

## **BoggsCast Episode 13: Abby George**

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JESSICA SHORT: Welcome to BoggsCast, where faculty and staff at The Boggs Center on Developmental Disabilities explore best practice, showcase success stories, and help listeners envision possibilities for innovation through interviews with state and national experts. Part of Rutgers Robert Wood Johnson Medical School, The Boggs Center is New Jersey's University Center for Excellence in Developmental Disabilities and Leadership Education in Neurodevelopmental Disabilities program. I'm Jessica Short, Training and Consultation Specialist. In this episode, we'll be discussing community engagement supporting a meaningful life with Abby George.

Abby George began her professional career as a special education teacher, but quickly realized she wanted to make an impact in the adult population of people with intellectual and developmental disabilities. Abby started as an Employment Consultant at SEEC in Silver Spring, Maryland in 2014, and has become a subject matter expert in customized employment. Currently she is in the role of Customized Employment Mentor, where she gets to share her expertise with all programs at SEEC, and help staff understand that employment skills are vital for everyone, not just those receiving employment services.

Welcome, Abby, and thank you for joining us.

ABBY GEORGE: Thank you so much for having me.

JESSICA SHORT: I want to start off by talking about the organization you work with, SEEC. SEEC is a progressive, nonprofit agency located in Maryland, providing a wide range of community supports to help people with intellectual and developmental disabilities live lives of their choosing.

I first became aware of SEEC at a conference in 2018, where I listened to a presentation about how SEEC's day services were provided completely in the community. Let's start there. SEEC's day services-- what prompted the move away from facility based to community-based services?

ABBY GEORGE: In short, we just thought it was the right thing to do. (LAUGHTER)

We really-- our our acronym, SEEC, stands for seeking equality, empowerment in the community, right. So we say community in our name. And we really wanted to kind of live that mission, and be authentic about it. So we thought that's where people should be-- thriving members of their community. So—

JESSICA SHORT: That's great. And the acronym again is-- what is the acronym again?

ABBY GEORGE: So it's changed a little bit over the years. But back when this major organizational change was happening it was Seeking Equality and Empowerment in the Community. We have substituted one of the E's now for Employment because that's our next big mission. (LAUGHTER)

JESSICA SHORT: Very nice. That's great. I was so excited about SEEC when I heard about them, but I never really knew what the acronym was for.

ABBY GEORGE: (LAUGHING) I know.

JESSICA SHORT: So that process, that process that SEEC went through, moving from facility based to community-based services, what do you feel were the most important parts or the most important steps that the organization needed to take for that move?

ABBY GEORGE: Well, it was bringing people along I think was the first major obstacle. And of course I've only been at SEEC since 2014 so I wasn't here when all of this was taking place. But I've talked to a lot of people with institutional knowledge who were and were part of this huge change. And without a doubt, the number one thing that they say is bringing people along, right? It's bringing-- the first conversation was with DDA. Like hey, we no longer want to do facility based stuff. We want to get people out in their community. So that was kind of the first conversation.

And then it was with staff, because, I mean, that was a huge culture shift at that time, right? Moving out of facilities and oh, I have to go into the community now? And what am I supposed to do all day, right? And I think families were, and people we support, were probably the biggest obstacle or kind of challenge that we had-- really getting people to buy into this philosophy that people belong in their communities.

People I talked to, my colleague Steve Blanks, about this at length. He said a concern of a small group of families was my child's going to die. Like if they're not taken care of, if they're not in a safe bubble in this facility that they have been in-- if they're outside in their communities, riding the bus or taking classes, they're going to die. There's that safety net that a facility brings that the unknown of the community doesn't provide. So that was a real challenge.

And we laid out plans. We talked about here's exactly what we're going to do tomorrow, right. It was-- I mean, we had the long-term conversation too, but like what does my child's day look like tomorrow, right? What does this mean for us? So it was-- that was step number one. It's just buy-in and communication ad nauseum. (LAUGHTER)

JESSICA SHORT: That's great. I mean, so that buy in is so important. So DDA, I guess, is your state entity in Maryland?

ABBY GEORGE: Yes, yeah, they're our state funding entity. Yeah.

JESSICA SHORT: So getting them on board, then getting staff on board, then getting families and individuals on board?

ABBY GEORGE: Yeah, Yeah.

JESSICA SHORT: So that buy-in is so important.

ABBY GEORGE: Absolutely. I mean, and that's with any major change, right? I mean, this was a major change, but it's with anything that you've got to bring people along. You can't just bamboozle them with, hey, we're going to change the way we operate. And we're going to change what this looks like.

And you know what, some people were fully against it, right? And they and they weren't going to get over it, and that's fine, right. We had-- SEEC had to be OK with losing some people as a result of this. And out of the 100, 125 people we were supporting at that time, we only lost like 6 to 8 people that we supported.

So you know, again, with all the communication we were doing, and all the information sharing, and really listening, that was a big part of it too. It wasn't just one way communication. We were really listening to the fears and the apprehensions of families and people we support.

But out of all of that, yeah, we only lost a handful of people. And that's OK, right? They just-- at that time, it wasn't right for them. It wasn't right for their family. And that's OK. You have to kind of be flexible about that.

JESSICA SHORT: And that's great. I mean, those numbers are pretty good. And so, SEEC decided that this was the route that they were going to take. This was the avenue that we were going to-- they were going to take.

ABBY GEORGE: Yeah, so basically, once SEEC was like, OK, community it is, we just hit the ground running. And we actually just stopped admitting people into our facility-based program, our day program. We just stopped admitting people, right, because it's too much. It's too much to do while you're bringing new people on, with the expectation that their lives are going to look a certain way in the existing structure that we had, when we were catapulting towards a totally different way. So we just said, you know what, not accepting people for a little while. We're going to figure this out on our own.

And so, the way we approached it is, of course we're based in Montgomery County, Maryland, which is right outside of Washington D.C. It's a huge county, very populous, and we're very fortunate that there are lots of things to do here. But what we did is we broke the county down into smaller regions, right. So we did it geographically, so kind of by city, right. So we did like Silver Spring. That's actually the team that we piloted first. But now we have five geographic teams. So it's a little bit easier to manage, right, rather than thinking about the whole entire community.

But we piloted our Silver Spring team because that's the community that we knew the best. That's where SEEC's headquarters were. That's where we figured out what staff lived there. We paired them up with people. We were really intentional about that piece. And then we went out and did things in Silver Spring. (LAUGHTER)

JESSICA SHORT: And that kind leads me into this next question. So your services in-- at SEEC, they're called Community Engagement?

ABBY GEORGE: Yeah, our day program is called Community Engagement, right. So we were really intentional about putting that word in the title of our department, right, because that's what people are doing. They're engaged in their communities in a meaningful way.

JESSICA SHORT: Great, and how is the community utilized when providing those services? So you said Silver Spring is the pilot. And I guess that's the thing. Like that pilot-- how did that pilot start? You talked about teams. So the staff works as a team?

ABBY GEORGE: Yeah, so the structure-- we have a team coordinator, a team lead, right, and then we have our direct support professionals under them. And then, I don't know what the ratio was at that time, but now it's usually 1 to 2, 1 to 3, at the most.

And we try to group people kind of by similar interest, right. So these folks love to be active, they like to work out, exercise, that kind of thing. These folks like to be more indoors, maybe they're a little more introverted, more studious, or whatever it may be. These people like to learn and take classes, and try new things. So we try to group them kind of with similar interests so that we could create schedules that were person-centered.

And so, yeah, we kind of just had people brainstorm, right. And knowing what's in your community, doing some research, is, of course, vital to providing quality community-based services. But yeah, people kind of went out. We have a great local public library in Silver Spring. We have a really active downtown-- restaurants and all sorts of stuff. We have great parks around Silver Spring. So it was just-- we weren't too prescriptive about you need to-- from 9 to 10, you're doing this. From 10 to 11, you're doing this, right. We said, just go out. Right? Go see what's around. Go explore. Go hang out. Go spend some time in the park. And that was kind of how it started.

And then, as we became more familiar, and made more connections, especially relationships are so important to quality community engagement. But then we got more intentional about it. Right. So we can take a class here. There's a community garden here. You know, so you can start to pinpoint things specifically that people can become involved in. But initially, it was just like, yeah, go out and find some stuff to do. (LAUGHTER)

JESSICA SHORT: That's great. But, I mean, that's a great start. It's... you know, be in the community. Be out there.

Working and providing services in the community definitely requires a lot of autonomy and independence on the part of DSPs. So has the recruitment process for DSPs changed with the shift to the Community Engagement Program?

ABBY GEORGE: Yes and no. So of course, yeah, like back then facilities were kind of the norm, right? If you worked in the IDD industry, in this field, you probably worked in a facility. And so, people were coming with that type of experience. But I think we try to be really open and honest, and targeted in our interview process, right? So we say like, hey, this is what SEEC is about. We're fully community-based. We believe in person-centeredness, and the person is the captain of their ship. We're just the vessel by which they live their best lives. So we make it really clear upfront that you're not going to be in a facility. You're not going to be kind of sitting somewhere all day. We believe in impactful lives for people.

But I would say what we look for in staff is different. We don't necessarily like-- we don't need you to have experience working with people with disabilities. Like that's by no means a prerequisite for us. We look for people who are outgoing, who are curious, that's a big personality trait that we look for in people. Like are you curious? Do you want to know more about the person you support? Do you want to know more about how to help them communicate better? Do you want to know more about the community in which they live? Curiosity is a big thing for us. You know, outgoing-- do you do you utilize your network and your relationships in your own life, right? If you're super introverted or you don't like to go out and get to know people, then that role might not be best for you, because that's again, like you said, we're very autonomous. We're kind of out there all day. Very rarely do you see a lot of staff in one place at one time.

So yeah, I would say it's more the type of person, the personality, that we look for rather than skills or experience. We can teach all of that. We can teach skills, but we can't teach you to be curious.

JESSICA SHORT: I think that's such a great point is that, especially in our field, right, in Human Services, we look for these specific standards of almost boxes to check, right? But the personality is something that you can't really train. Like, really looking at the aspects that you can train, and the skills that you can train, but the other aspects, that kind of innate personality for the job, that outgoing personality, that person that's able to support the person out in the community, to build those relationships.

ABBY GEORGE: Yeah, and we always talk about our recruitment efforts. Like where are we recruiting? From what pool? Like what different place? Like what's the most creative place we can hang up a flyer, right? (LAUGHTER)

And we've talked about, well, what are professions, like if we're looking at someone's resume, how can you tell if someone is curious or outgoing or whatever? And we're like, well, what type of professions require that, right? And it's usually like bartenders. They always have to kind of work people, and have to be curious about people, right. Hairdressers, right, you go to the barbershop or you go to the hair salon, and it's just talk, talk, talk, right?

JESSICA SHORT: Right.

ABBY GEORGE: So yeah, so we very rarely look at the experience. It's more about, again, personality, because you can't teach that.

JESSICA SHORT: That's great. That's great. And that idea of curiosity-- I think that's a really great point, especially when getting to know the individuals. And I think-- let's talk about that.

How important is getting to know the person that you're supporting, when it comes to the Community Engagement Services? And what are some of the tools that SEEC uses to kind of discover who the person is?

ABBY GEORGE: That's the most important part of being a Direct Support Professional, is you have to be an expert on the person that you support. And we do that in a variety of ways. Again, that curiosity really plays into it. You have to-- especially if the person doesn't communicate using words or they have an alternative communication style that they use, that information doesn't always flow from, if a staff leaves and a new staff comes in, or-- (LAUGHTER) and so you have to be really intentional about, I have to be able to communicate with this person first and foremost. So we-- that's a tool that we use. We have a communication assessment, which we use for people supported. And it's, do they communicate using words? Do they use sign language? Do they have their own signs they use? Do they use gestures? And what do those look like? And how do I recognize when this person needs or wants something, or is trying to tell me something?

We also use interest inventories, skill inventories, for new people who are coming in, and they're working with a brand new person who they've never met before. What's a good starting place, right? What is this person interested in? If they're not-- if they like to be around people all the time, probably taking a walk in the park by themselves isn't meaningful to them. That's not how they want to spend their days. Or if they hate coffee, why are we taking them to Starbucks every day? (LAUGHTER)

So, it's just, yeah, kind of a baseline interest inventory. You know, I like to have lunch with friends or I like to read books or I like to watch movies or whatever it may be. And that serves two purposes. A, it gives us kind of some activities to try, some ideas to fill up that schedule. But it creates a conversation piece too. So, if they like to read books and magazines, oh, what's your favorite book or magazine, right? Let's start a conversation about it. You're engaging them in a different way. So yeah, those are kind of the baseline tools that we use.

JESSICA SHORT: So it sounds like SEEC is really intentional from every aspect, when it comes to the Community Engagement Services, from the staff that are going to be providing the service to the individuals that they're matched with, and the communities that they're working in.

ABBY GEORGE: Yeah, absolutely. One of the biggest factors that we consider is relationships and networks. We really pride ourselves on being an active part of our community, rather than just being an entity in the community. And so, we're all about relationships and we've-- over the past couple of years done like neighborhood walks with Neighbors Inc. in New Jersey. And so they've really taught us how to

be really observant, and to, I mean, it's not a crazy concept, right. It's not like there's a checklist or anything that you have to do. It's literally just getting out in your immediate community, and just like talking to people, right, being curious, and making connections. And that's how we want people to spend their days, is getting to know people in their communities, and for them to know the people we support too.

JESSICA SHORT: So engaging their communities, engaging the people in their communities. What a great concept.

[LAUGHTER]

JESSICA SHORT: Have there been times where staff have tried something with an individual, that an individual said they would be interested in, but then it wasn't a great success?

ABBY GEORGE: (LAUGHING) Yeah, talk to every single one of our staff, and every member of our employment team.

JESSICA SHORT: Right?

ABBY GEORGE: Yeah, absolutely. And it's interesting too, right, because I think a lot of people we support-- or a handful of people we support are hesitant to try new things, because they're very routine oriented. And this is all they've ever known. This is all they've ever had exposure to. And so a lot of times they're not willing to go outside their comfort zones.

We just kicked off this person-driven technology pilot at SEEC, using iPads. And when we did our kind of kickoff event, we have seven people we support, and their staff participating in the pilot. And after the kick-off event, we would go and talk to people and say, how's it going? How are we using the iPad? And staff was like, they don't care about it. Like they do not want it at all. There's nothing that they want to be a part of on this iPad.

And so, I think the key in any situation like that is making it meaningful to the person. So, with the iPad, right, you think this communication app is going to open this person's eyes, and they're going to be so into it. And it's like, well, they've had their own communication pattern for their 45 years that they've been alive. They don't want to try a new communication method. It's not meaningful to them. They've been able to get what they want for 45 years, using the way that they communicate. Let's find a different way to make it impactful to them.

It's all a learning experience too, right? So we learn from that. That communication app, not going to work for her. She doesn't care about it. She already communicates. But let's find a different way to make it meaningful.

JESSICA SHORT: And that's something, I think we-- a lesson we all need to remember sometimes, that even if something doesn't go the way we expect it, right, we still learn something from it. Right, we learn that we don't try that again. Or we learn that they like this part about it, but not this part about it.

ABBY GEORGE: Absolutely. Failure is what drives us, honestly. We really, again, pride ourselves in being creative, and trying out-of-the-box things. And if they don't work, it's cool. Like we've learned. Let's remember that next time, and let's try a different way.

JESSICA SHORT: That's great. And I think that's really important for an organization as a whole to understand and internalize.

You brought up technology. And so, let's talk about that. How important is technology when it comes to providing effective community supports in the Community Engagement Program?

ABBY GEORGE: Yeah, so this is something we're just kind of switching our focus to now. So, as of now, like, all of our staff have iPhones that they use. They all have either a tablet or a laptop. And so, they use that to kind of do on the spot stuff, right. So if the person decides, hey, this afternoon, I want to go watch a movie. OK, let's look it up right now, and see what we can do.

It's huge in travel training, right. So we're really fortunate to have a great public transportation system in Montgomery County. It is very confusing though. (LAUGHING) So it's good. We have an app that's developed strictly for this area for public transportation. So we use that to plan routes. We teach people if they have a smartphone, if you're on the bus, you can follow along. And each stop on the bus goes gray as soon as it's passed, so you can kind of know when to get off, pull the chain.

But I would say, we're going to be a lot more intentional in the next several months about using technology, especially as it relates to people being independent. In this industry and again, we struggle with it too, is we're so-- the people we support are so cue dependent, right. They're always looking to their staff to say, tell me what to do next, right. But we want to get away from that, right, because people want to live independent lives. And who are we to kind of step into that role of being their spokesperson? And so, we're working towards people using iPads to order their lunch or order their coffee or go shopping online or watch YouTube videos about a topic that they're interested in, as opposed to us doing that for them.

It's twofold, right, it takes the pressure off of us as staff. And it takes-- it's a little bit more efficient because we're not always having to step in and say, no, don't do this. Do it that way. Or tell the person, hello. They said hello to you. Or tell the person your order, right. That's so-- we're giving so much information, and so much direction. How do we take that role off of us, and put it on the person we support, right? But it's hard to unlearn that behavior, right? Learned helplessness is real. And we do it to ourselves, right. We are the cause of that. And so it's having to unlearn that behavior about always directing the person to do something, and letting them do it themselves.

JESSICA SHORT: Right. Alright, so, since your area of expertise is customized employment, I would really like to discuss your thoughts about how community based supports and services impact employment for people with intellectual and developmental disabilities.

ABBY GEORGE: Yeah, they go hand in hand, honestly. Employment is a part of a meaningful life, right? It's a part of being in our communities. We work, and live, and thrive in our communities. So, I think the two go hand in hand.

There are so many employment skills that you can build during your day in the community that can be directly applied to a job search or discovery. So, I always like to use the example of, even if a person isn't "ready for work", if they're not interested in work, we can still build up skills just by doing kind of everyday things.

So, if we take swim lessons-- so the person goes swimming. That's their recreation during the day. They have to go in. They have to usually greet someone, maybe at the front desk. They have to pay their money. They have to, at least at our swim center locally, it's multi-level. So you have to navigate. You have to get changed beforehand. So I mean, just in going swimming, right, we covered like four or five skills. So talking to people, that's interaction, social skills. Money management, right, I have to either know how to use my card. I have to swipe it. Or if I'm using cash, I have to make sure I have enough to give the person, right. So there's some kind of financial literacy there. Navigation, I have to know how to get around places, making sure I have all my-- I have my towel. I have my goggles. I have my swim cap. I have the correct bathing suit. So those are all things that could be directly applied to looking for a job.

So, we work, I think, really intentionally about-- and I'll talk about this specific team in a minute, that does this really well-- but they look-- they break down kind of like a task analysis for each activity that they do. And they say, what are the skills associated with this? And what do I need to know going in? Right, so if the person I support isn't, or doesn't use words to communicate, how am I going to greet somebody, right? Do I practice giving a wave? Do I smile? Right, there's some coaching that goes along with that. So they work really intentionally about the skills that are built into each of these activities.

JESSICA SHORT: And that's great. Really intentional with the skill building with community, with the Community Engagement Program. And being out in the community, just in general, do you find that with the Community Engagement Program, people are broadening their networks of who they know in the community?

ABBY GEORGE: Absolutely, and that's a huge part of-- that's why we're so intent on making, or helping people cultivate relationships, because how do you get a job? It's through networking, right? It's like, there's some statistic out there that says like 80% of people get their jobs through people that they know, (LAUGHTER) or something like that. But yeah, that's why relationships are so important. A, it's skill building, right. You can work on your social relationships, getting to know new people, how to have conversations, how to stay on topic when you're having conversations. You might start spending time with

that person. Maybe they're teaching you a skill or something new. So that's why relationships are kind of the bedrock of our Community Engagement Program.

JESSICA SHORT: That's wonderful. What advice-- what advice would you give to an agency wanting to move from facility-based services to community-based services?

ABBY GEORGE: This is probably going to be frustrating. But just do it, right. (LAUGHTER) Just do it, right. But start small. Right, so again, we piloted a group of 5 or 10 people first, to go out and kind of be in their communities. But we just decided to do it, right, because there's that saying, if you wait until you're ready to do something, you're never going to do it. There's never going to be enough processes, enough structures in place, to make you feel like you are ready to move from a facility-based program to community-based. But you will learn along the way, right.

It's not like it went perfectly smooth for us. It did not. There were lots of bumps along the way. But, we took them, and we discussed them. And we learned from them. And then, we did better. And eventually we got really good at what we were doing. So I would say, again, we just kind of cut off our services, and said, at least for our facility-based one. And we said, we're not accepting new people for that. Here's the direction we're taking. Let's work on this in-house. But we went out and did it.

JESSICA SHORT: You made the decision. You had the mission. You knew the why of what you were doing. And SEEC moved forward. And that was the direction they were taking, and that's where it was going.

ABBY GEORGE: Yeah, again, I mean, we figured out that we're doing people a disservice by keeping them in a facility all day. I mean, and it's really about putting yourself in that person's shoes too. Like would-- do we want to just be sitting in a place all day with white walls and you know, (LAUGHING) doing puzzles or whatever it may be? Probably not for most of us. And so why would we-- if we wouldn't find it acceptable for ourselves, why would we find it acceptable for the people that we support? They deserve full rich lives too.

So, yeah, two I guess pieces of advice, just do it, but start small. And communicate, communicate, communicate.

JESSICA SHORT: I think, I mean, I think that's huge too. The idea of communication, and the idea that-- being open to learning from things that don't go well. I think that's huge, administratively, being ready for it's not always going to go as you planned. And what do you take away from that?

ABBY GEORGE: Yeah, most of the time it's not going to go as you planned. And you can have every process written. You can have the structure put in place. But, when you apply real life to that, you can see how quickly it kind of falls apart. So I say build processes and structures as you go.

JESSICA SHORT: Abby, I cannot thank you enough. This was so informative. Thank you for joining us. Thank you for being here.

ABBY GEORGE: Thank you so much. This was fun. I really appreciate it.

JESSICA SHORT: Thank you.

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