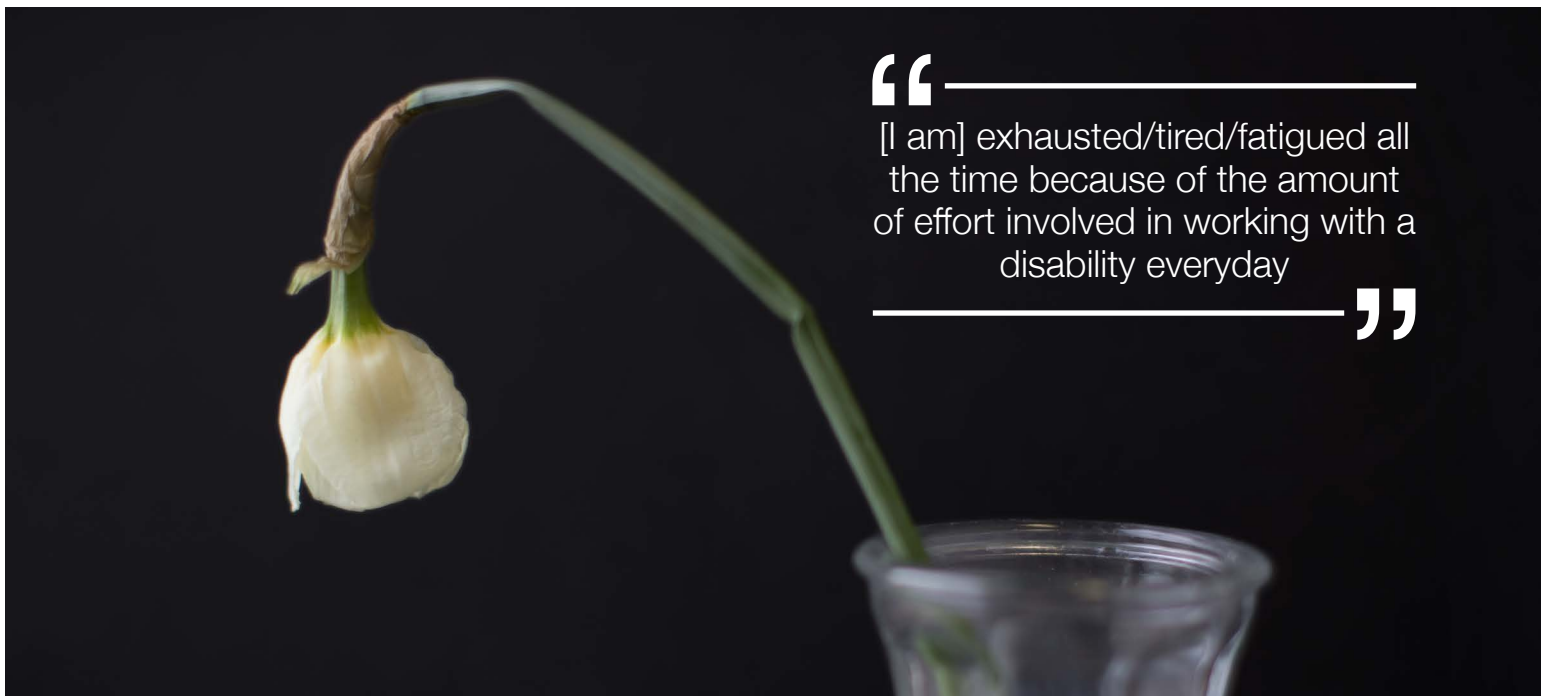
> " [I am] exhausted/tired/fatigued all the time because of the amount of effort involved in working with a disability everyday "

managers, co-workers, and/or patrons play a major role in their work environment and impact their sense of safety, trust, and belonging. Improving employee experiences by eliminating these kinds of comments and interactions will require shifts in organizational and departmental cultures to be more respectful, inclusive and equitable for employees with disabilities. See the Impact of Leadership, Co-workers, and Other Staff section below on page 16 for more discussion of the role of dynamics between managers, co-workers, and employees on work environment.

> "
> There are a lot of misconceptions about autism, and I'm not confident in my ability to correct them if needed. I have also heard multiple co-workers with whom I work closely express ignorant and prejudicial opinions about other people with autism.

In addition to interpersonal dynamics, many participants said that their experience of the work environment is impacted by not having the accessibility that they need to effectively do their jobs. Some participants noted that different disabilities require different considerations, which affects their experiences of the work environment in different kinds of ways. Some employees pointed out they have challenges with noise and/or visual distractions, scent and chemical sensitivity, working with a mental health diagnosis, or difficulty navigating the multiple cubicle configurations for employees with physical disabilities. See the Requesting and Implementing Accommodations section below on page 23 for more detailed information about the role of accommodations on employees' experiences of the work environment.

Employees expressed fear about disclosing disabilities to managers, HR, and co-workers.

A major decision for employees with disabilities is whether or not to disclose their disabilities to others at the workplace. There are a range of factors that impact employees' decisions to be open about their disabilities. Some of these factors relate to personal preferences or past experiences, such as experiencing stigma, inappropriate comments, or lack of professional opportunities. Other factors relate to the work environment and culture. This includes structural barriers such as formal policies, as well as County or departmental norms and practices that have lacked flexibility, support, and consideration for the unique and complicated needs of employees.

More participants said they are completely open about their disabilities with their managers (65%) than they are with their co-workers (52%). However, more participants said they are "sort of"[10] open about their disabilities with their co-workers (26%) than they are with their managers (17%). This difference in level of openness with managers compared to co-workers likely relates to employees needing to be more open with managers in order to get formal ADA[11] accommodations or "informal arrangements" that they need to do their work more effectively. The same percentage of participants (15%) said they are not open with their managers as said they are not open with their co-workers, but they were not necessarily the same people. Only half of the participants who are not open with their managers are also not open with their co-workers.

When employees do share their disability status, they navigate issues such as when and with whom to disclose information. Key considerations that play a role in their decision include: their own

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[10] Participants who said they are "sort of open," "open when they need to be but not otherwise," "open with some but not others" or "used to be open but are not open now."

[11] Americans with Disabilities Act

organizational position (e.g. if they are front-line staff, management, volunteering at the county, etc.), time with the county (e.g. are they in their probation period or have they been working at the county for a long time), when to share (e.g., on an application, at an interview, once they start the job, when they start having difficulty effectively doing their job), as well as the position of the other person/people they may disclose to (e.g. if they are a co-worker, manager, in Human Resources, etc.).

Participants who said that they are not open about their disabilities with their co-workers or managers were more likely to take the anonymous questionnaire – this is consistent with their desire to remain anonymous. Additionally, there was some evidence that the likelihood of being open with co-workers or managers was related to the types of disabilities participants have. Participants who did not identify as having mental illnesses were more likely to be open with co-workers (and somewhat more likely to be open with managers). Participants with chronic illnesses were also somewhat more likely to be open with co-workers. This may be related to the stigma attached to different types of disabilities which could affect whether employees are willing to be open about their disabilities with their co-workers and managers.
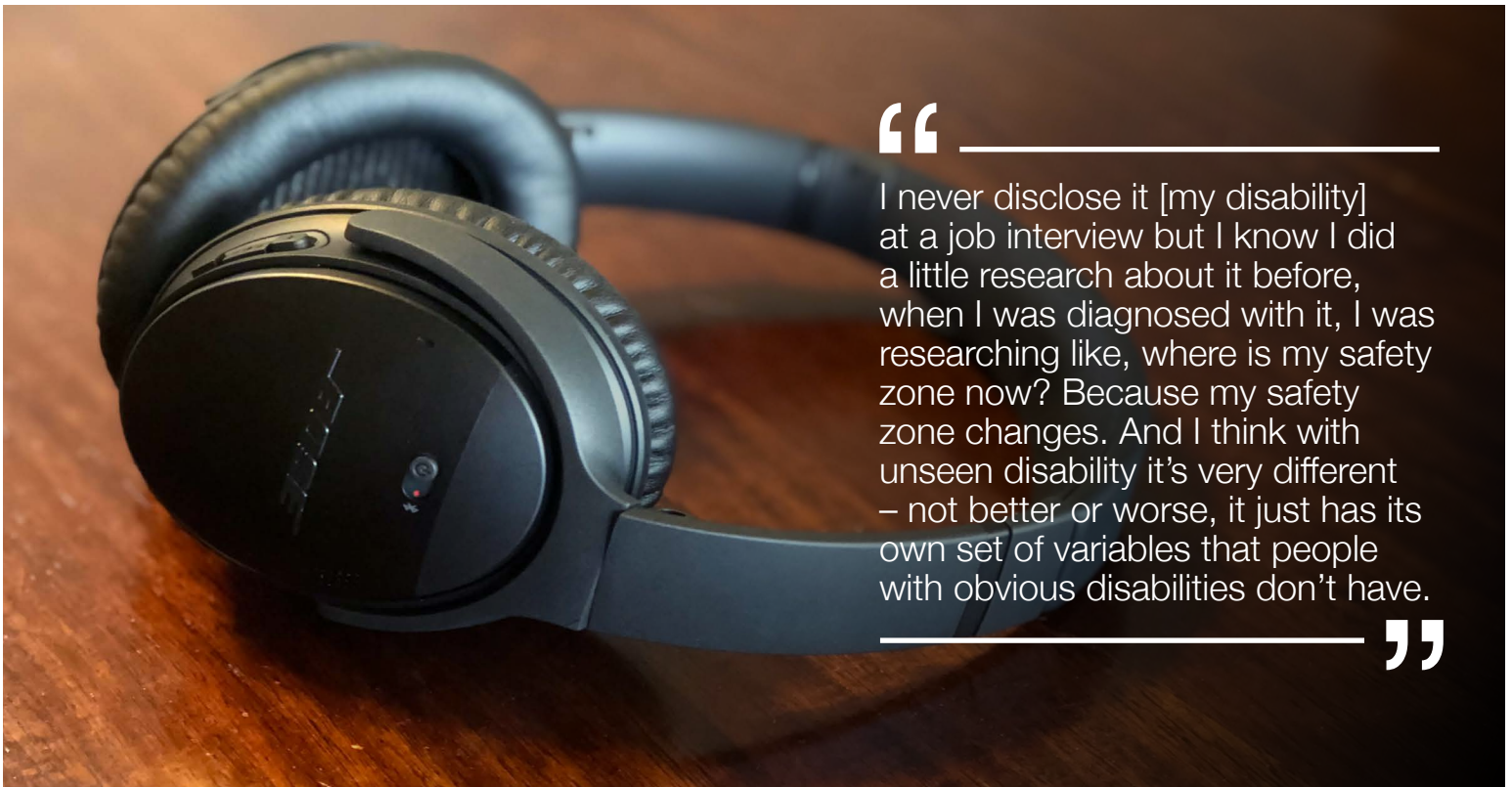
" I never disclose it [my disability] at a job interview but I know I did a little research about it before, when I was diagnosed with it, I was researching like, where is my safety zone now? Because my safety zone changes. And I think with unseen disability it's very different – not better or worse, it just has its own set of variables that people with obvious disabilities don't have. "

Why are employees open about their disabilities?

- They feel accepted, supported, understood, and/or respected.
- They feel that they need to avoid being misinterpreted or misunderstood; they think it increases their chances to be retained, promoted, and/or seen as competent.
- They have visible disabilities.
- They need others to know about their disabilities and accommodations in order to perform their work duties.
- They want to educate, spread awareness, and/or help destigmatize disabilities.
- It is easier to be open than hide their disabilities.
- They like being open and want to share their experiences with others.
- People ask or are curious about their disabilities or accommodations.
- **Considerations specific to managers:** Managers and supervisors are uniquely positioned to be a resource and support employees because they are often involved in the accommodation process. Thus, being open with managers had the potential to facilitate accommodation requests, both when working through the county's formal process as well as for "informal arrangements."
- **Considerations specific to Human Resources:** Similar to managers and supervisors, Human Resources plays a key role in the formal ADA accommodation process and is also positioned to be a resource and support for employees with disabilities. Therefore, being open with Human Resources had the potential to facilitate accommodation requests.

Why are employees *not* open about their disabilities?

- Fear of being stigmatized by co-workers, managers, and supervisors.
- They feel uncomfortable sharing because they are a private person or don't feel that their disabilities are anyone's business.
- They feel it will negatively impact the ability to be promoted and/or seen as competent.
- They do not trust their co-workers, managers and/or supervisors to show them respect and/or keep their personal information confidential.
- They anticipate and/or have experienced jealousy, especially from co-workers who might not understand the reasons for their accommodations (especially if the accommodations could be considered as a "special" privilege, such as a parking spot or the ability to telework).
- They do not want to feel different or be treated differently.
- **Considerations specific to visible vs. non-visible disabilities:** Many participants with non-visible disabilities often had extra considerations about whether or not to disclose their disabilities, sometimes because of stigma associated with certain non-visible disabilities (e.g., mental health or psychiatric disorders), sometimes because of self-consciousness, sometimes because other people do not believe that they have disabilities because they are not obvious or the kinds of disabilities they stereotypically think of, or simply because it is easier to not disclose.

"[I am not open because I am] Afraid of minimizing, being discounted, and even ridicule[d], which I've already experienced when I leak it out to others even a little.

"They are aware of it. But I don't like to be seen different. Sometimes he [my supervisor] isn't that understanding of things, but usually he is. I don't ask for accommodations usually.

"My disability isn't visible so often when I share it's not taken seriously.

"[I am] Mostly open - she [my supervisor] knows about it and I tell her when it flares up, but I don't talk to her about the day-to-day implications. Perhaps because of embarrassment or fear about stigma?

"I think that in some ways it's easier to hide, but it's hard because it's another layer of self consciousness because you feel you have something to hide. So it's like living with a secret.

"I have had a very open dialogue with my team and supervisors. What impacts my disclosures is my ability to do my job and any help/accommodations I may need toward that end.

"Because you can't look at me and know I have a disability and that makes it a struggle.

"I am [open] with some people, but I don't wear a sign and I don't advertise. I prefer that people look at who I am, but I do have physical restrictions. I only share it when something comes up, like one person asked me to climb a ladder and I can't do that so I had to tell the person. I don't like people looking at me.

Universal Design and Employee Engagement

Some participants suggested that consistently using universally accessible workspaces, technologies, equipment, policies, and practices would be helpful to them. In follow-up conversations, IDEA leadership recommended implementing Universal Design. Universal Design is a concept that "products, systems, and environments should be as usable as possible to as many people as possible, regardless of their age, ability, or situation." Universal Design has the potential to empower a diverse range of people and can help reduce stigma associated with having disabilities. While Universal Design is a powerful approach and has the potential to benefit many employees, it is most effective and a best practice when it is used as part of a larger strategy that includes addressing stigma, structural and systemic barriers, and consistently partnering with employees with disabilities.[12]

> **Resource: Want to learn more about how others are implementing universal design?**
>
> **With a Deadline In Place, Norway Warms Up to Universal Design**
>
> A hospital in Trondheim is a laboratory of sorts for the state's ambitious plan to embrace a different way of creating buildings, transit, and even websites by 2025.
>
> https://www.citylab.com/design/2018/11/norway-universal-design-st-olav-hospital-architecture-cities/576685

Awareness, Education, and Training

In addition to suggesting the use of Universal Design, many participants expressed the need to de-stigmatize disabilities and spread awareness about disabilities and accommodations. Participants said that spreading awareness about disabilities and accommodations would help them to feel more comfortable and accepted by managers and co-workers and that it would improve the work environment and sense of safety, trust, and belonging in the workplace.
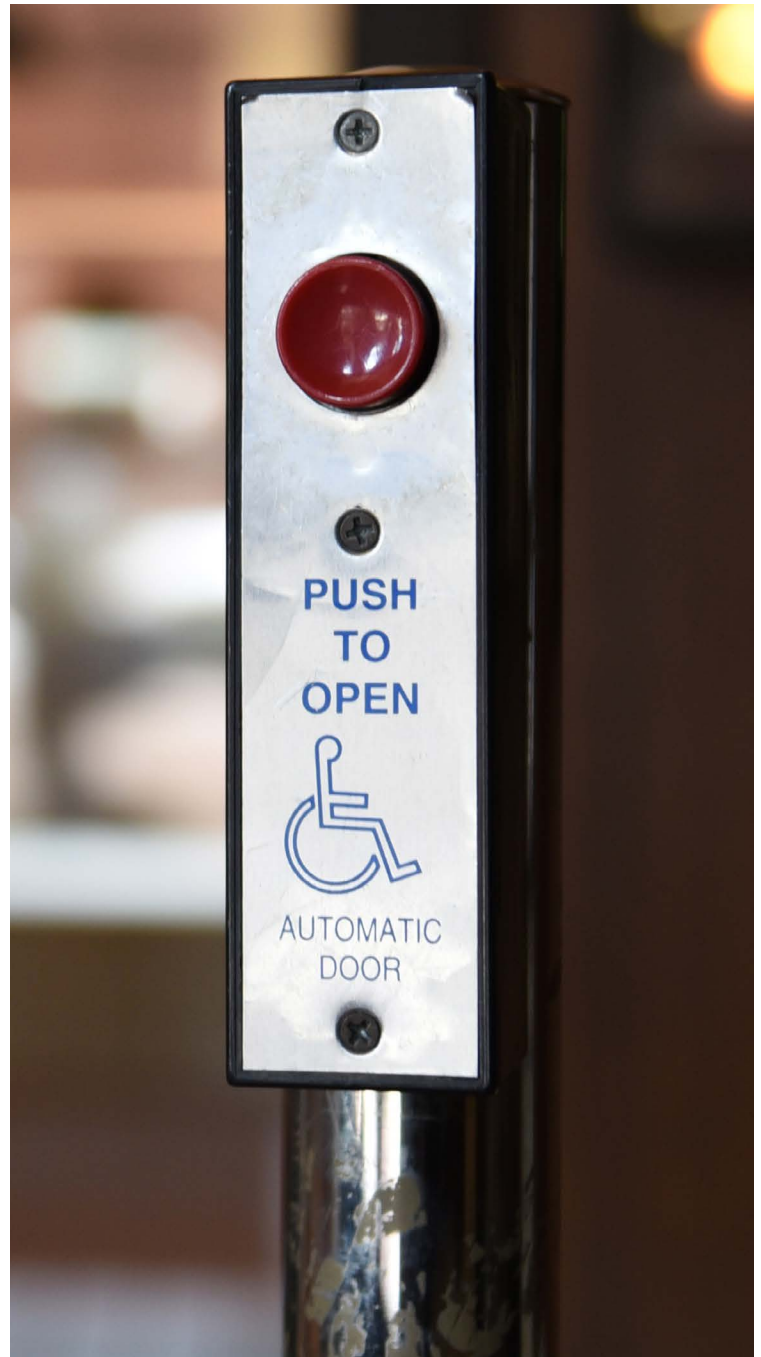
Recommendations for Organizational Change and Culture Shift

In partnership with IDEA and other stakeholders:

- Revise current and/or adopt new policies to implement Universal Design in all aspects of county policies and practices (e.g., in the hiring process, at the workplace, at county-sponsored events, including ensuring meetings, trainings, websites, paperwork, etc. are ADA compliant) as part of a larger strategy that also addresses stigma and structural and systemic barriers.

- Consistently communicate about and provide opportunities for input in decision making processes. For instance, when countywide and/or department-specific changes to equipment and technology are made, as a starting point, consulting with and ongoing engagement with the IDEA ERG would help ensure that any changes will not adversely impact employees with disabilities and prevent them from being able to perform their work duties successfully.

- Develop and implement mandatory training about the intersection of disabilities, power, privilege, equity, and inclusion to help de-stigmatize and normalize disabilities and accommodations and establish a workplace culture of safety, trust and belonging. This aligns with pieces of the MultCo Workforce Equity Strategic Plan (WESP), especially the minimum standard for managers and HR staff working with employees with disabilities.

- Co-create and implement broad communication plans on the following two topics:
  - Spreading awareness about disabilities.
  - The accommodation process (access, employees rights, process, etc.) and implementation of accommodations.

- Talent Development, and others who implement trainings and events should ensure that all trainings and events include considerations specific to ensuring that employees and attendees can fully participate. For example, at minimum, locations for trainings and events should be ADA compliant and advertisements and registrations should include ways for attendees to easily submit requests for accommodations.

Impact of Leadership, Co-workers, and Other Staff

Managers and supervisors play a critical role in the work environment

Previous projects, including the Countywide Employee Survey, have found that leaders, such as managers, supervisors, and Human Resources, play profound roles in employees' experiences in the workplace, both in positive and negative ways, and are instrumental in shaping experiences of safety, trust, and belonging. Unsurprisingly, we found similar results in this project.

Participants talked about their managers both without prompting and when asked a specific question regarding management. Respondents used the words "manager" or "supervisor" 256 times throughout their interviews, focus groups, or anonymous questionnaire – more than any other thematic words used – indicating that managers and supervisors play a major role in employees' experiences. The words "manager" and "supervisor" tended to coincide with the words "accommodation," "disability/ies," "disabled," "co-workers," "FMLA (Family Medical Leave Act)," and "Human Resources/HR." This suggests that managers and supervisors play important roles in general, in regards to the accommodation process, and related to issues with other staff, such as co-workers and human resources.

All participants who were directly asked confirmed that their manager affects their work environment.[13] An overall theme was that managers and supervisors set the tone for the work environment – in both positive and negative ways (see Table 3 for percentages). Some employees noted the ways their managers were instrumental in creating and sustaining a positive work environment while other employees felt that their managers intentionally and/or unintentionally created a hostile work environment. In some

cases, employees noted their managers are the reason they stay at the county or in their department, while others cited that their managers are the reason why they want to leave their unit and/or the county.

Table 3

Percentage of participants who said their manager affect their environment in positive and negative ways

Participants said their managers affect their work environment in:	Percentage of participants
Both positive and negative ways	51%
Only positive ways	30%
Only negative ways	19%

Managers who create a positive work environment for employees with disabilities

Participants who reported that managers create a positive work environment generally noted that managers do so by being supportive, thoughtful, and attentive to employees' needs. As such, employees felt respected, valued, trusted, and understood. In addition, they said they feel they have a balance between structure and flexibility as well as autonomy.

Many employees discussed the importance of managers in the formal ADA accommodation process. Specifically, participants mentioned managers facilitating the request process, successfully implementing the accommodations, and ensuring that there is follow up with the employee to adjust anything that may not be working or could be working better. Participants noted that this is an important iterative process that is critical to success in the accommodation process.

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[13] 68% of all participants were asked this question.

Employees noted that part of being a 'good manager' is knowing about the accommodation process, about possible accommodations, and/or other ways to explore resources that would be helpful (e.g. Multco Marketplace, ADA policy, etc.). Even when managers are not knowledgeable about the formal ADA accommodation process, employees reported that they have positive feelings when managers and supervisors think creatively, focus on solutions, and support them in finding the help they need throughout the accommodation process. While some employees expressed feeling frustration and disappointment when their accommodation requests were declined, other employees reported feeling supported and respected when managers practiced clear and timely communication of the reasons why the accommodations were not approved and actively worked to find alternative solutions. Furthermore, many employees expressed that they appreciate when their managers help them balance the demands of their professional and personal lives by encouraging self-care and being as flexible as possible with work schedules and tasks. Importantly, many participants were sensitive to the ways their requests for accommodations might impact their managers, co-workers, and the work.

> **"** I trust my manager. She is very supportive and helpful. Other managers in the past have not been kind or helpful. I have learned to be assertive and not be pushed around.

> I have a strongly supportive supervisor, which makes a huge difference. Multnomah County makes an effort to be inclusive. **"**

Managers who create a negative work environment for employees with disabilities

Participants who reported that managers create a challenging or negative work environment often said that their managers do so by being disrespectful, unhelpful, unsupportive, judgmental, and/or by showing a lack of compassion for their employees. This has the effect of making employees feel fearful, stigmatized, embarrassed, not trusted, dissatisfied in their job, and makes employees feel that they are not welcome, and/or that they no longer want to work at the county. Participants sometimes said that their managers actively play a role in discouraging or preventing employees with disabilities from opportunities for promotion or professional development, which also impacts retention.

Managers who create a negative work environment also impact employees' likelihood of disclosing disabilities and requesting accommodations through the formal accommodation process. Many participants reported that their managers do not provide what they need, sometimes because managers are inflexible (e.g., manager doesn't allow certain types of accommodations, such as the use of flex time or office equipment), make excuses about why accommodations can not be granted (e.g., there is not enough money in the budget to pay for accommodations, the essential functions and core duties of the job are incompatible with some accommodations), are uninformed about the accommodation process, are unwilling to help employees navigate the accommodation process, and/or provide accommodations or arrangements that are not sufficient. Some participants described this challenging behavior as "passive," such as not moving request through the system. In other cases, participants described "active" behaviors, such as managers who obstruct the accommodation process and/or try to remove their accommodations.

Participants also described a lack of trust from their managers. This came up in two contexts: (1) managers not believing the employee about their disabilities, such as thinking it's psychosomatic or that employees are lying about their disabilities and (2) managers not trusting employees to do their work while teleworking. Related to teleworking, some managers were described as "holding telework or other accommodations over the employee's head," or treating it as a 'privilege' rather than an accommodation. These sorts of concerns were more common with non-visible disabilities, such as mental health disorders or scent/chemical sensitivities, compounding the fact that disabilities such as these are already more difficult to accommodate.

Several participants also said that managers are a critical piece of the work environment because of their role and responsibility in addressing co-worker dynamics and interactions. Specific to employees with disabilities, participants felt strongly that managers should be held accountable for dealing with co-workers who violated policies, including disciplining employees for continued or egregious violations, particularly if the behaviors influence their ability to perform their work duties and/or their sense of safety, trust and belonging.

> "
> I would have to say management ignorance or not understanding [has been challenging]. Maybe that's a better word than ignorance. Or unsympathetic. I think it's a whole, there's a couple things, it shouldn't be this hard.

Human Resources' role in the work environment

Human Resources (HR) staff are leaders in the county who play a critical role in employees' experiences. When asked about their work environment, 13% of participants said, unprompted, that Human Resources affects their work environment in some way. Almost 60% of these participants (57%) said that Human Resources affects their work environment in negative ways, including that Human Resources has been unsupportive, uncommunicative, unhelpful, or difficult to work with during the accommodation process.

Participants also mentioned inconsistencies in experiences and policy between the HR units in different departments. Slightly more than 40% of participants (43%) said that Human Resources affects their work environment in positive ways, including that Human Resources has been helpful, respectful, kind, and supportive. In addition to this specific question, participants mentioned either "Human Resources" or "HR" 114 times without prompting. The words "Human Resources" or "HR" tended to coincide with the words "Accommodation," "ADA," and/or "FMLA;' this is unsurprising, since Human Resources staff are necessarily involved in the ADA and FMLA accommodation processes.

In summary, leadership, including managers, supervisors, and Human Resources, are key players in setting the tone for the work environment. Leadership has the power to influence employees' experiences in both positive and negative ways. The following recommendations are based on findings about leadership, management, and HR and suggestions from participants.

Recommendations Regarding Leadership, Management, and HR

- At minimum, leaders, managers, HR, and other staff involved in the decision-making of ADA accommodations should consistently demonstrate the core competencies of Promoting Equity, Leadership, Relationship Building, and Communication. All managers should be trained in and accountable to minimum standards in these competencies. Hiring processes for managers should include a consideration of these competencies, as required in the WESP Focus Area 2, Objective 4.

- Managers should be required to follow the recommendations regarding communication in the Accommodations section below.

- Managers should promote employees' well being (e.g. seeing them as a whole person, rather than just a worker). Some ways to do that are:

  - To encourage employees to build wellness goals into their annual PPRs. Additionally, activities undertaken as a part of WESP Focus Area 1, Objective 2 (assessing morale, inclusion, cultural responsiveness and a supportive environment) should include a consideration of the experiences of employees with disabilities.

  - Managers and supervisors should provide recognition and acknowledgment of employees' efforts and work in addition to areas of improvement. This includes timely performance reviews that provide concrete feedback and focus on employees strengths and not just deficits.

  - IDEA members and participants in this project recommended increasing the number of role models and mentors, especially in leadership roles, with visible disabilities and/or with identified non-visible disabilities.

- Managers should be expected and held responsible to ensure that they are compliant with ADA accommodations and policies that affect a safe and respectful workplace.

- Easier and improved communication with Human Resources, including both general education/awareness-raising and improvements to specific communications about the status of individual accommodation/FMLA/disability insurance requests. Improvements in communication are needed in a variety of areas, including the ADA process, disability insurance, and FMLA.

Co-workers' role in the work environment

A major theme from employees who participated was that their co-workers play a significant role in the work environment, impacting employees' experiences and sense of safety, trust, and belonging at work and at times, their ability to be at the workplace and/or do their work. Participants mentioned co-workers or colleagues 97 times, both without prompting and in response to direct questions about co-workers, indicating that co-workers play a key role in employees' experiences at the county. When participants used these words, they also tended to use the words "manager" and/or "supervisor," suggesting that there are dynamics between co-workers, managers, and employees that affect employees' overall experiences of the workplace.

Table 4

Percentage of participants who said their co-workers affect their environment in positive and negative ways

Participants said their co-workers affect their work environment in:	Percentage of participants
Only positive ways	35%
Only negative ways	35%
Both positive and negative ways	30%

Participants were equally likely to say that their co-workers are a positive or challenging part of their work environment (see Table 4 for percentages). Co-workers who are supportive, helpful, make employees feel comfortable and accepted, and/or are aware of their impact on their co-workers and are willing to consider different practices in their workplaces often contribute to a positive work environment for employees with disabilities. Participants reported that it is particularly helpful when they have opportunities to build relationships with their co-workers and can talk with co-workers who have shared lived experiences. In particular, the IDEA ERG is seen as a positive resource. Without prompting, many employees mentioned the IDEA ERG in their interview, focus group, or anonymous questionnaire. Some employees said that they recently became involved with IDEA as a result of hearing about or participating in this project, highlighting the importance of awareness about resources for employees with disabilities.

Participants also discussed how co-workers can negatively impact their experiences and sense of safety, trust, and belonging, and their ability to do their work. For instance, employees reported that co-workers sometimes make inappropriate comments or demonstrate a lack of understanding about disabilities and accommodations. Some participants described feeling resented because co-workers assume they are receiving "preferential treatment" rather than understanding it as an accommodation they are entitled to and that enables them to do their work. In some of these cases, co-workers' lack of understanding about disabilities and accommodations may be because of a desire or need for confidentiality (of the disability and/or the accommodation). In other cases, participants said that co-workers' behavior causes harm or exacerbates some disabilities (e.g., wearing scented products in the presence of employees with scent and chemical sensitivity, causing distractions like having conversations near employees, etc.). These negative interactions with co-workers make employees with disabilities feel uncomfortable, unwelcome, and misunderstood. In addition, they can sometimes interfere with the ability to be at the workplace and/or complete work.

Finally, some respondents described not having opportunities for relationship-building with co-workers. Some employees said they feel disconnected from others at work; this was a particular sentiment from participants with disabilities that make it difficult to navigate relationships. Several participants suggested that a focus on relationship-building and disability awareness would greatly improve their work environment and their sense of safety, trust, and belonging in the workplace, and had the potential to help them with their work tasks.

> " For me, and I don't know how true this is of other people with disabilities, that there's a layer because you are in hiding and not wanting more people to know about. I feel like I don't want to get too close to other people in the building because I don't want to let them in to where they may find out about it until I know that I can trust them. We'd have to become friends first and that's really hard to do in that building in particular. And in that in environment because people talk and you never know who they are going to talk to. "

There is an interplay between co-workers and managers, because managers play a unique role in affecting employees' interactions with each other. Managers are pivotal to employee accountability, including holding employees accountable if they are contributing to negative experiences and work environments for their co-workers with disabilities and/or interfering with an employee's ability to complete work. Managers are also positioned to promote the kind of relationship-building in their units that employees with disabilities say is important to their feelings of safety, trust, and belonging and to ensuring that employees have the ability to do their work.

Recommendations Regarding Co-workers

- At minimum, all employees should consistently demonstrate the core competencies of Promoting Equity, Leadership, Relationship Building, and Communication. Talent Development and other county leaders, in partnership with the IDEA ERG and other stakeholders, should work together on a plan for both training and accountability for employees who do not meet these competencies.

  - These competencies should also be used as part of the screening process and criteria for hiring new employees.

- To strengthen the core competency of Relationship Building, county leadership should encourage managers to dedicate time to team building exercises that use an equity lens and are trauma informed (including embedding this into existing meeting times), and to allow employees to use work time to build relationships.

- Leaders and managers should encourage and support participation in the IDEA ERG and/or other groups that strengthen connections between employees with disabilities and allies. This aligns with the Multnomah County Workforce Equity Strategic Plan recommendation to invest in ERG participation as a critical space for safety, trust, and belonging.

- Managers should be held accountable for addressing situations where co-workers are exacerbating employees' disabilities and/or causing harm to employees with disabilities. In partnership with IDEA, ADA Specialists, ODE, and County Leadership, develop processes and policies that employees may use if a manager is not effectively managing issues between co-workers.

Requesting and Implementing Accommodations

Accommodations play a major role in employees' experiences of their work environment.

Participants were asked about both challenges that make their work more difficult and supports that help them to participate fully and effectively in the workplace. Three aspects were frequently mentioned as both challenges and supports: (1) physical space/work space, (2) schedules, and (3) equipment, technology, and adaptive services. Workspaces can be a challenge in many ways, including physically navigating the space, having too many distractions, not having accessible parking, and difficulty with inaccessible county cars and buildings (e.g., no elevator and/or lift access, handicap accessible entrance is far away from office). For those with chemical and scent sensitivities, the workplace poses a unique set of challenges, and these disabilities can often be exacerbated by co-workers and other staff who use scented or chemical products. However, some employees said that they like their work space and/or they appreciate having access to a gym and wellness rooms.

Several participants discussed challenges related to schedules. Although some participants said they appreciate the schedule available to them, many participants said that inflexible work schedules create barriers and burdens for employees with disabilities, and noted that it would be helpful to be able to have a more flexible schedule or to telework.

“
Teleworking has actually provided more benefits than what I had hoped or anticipated. I sleep better. I am not as depressed. I love not commuting! And I love not having to pay for parking (I can't take the bus because of my chemical and noise sensitivities)!

Adaptive technology and equipment (e.g. screen readers, closed captioning, sit-stand desks, air purifiers, ramps, etc.) are essential for some employees. In some cases, participants discussed challenges obtaining the equipment or technology they need, while in other cases participants reported challenges when trying to use the equipment, software, and/or technology they need to perform their work. Some participants also discussed challenges related to services for employees with disabilities (e.g. sign language interpreters). Issues include a lack of knowledge about available services; difficulty accessing services; confusion regarding payment for services (see Budget section on page 35), especially at county-wide events and trainings; and concerns about the quality of the services with some vendors with whom the county contracts.

Regardless of the specific need, the ability to support employees with disabilities with the accommodations they require is essential. As such, the formal ADA accommodation process plays a major role in the experiences of employees with disabilities at the county. We found that the accommodation process influences employees in both negative and positive ways. Employees who participated used the word "accommodation" 138 times and "ADA" 53 times throughout their interviews, focus groups, or anonymous questionnaire, both with and without prompting (see Table 5).

Table 5
Word Counts from Interviews, Focus Groups and Anonymous Questionnaires

Word	Number of Instances of the Word
Accommodation	138
FMLA	64
ADA	53
Flex, Flexible, Flexibility	48
Telework	36
Form	19
Budget	13

The terms "accommodation" and ADA" tended to coincide with the words "Human Resources/HR," "Manager/supervisor," "telework," and "budget/funding," with some mentions of "flex/flexibility" as well. This shows that managers, HR, and the budget are interrelated and perceived to be important aspects of the ADA accommodations process. This also highlights the importance of flexibility more generally, and telework more specifically, as important to consider because employees report this is a highly desirable accommodation that allows them to perform their work.

Lack of awareness of the county's ADA accommodation process and the right to request accommodations

There was lack of knowledge and clarity about the formal ADA accommodation process, including a lack of awareness about accessing and navigating the request process. As as result, a substantial number of employees may be unaware of the existence of and their right to use a formal ADA accommodation process.

While more than half of respondents (63%) said that they are aware of the county's ADA accommodation process, over a quarter of participants (26%) said that they are not aware of the process. Just over 5% of participants said that they "sort of/maybe" know about the county's ADA accommodation process, or described being aware of the county's FMLA process instead of the ADA accommodation process.

Many employees (70% of participants) said they are aware that they have the right to request accommodations, but 15% said they are not aware of this right, and 9% said that they either "don't know" or "sort of/maybe" know that they have the right to request accommodations. Some participants who are contract workers and/or volunteers indicated that they do not know if they are eligible for ADA accommodations. While the county's ADA accommodation policy was designed for employees who are paid by the county, contract workers and volunteers would

still be able to work with Human Resources and/or their volunteer coordinator to get the accommodations that they need, but this was not common knowledge for participants.

Participants were also sometimes unsure whether they require accommodations. When asked, the majority of participants (78%) said that they do require accommodations, 17% said that they do not require accommodations, and 6% said that they either "don't know" or "sort of/maybe" require accommodations. Employees who identify as having mental health or psychiatric disorders were somewhat more likely to say that they "don't know" or "sort of/maybe" require accommodations. Also, employees who identify as having neurological disorders were somewhat more likely to say that they do not require accommodations.

For participants who said that they do not require accommodations, when asked what resources might help them work more effectively, 67% said they don't know what the county would do, or would be willing to do, that would help them. Of those who were specifically asked, only one participant said that they had everything they need to do their job. When these participants did identify resources, their answers varied. Participants mentioned:

- The ability to telework.
- Having a flexible schedule or the ability to use flex time.
- Specific equipment (e.g., adjustable desk, better lighting).
- Education for other employees about disabilities.
- A job coach or mentor.
- Work spaces that were configured to be either less distracting or less physically challenging.
- Increased relationship building between co-workers.

Importantly, some of these answers are accommodations that other employees currently use. The fact that not all participants considered

these to be possible accommodations highlights the importance of the county spreading awareness about accommodations, including the possible types of accommodations that employees may be able to receive.

People access a mix of formal accommodations and "informal arrangements"

Over a third of the employees who participated (35%) requested accommodations formally through the county's ADA accommodation process. However, over half of the employees who participated (59%) reported that they have "informal arrangements" to access the resources they need to perform their jobs. For example, an employee might directly ask their manager or other people (e.g., IT, Facilities) for equipment,

software, or other resources to help them work more effectively. While county policy precludes "informal arrangements," many participants felt that using them was an important strategy for getting what they needed to work effectively, especially when they were specifically trying to avoid using the County's formal ADA process.

Only 11% of respondents had exclusively used formal accommodations, while 35% of respondents have used only "informal arrangements." Some employees used a mix of formal accommodations and "informal arrangements" to help them work more productively – almost a quarter of participants (24%) reported doing this. Over a quarter of respondents (26%) reported that they had not requested either a formal accommodation or an "informal arrangement." Table 6 shows the patterns of accommodation use, and Table 7

Table 6

Percentages of participants who have requested accommodations and, if so, how they requested accommodations

"Have you requested accommodations, either formally through the county's ADA accommodation process or informally?"	Percentage of participants
Only "informal arrangements"	35%
Not requested accommodations or "informal arrangements"*	26%
Both formal accommodations** and "informal arrangements"	24%
Only formal ADA accommodation process**	11%
Not asked or did not answer the question	4%
"Informal arrangements" Total	**59% (total)**
Formal ADA accommodations Total	**35% (total)**

*Half of these employees (13%) indicated that they have not requested accommodations or "informal arrangements", the other half of these employees (13%) we assume have not requested accommodations or "informal arrangements" because employee indicated they do not require accommodations in the anonymous questionnaire.

**Either been through the entire formal ADA accommodation process or started the formal process but did not finish

lists examples of formal accommodations and "informal arrangements."

Not only were "informal arrangements" more commonly used, but 4% of participants who said they started the formal ADA accommodation process did not finish it. Some participants stopped the process because it was too complicated, it took too long to try and navigate the process and/or it was too frustrating and they "gave up." Other participants said they felt requesting a formal accommodation threatened their continued employment, or they stopped the process because it was no longer necessary (because they changed positions or received what they needed in other ways).

For those people who did not use either a formal accommodation or an "informal arrangement," participants sometimes reported that they would develop their own "workarounds" to help in their work. These are often things they do so that they do not have to request formal ADA accommodations or "informal arrangements" from their managers. Participants expressed that sometimes it is simply easier to try to take care of things on their own. However, several participants also expressed that doing this is stressful, that their "workarounds" are often not very effective, and that this places an extra burden on them that other employees do not need to think about. See Table 7 for examples of participants' "work arounds."

> " I've sort of just built in my own accommodations, found tricks and tips that help me get by. I'm too fearful of judgment to ask for accommodations.

As noted above, sometimes employees are denied accommodations, or "informal arrangements." At other times, participants do not request desired accommodations, either because they do not think they would be approved or they are fearful of disclosing their disabilities. Many participants mentioned that there are accommodations that they wish they had or wish they could ask for. See Table 7 for examples of participants' desired accommodations.

There is some evidence that whether employees have requested formal accommodations or "informal arrangements" is related to the disability type. Participants with chemical sensitivities were more likely to have requested both formal accommodations and "informal arrangements" and were somewhat less likely to have not requested accommodations at all. Participants with chronic illness were also somewhat less likely to have not requested accommodations.

Some participants also reported that the formal ADA accommodation process is more complicated for certain kinds of disabilities and/or more complex cases. Complex cases were often associated with non-visible disabilities, such as scent and chemical sensitivities or mental health diagnoses. In these cases it was often less clear what the options for accommodations are and/or how to implement them. Participants noted that, with these complex cases, there is a heightened need for clear and effective accommodation processes.

> " When it comes to [one of my physical disabilities], I feel I can always ask for accommodations. When it comes to chemical sensitivities, I feel like it is trickier. The enforcement of this is weak, and depends on the good will of colleagues. There is no formal, enforceable policy around use of scent, just guidelines and suggestions. I would like to see this strengthened.

Table 7

Formal ADA accommodations, "informal arrangements," "work arounds," and desired accommodations

Type of accommodation, "informal arrangement," or "work around" Examples	Currently used as ADA accommodations or "informal arrangement"	Mentioned as "work around"	Mentioned as desired accommodation
Equipment or Technology:	**28 (total instances)**		
Air purifier/HEPA filter/humidifier/fans	X	X	
Sit/stand desk	X		X
Large computer monitors	X		
Microphone	X		
Special keyboard and/or mouse	X		
Special desk chair	X		
Zoom technology software (on computer and/or phone)	X	X	
Screen Reader software	X	X	
Laptop computer	X	X	
Stack laptop on top of books (instead of having a sit/stand desk)		X	
Use co-workers' sit/stand desk		X	
Ear plugs/noise canceling headphones		X	
Using items/equipment (e.g., cart, chair) as a cane		X	
Automatic doors			X
Badge readers closer to the door or have a longer delay for unlocking the door (to allow more time to open door)			X
Magnetic grabber			X
Telephone headset			X
Low vision technology on shared equipment (e.g., copy machines)			X
Schedule and self care:	**17 (total instances)**		
Telework	X		X
Flex work time/modify schedule	X		X

Table 7 (continued)

Formal ADA accommodations, "informal arrangements," "work arounds," and desired accommodations

Type of accommodation, "informal arrangement," or "work around" Examples	Currently used as ADA accommodations or "informal arrangement"	Mentioned as "work around"	Mentioned as desired accommodation
Alternative schedule	X		X
Time during work day to exercise or for mental health breaks		X	X
Take work home		X	
Regularly use vacation or sick time to rest		X	
Physical Space or Workspace:	**17 (total instances)**		
Clean buildings and employee's work space more often	X		X
Remove lights above employee's work space	X		
Bigger work station	X		X
Private office space with door	X		
Access to wellness room	X		
Ability to work in a different building/office	X		
Scent/chemical-free policy	**X (in work unit)**		**X (countywide)**
Select where to sit for a meeting, training, or event		X	
Work area with natural light			X
Buildings that are universally accessible (e.g., entrances, elevators, bathrooms, meeting rooms, work spaces, etc.)			X
Easy-to-access rental cars/county cars			X
Communication:	**7 (total instances)**		
American Sign Language (ASL) Interpreter	X		

Table 7 (continued)

Formal ADA accommodations, "informal arrangements," "work arounds," and desired accommodations

Type of accommodation, "informal arrangement," or "work around" Examples	Currently used as ADA accommodations or "informal arrangement"	Mentioned as "work around"	Mentioned as desired accommodation
Advance notification of construction, workspace configuration, or other events that might impact employee	X		
Lip read or ask others to speak up		X	
Other types of accommodations:	**29** (total instances)		
Limiting employee's in-person interactions	X		
Access to close parking	X		
Ask co-workers or others to help or to stop behaviors which impact employee with disabilities (e.g., not to wear scents, to minimize talking/noise)		X	
Carry notebook or use a cellphone/ipad to take notes		X	
Have medical supplies or equipment available at any work location the employee uses for meetings, trainings, or events		X	
Memorize how equipment works (instead of being able to see buttons, etc.)		X	

Stigma and institutional barriers affect willingness to request both formal accommodations and "informal arrangements"

Participants' level of openness about their disabilities is often related to whether and how they access resources to help them work. Employees who described being less willing to be open about their disabilities were also less likely to have requested either formal accommodations or "informal arrangements." Some reasons for not wanting to disclose disabilities include fear of managers being skeptical about their disabilities or their needs, stigma associated with having disabilities (in particular, certain kinds of disabilities), and concerns about retaliation. Some participants who did not want to disclose disabilities to Human Resources and use the formal ADA accommodation process still asked their manager for "informal arrangements." In these cases, they used strategies that enable them to access "informal arrangements" without having to mention their disabilities. For instance, some participants reported asking to telework, but gave a general reason (e.g. they wanted flexibility to work from home) rather than specifying that they want to telework because of something related to their disabilities.

Employees who participated in interviews or focus groups were somewhat more likely to say they have requested "informal arrangements." While it is possible that we heard more about "informal arrangements" because of the opportunities to ask follow-up questions in-person, the link between openness about disabilities and willingness to request resources highlights an important connection between the level of comfort with one's work environment and ability to access the resources needed to do their job.

The majority of participants who made "informal arrangements" (81%) directly asked their manager or supervisor for these arrangements. Around 20% worked with others (IT, Facilities, experts outside the county) for equipment, resources, or arrangements to help them work more effectively,

while 13% worked both with their manager and others.

Just under half of participants who reported using "informal arrangements" described their experience as positive (47%), over one quarter said the experiences were both positive and negative (28%), and 16% described purely negative experiences. Participants who expressed positive experiences with requesting "informal arrangements" often said they got what they needed, their manager was willing to help them, they felt comfortable asking for what they need, their manager was open and accepting, and/or that their manager had previous experience with other employees with similar disabilities.

> "
> For me it has always been informal and it has always been a yes. I get what I need. … It was very simple and easy. My supervisors have always been very accommodating and easy.

Participants who described negative experiences said that they did not get any or all of what they needed, that their manager suggested or provided alternative arrangements that were not helpful or were disrespectful, that the manager was not receptive to the employee's needs, or that their manager ignored or never followed-up on the employee's request for arrangements. In some cases, participants described being too nervous or uncomfortable to ask their manager for what they need.

> "
> They tend to have a "suck it up" attitude when it comes to sharing difficulty. Or they don't realize how much it impacts my work.

Many participants who requested "informal arrangements" said that they did so because they purposefully avoid the formal ADA accommodation process due to a combination of institutional barriers (e.g. the process is too complicated and arduous), personal preferences (e.g., wanting to remain private about their disabilities), and previous experiences. As shown below, this sentiment was also repeated by people who did attempt the ADA process.

Over half of people using the formal ADA accommodation process described it negatively

As discussed above, over a third (35%) of participants have requested accommodations formally through the county's ADA accommodation process. With the exception of one employee, who went through a formal process through an outside organization with which they are affiliated, all of the employees who requested formal accommodations went through the county's formal process involving Human Resources. Over 40% of these employees (42%) described their experiences of the formal accommodation process as purely negative. Around 16% of employees described their experiences with the formal process as both positive and negative, while 37% of participants described their experience as purely positive. Participants who had positive experiences with the accommodation process said that Human Resources was helpful, supportive, knowledgeable, and communicative; that the process was simple, easy, or smooth; or that their accommodation was approved and they got what they need.

> " I believe in being truthful and up front when a problem arises. I work hard and I should have a safe place to work. I deserve to have any accommodation within reason to help me be able to do my job. I am a loyal and caring employee and an asset to our workforce, so I decided to talk to someone.

However, when asked about strengths and challenges of the ADA accommodation process, participants were much more likely to discuss barriers and challenges or to recommend improvements than they were to mention what they like about the process.

Specific critiques of the ADA accommodation process included:

- The need to standardize the accommodation process (as opposed to the accommodations themselves) while keeping flexibility for specific accommodations.
- Accessing, completing, and submitting the paperwork was too complicated, too stressful, and was often a barrier.
- They did not know how to navigate the process or who to contact for help with the process.
- Human Resources was not helpful or supportive.
- An unsupportive or unknowledgeable manager made the process more of a struggle.
- They had concerns about privacy and confidentiality.
- They had to wait a long time for the accommodation to be approved and implemented.
- Their accommodation request was ignored or denied.
- It was difficult for people involved in the process (Human Resources, medical staff, the employee themselves, the manager) to determine what would be a reasonable and effective accommodation or even what kinds of options they had for accommodations.
- There were not specific ADA Specialists or Human Resources staff who specialize in the ADA process.

When describing the formal ADA accommodation process, participants used words like "unfair," "unsuccessful," "disrespectful," "awkward," "scary," and "nightmare." Additionally, some

participants said if an accommodation is not working well, it can be hard to decide whether to ask for an alternate or to try something new; either because they do not want to be seen as a burden or because they do not want to go through the formal process again.

> " I started the process of seeking accommodation but stopped because it was intimidat[ing], invasive and convoluted.

> The process is not clear on how to start or where to seek information. "

Formal accommodations and "informal arrangements" were not always effective

As shown in Figure 1, half of participants (50%) who used the formal accommodation process said that their formal accommodation is not effective. By contrast, only 10% of "informal arrangements" were described as not effective, while nearly half (47%) were described as effective, and another 21% were described as partially effective. The lower perceived effectiveness of the formal accommodation process highlights another way in which the formal process poses a challenge for employees who need accommodations.
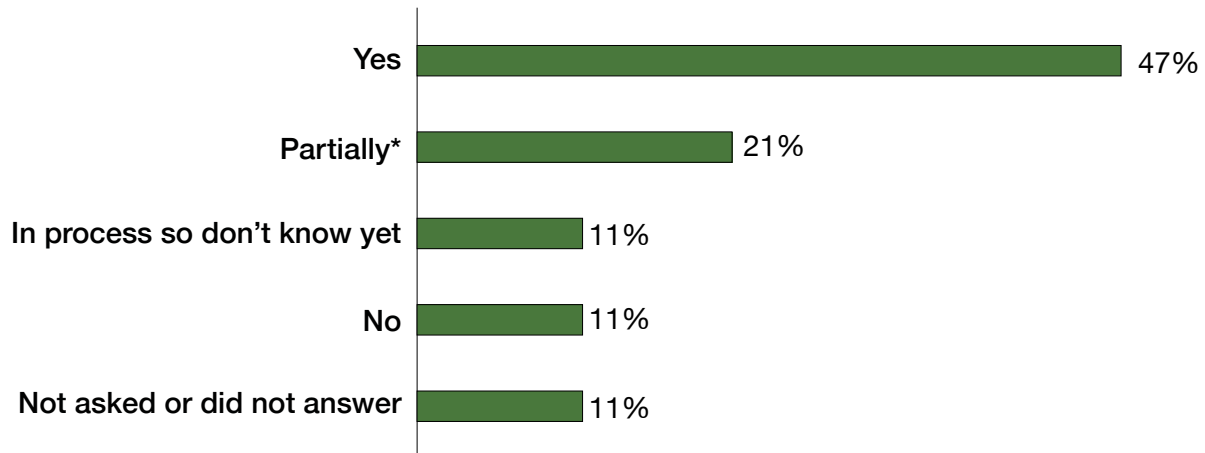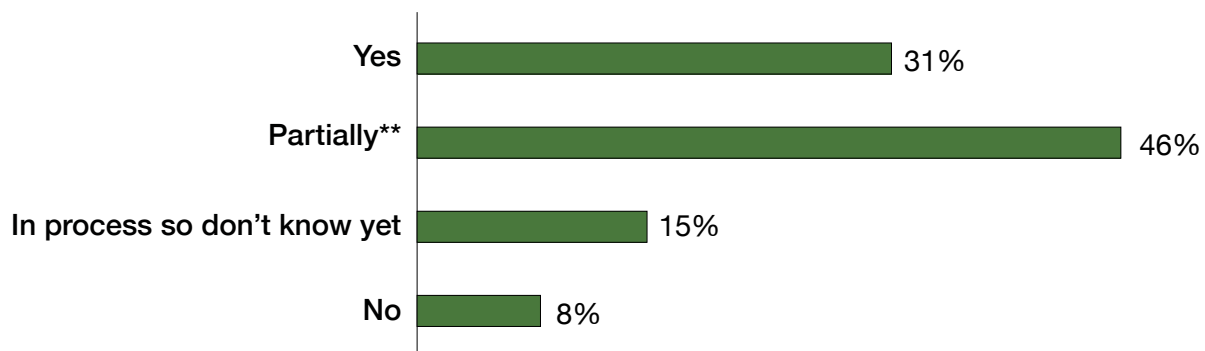
Figure 1

Percentages of participants who have received effective accommodations by type of accommodation they requested

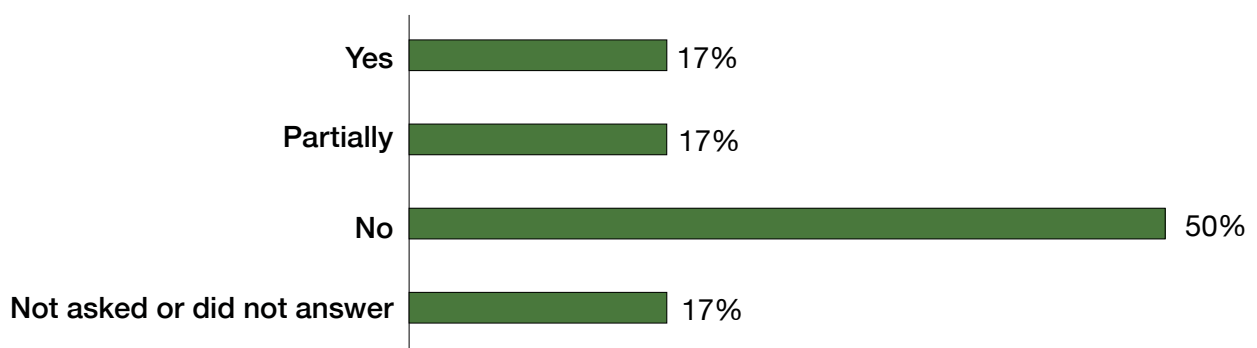## Answers to the question, "Have you received effective accommodations?"

Only "informal arrangements"

Yes	47%
Partially*	21%
In process so don't know yet	11%
No	11%
Not asked or did not answer	11%

Both formal ADA accommodations+ and "informal arrangements"

Yes	31%
Partially**	46%
In process so don't know yet	15%
No	8%

Only formal ADA accommodations+

Yes	17%
Partially	17%
No	50%
Not asked or did not answer	17%

*Partially; Sort of/Maybe; As best as can be
**Partially; Sort of/Maybe; Yes for some accommodations, not for others
+Either been through the entire formal ADA accommodation process or started the formal process but did not finish

There are inconsistencies throughout the county regarding requesting, approving, and implementing accommodations.

Participants reported inconsistencies both within and between departments, for both formal accommodations and "informal arrangement" requests. Although many people said their "informal arrangements" met their needs, there were also inconsistencies in how they were implemented, including who got them and what was offered as an "informal arrangement." This is not surprising considering that "informal arrangements" are handled primarily by individual managers who may have different approaches, perspectives, and budgets, which may affect the ability to provide arrangements.

Inconsistency of "informal arrangements" is one reason that county policy requires employees to use the formal accommodation process. However, the county's formal ADA accommodation process is also inconsistent across the county. Different departmental cultures and norms, as well as differences in the way departmental Human Resources handle accommodations, contribute to these inconsistencies. Participants noted a lack of standardization in the process. Specifically, some participants noted that each accommodation is treated as a "one off," with no precedent on what other employees with similar disabilities have received, making it difficult for employees and Human Resources to know what options exist (or are even possible) for accommodations across the county.

> " [There are] inconsistencies about certain supervisors. My previous supervisor was much more open to flexing, but there is a lot more scrutiny with my current supervisor. [Researcher asks "What would improve this?"] Managers being consistent and educated and having better training would be good.

> " So it [accommodations] runs through your HR and each HR is decentralized. So that you have [one department] HR and they'll be like, we don't do that and they don't have any idea that someone in [another department] got that. Or Central HR doesn't have a list of accommodations that are preapproved that they let people have.

Employees with disabilities also use the formal FMLA process to help meet their needs

Although the focus of this project was not on the Family Medical Leave Act/Oregon Family Leave Act (FMLA/OFLA), just under 15% of participants mentioned using FMLA/OFLA to meet needs related to their disabilities, either in conjunction with formal ADA accommodations or instead of using ADA accommodations. Participants used the word "FMLA" many times, supporting the idea that participants see FMLA as a resource related to their disabilities (see word counts in the Table 5 on page 23). Since we did not specifically ask about this resource, it is possible that more than 15% of participants use FMLA/OFLA but did not tell us about it during interviews or the anonymous questionnaire.

There were a range of experiences with FMLA/OFLA. Most notably, there was some confusion about the difference between ADA and FMLA/OFLA. Similar to the formal ADA process, employees were much more likely to discuss challenges and barriers to the FMLA process. Concerns about the FMLA process included:

- The process is too complicated and stressful.
- The requirements are too rigid.
- Human Resources was not supportive or helpful with the process.
- The paperwork seems to change from year-to-year, and the requirement for annual

paperwork is a hassle for people with chronic conditions.

- Their request was denied.
- There were inconsistencies across units and departments regarding internal policies about FMLA leave.
- Concerns about specific FMLA policies or practices (e.g., the county policy requiring that employees exhaust all paid vacation and sick leave before taking unpaid leave).

Despite these concerns, in general, participants appreciated FMLA protections for taking the time they needed off work. Those people who had positive experiences with FMLA said that the process was simple, easy, and clear; they felt comfortable asking Benefits questions; that Payroll and Benefits did a good job keeping track of paid sick and vacation time while on FMLA leave; and they appreciated that the paperwork can be completed online (by the employee or by their manager if they are incapacitated). Participants expressed feeling positively about their FMLA requests being approved. Although this project was not intended to explore the FMLA process, these results suggest a need for further investigation of employees' experiences with the FMLA process.

Budgets are sometimes a barrier to receiving accommodations

Employees reported a range of experiences with budget considerations when requesting accommodations. Some employees described managers who cited a lack of funds as a reason to refuse an accommodation or make employees feel guilty about accommodations. In other cases, employees reported feeling badly, or "like a burden," because they asked their manager to spend budget on their accommodation. In some cases, employees mentioned instances where they were able to purchase an accommodation and found that it did not effectively meet their needs, but were hesitant to or did not ask for a more effective resource because they felt guilty spending more money.

Currently, departments/divisions/programs are responsible for covering expenses related to accommodations. This can lead to inconsistencies in employees' experiences with requesting accommodations because in larger departments there may be minimal impact on the overall departmental budget, while in smaller departments, a request may significantly impact departmental budget. Regardless, funding or budget issues should not be a barrier to providing accommodations.

Employees also described confusion around how and whom to charge for accommodations that do not clearly fit into an existing department/division/program's cost center. For example, employees described not knowing who should pay for ASL interpreters for countywide events or interdepartmental meetings. Ways to address this are described in the recommendations below.

Recommendations Regarding Requesting and Implementing Accommodations

- Designate FTE to a core group of ADA Specialists who are dedicated to supporting employees throughout the ADA accommodation process. The amount of FTE needed for these ADA Specialists will depend upon an assessment of ADA Accommodation needs, recommended below. This recommendation aligns with recommendations from the Jemmott Rollins Group (as part of the Workforce Equity Strategic Plan), but builds on it in the following ways:

  - The ADA Specialists should be liaisons/navigators who are dedicated to supporting employees with disabilities, including providing support for and updates to employees throughout the ADA accommodation request process.

  - The ADA specialists should have comprehensive ADA knowledge and skills, including how ADA and FMLA/OFLA laws and county policies and practices apply to different types of employees.

  - The ADA specialists should have strong interpersonal and relationship building skills.

  - IDEA and other stakeholders should be consulted about placement of ADA specialists within the organization.

- ADA specialists should work with IDEA, ODE, Department HR, Central HR, and County Attorneys to review the ADA accommodation process to identify and implement ways to remove barriers to and streamline the application and process (e.g. make the process, including paperwork, easy to access, complete and submit) and ensure that the process is followed consistently across departments.

  - County Leadership should then work with Central and Department HR as well as ODE to develop and hold departments responsible to follow the accommodation process consistently.

- ADA specialists should work with county partners to create a list that tracks requests for accommodations. This list would be ongoing and require regular updating (to include new requests and/or information about the accommodation that was provided). The purposes of this list include: creating accountability for accommodation requests, tracking and quantifying accommodations, sharing knowledge of strategies and/or promising practices, and keeping track of challenges or barriers. The ADA Specialists would be responsible for creating and maintaining this list and sharing information with employees, HR, leaders and others.

- Strengthen communication and awareness about:

  - How to request accommodations, where to find information, and who is eligible to request accommodations.

    ° This information should be up-to-date; easily and universally accessible on county websites (e.g., Commons, HR websites); and managers should review information at onboarding for new employees and annually with all employees.

  - Confidentially – Managers, HR, ADA Specialists, and all parties involved in the ADA accommodation process should understand that they must keep disability and accommodation information confidential both when required by law and when requested by the employee (when legally allowable).

  - The ADA accommodation process should be a partnership and an on-going iterative process between employees, HR, and, when applicable, managers and medical providers. This should be an iterative process, i.e. it should include regular communication about:

  - The status of requests for accommodations.

- Plans for partnering with employees for on-going support and follow-up about accommodations to ensure the accommodations are working well. The person requesting the accommodation should have the chance to indicate a preference for who they will work with (likely the ADA Specialist, their manager, and/or HR) to evaluate their accommodations and ensure they are effective.

- Events or changes to the workspace that may impact employees (e.g., painting, carpet cleaning, or construction in the building, impacts on parking, especially when handicap accessible parking is changing, when work spaces are being reconfigured or moved, etc.).

  ° This communication should be done in advance of events or changes. Managers, HR, ADA Specialists, as well as employees should be involved in the accommodation process.

  ° When the county is planning events or changes that may impact employees, IDEA and other employees should be included in decision-making processes.

  ° When there are events and changes that may impact employees, support should be provided and accommodations should be implemented so that employees can effectively continue their work.

- Clearly define practices for more complex accommodation cases.

- Work with IDEA and other stakeholders to better understand how specific county policies, practices, and processes related to FMLA/OFLA may adversely impact people with disabilities, and work to minimize the adverse impacts.

- Remove institutional barriers to the formal accommodation process, while still encouraging managers to help employees get the support they need.

- Create a centralized repository and inventory of equipment, software, and other materials and resources that are used as accommodations, so that if equipment, software, etc. is no longer used by employees, they can be used by other employees, regardless of department. This list could serve as a resource to help employees, managers, leaders and/or other staff become acquainted with potential options for accommodations.

- Ensure that the equipment for accommodations works properly and that software and technology is up to date and compatible with other county-wide and department-specific platforms as well as any adaptive technology.

- Facilities, IT, county leaders, departmental HR, Central HR, and County Attorneys, in collaboration with IDEA and ODE should revisit, update, and finalize ADA compliance plans to ensure that all county buildings (e.g., elevators, ramps, automatic doors, parking, etc.), services and events (e.g., ASL interpreters, closed captioning, etc.), materials (e.g., large print, Braille, etc.), and resources (e.g., websites, trainings, etc.) meet ADA requirements that the county is in compliance with the ADA for workspaces and events.

  - Ensure quality and certification of contracted service providers (e.g., ASL interpreters) meet the users' needs.

- Develop, through aforementioned training and leadership, an organizational expectation that when planning meetings, trainings, and/or events, employ the best practice of asking meeting, training, or event participants if they need accommodations to participate and then providing the requested accommodations. It is important that trainings and events not compound accessibility issues; trainings and events should comply with ADA accessibility standards (e.g., enforce scent-free policies, have materials in large print and accessible with screen readers, provide interpreters, etc.).

- To be responsive to the diverse needs of employees and their range of accommodations, encourage flexibility with work places (e.g. allow teleworking, reassignment to a new workspace, etc.) and work schedules (e.g. being able to flex their work hours, work alternative schedule, like 4-10's) when possible.

- Funding or budget issues should not be a barrier to providing accommodations. IDEA, ODE, County Leadership, and county budget/finance leaders should work together to consider a budget policy or structure that will ensure funding for accommodations is not a barrier. Some considerations include the following:

  - A needs assessment should be conducted to better understand the number, type, and cost of accommodations occurring at the county. This assessment could be aligned with the development of tracking lists and assessment of ADA Specialists' workload mentioned in other recommendations.

  - Some possible structures include:

    ° Encouraging and/or requiring departments to set aside funding in their annual budgets specifically for ADA accommodations.

    ° As suggested by participants in this project, the county could create a centralized budget and cost center for purchasing equipment, software, and other items for accommodation.

  - All county-sponsored events and trainings should be required to include budget to pay for ADA accommodation expenses (e.g., ASL interpreters, closed captioning, etc.).

Conclusion

The county is embarking on adoption of the Multnomah County Workforce Equity Strategic Plan (WESP) and is working to make changes in policies, procedures, and culture to create a workplace of safety, trust, and belonging for all staff. By adopting the recommendations from this project, the county has an opportunity to implement and enforce policies that support the full range of employees with disabilities, in all aspects of their work. Incorporating these recommendations in the county's next steps towards Workforce Equity will help to ensure that employees with disabilities can not only perform their work tasks, but are included in the county's vision of safety, trust, and belonging for all employees.

Resources

This list is not comprehensive. It is a compilation of resources suggested by participants, IDEA members, and others. At the time of this publication, the links and information are accurate. A more comprehensive list will be coming soon to the IDEA ERG website.

Multnomah County Resources
IDEA /ERGs (formerly AdAPT) – Public website access
IDEA/ERGs – Multco Commons access (for Mutnomah County Employees only)
Multnomah County Benefits
Multnomah County Central Human Resources
  • For the County's ADA policy, go to the section on Labor Relations

Community Resources
Disability Rights Oregon
FACT Oregon
INCIGHT (Portland based organization)
Oregon Commission for the Blind
Oregon Association of the Deaf

Resources about Accommodations and Disabilities
Americans with Disabilities Act
U.S. Equal Employment Opportunity Commission (EEOC)
Job Accommodation Network
Invisible Disabilities Association
  • Chemical Sensitivities
Autistic Self-Advocacy Network (ASAN)

Universal Design
universaldesign.com
Interaction Design Foundation
City Lab Article – example of universal design
Universal Design and the Problem of "Post-Disability" Ideology, Design and Culture, Aimi Hamraie (2016). http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/17547075.2016.1218714

Implementing Accessibility
WebAIM – introduction to digital accessibility

Miscellaneous
But You Don't Look Sick: The Story Behind the Smiles. Christine Miserandino. Spoon Theory
  • Spoon Theory graphic