



# South Dakota

# Possibilities 2024

A publication by the Center for Disabilities  
about the state's abundant opportunities  
for people with disabilities

# South Dakota Possibilities 2024

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## Eric Kurtz, Ph.D.

Executive Director,  
Center for Disabilities

## Jessica Lamb

Executive Director,  
South Dakota Council on Developmental Disabilities

## Principal Writer

Judy Zwolak

## Managing Editor

Kendra Gottsleben

## Photography

Lynsey Prosser  
Traci Roemen

## Designer

Eric Dalseide



UNIVERSITY OF  
**SOUTH DAKOTA**  
SANFORD SCHOOL OF MEDICINE

## Center for Disabilities

A University Center for Excellence in Developmental  
Disabilities Education, Research and Service

Health Science Center  
1400 W. 22nd St., Sioux Falls, SD 57105  
Phone: 605-357-1439  
Fax: 605-357-1438  
cd@usd.edu  
usd.edu/cd  
X: @CD\_SouthDakota  
Facebook: CDSouthDakota  
YouTube: /Center4Disabilities

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University of South Dakota  
Sanford School of Medicine

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# Welcome to our Ninth Edition of *South Dakota Possibilities!*

This publication celebrates the achievements of individuals with disabilities and honors the families, professionals and organizations that support them. Our mission is to raise awareness and highlight the skills, abilities and unique talents of those dedicated to improving the lives of individuals with developmental disabilities and their families throughout their lives.

At the Center for Disabilities, we envision a future where everyone, including those with disabilities, can achieve independence, self-determination, productivity and community inclusion. In this edition, you'll find motivating stories of South Dakotans who pursue their dreams with independence, determination, optimism and commitment. We hope you enjoy getting to know the remarkable individuals featured here. The possibilities are endless, and the potential is limitless!

We love sharing these stories and are always on the lookout for more individuals to highlight from across the state. If you know someone who would like to be featured in our next issue, please email us at [cd@usd.edu](mailto:cd@usd.edu) with their name and contact information.

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# Connor Roemen: **An All-Around Athlete in Adaptive Sports**

Nineteen-year-old Connor Roemen is an easy-going, friendly guy whose outlook leans toward the positive. But when it came time to work with his family on buying a new car, he put his foot down.

“I did not want a van,” asserted Roemen, describing a common vehicle available to individuals who need hand controls. “I told my parents, ‘I cannot drive a van around town. I’m not going to be able to get any girls with a van.’”

He won the argument. A GMC truck with wing-like doors is what you’ll see Roemen motoring around his native Sioux Falls and points further out as he works, hangs out with friends and family and travels to compete in various athletic activities.

Like his car, the sports equipment Roemen uses have modifications that allow people with disabilities to participate. Three years ago, the O’Gorman High School student and athlete was a passenger in a car that slid off the road during a rainstorm in Okoboji, Iowa. Roemen no longer has the use of his legs since the accident, but he retained his interest in staying active and athletic.

Involved in sports from a young age, Roemen played football, basketball, baseball and tennis growing up. He also ran track and was an avid snowboarder and skier.

Now, he can enthusiastically list the sports he has taken part in since the accident. “I’ve done skiing, mountain biking, sled hockey, tennis and pickleball, but I really want to golf,” he said.

Roemen takes part in these activities by using assistive equipment and seeking out groups and organizations that provide access to adaptive sports. Physical therapists, rehabilitation centers, and local sports organizations often organize activities or have connections to such groups.

Traci Roemen, Connor’s mother, said her son seeks out these activities with enthusiasm and an open mind.

“His accident has been a life changer for all of us,” she said. “It is Connor’s positive outlook on life, his love for adventure and willingness to try new things, and his faith that has gotten us through the last three years.”

Participation in adaptive sports provides numerous benefits.



Move United, a nonprofit organization that promotes sports participation among youths and adults with physical disabilities, found that engaging in sports makes a difference. According to the organization, people with disabilities who indicate that they are physically active are more likely to be employed, to believe that being physically active has helped them advance in their jobs, and to lead to a healthier lifestyle. They also report higher life satisfaction and are positive about their life prospects.

Roemen agreed that maintaining an active lifestyle positively affects his life.

“If I didn’t have any of these opportunities to get outside and have fun, my life would definitely be different because I would just go to work, come home and do the same thing every day without having any adventure,” he said.

Apart from some general knowledge about paralympic competitions, Roemen hadn’t previously been aware of adaptive sports until he was shown some options by his rehabilitation therapists at Craig Hospital, a Denver-area rehabilitation center where he had spent two months after his accident.

“At the time my head wasn’t in the right place to think about it,” he said.

It wasn’t until he was back in Sioux Falls and went back to school at O’Gorman that Roemen took an interest in participating and competing in sports.

“I got back into the swing of things and started seeing my friends again, just getting back into a normal life routine helped me get interested,” he said.

Working with physical therapist Matt Leedom, DPT, Roemen first tried adaptive skiing at Great Bear Ski Valley in Sioux Falls, where he joined Leedom in a tandem bi-ski as they hit the slopes.

“It was so awesome, I had so much fun,” he said. “After the first day, I was happy that I could get back on the mountain, go fast, hit jumps and be myself again and not just be in a wheelchair 24/7. I can go out and do fun activities.”

Sled hockey was his next trial sport, followed by mountain biking. Craig Hospital led a group bike trip to Wyoming, which he participated in. “They do a teen trip every year and I got to go to Jackson Hole,” he said. While on the trip, Roemen tried out a fully-electric bike called a Bowhead Reach.

“It’s made by a really special company that makes high-end bikes and as soon as I got on



one of those bikes last year, I fell in love with it right away and had to order one,” he said.

As with a lot of adaptive sports equipment, this bike wasn't cheap – the basic model starts at \$16,000. A grant from the Kelly Brush Foundation, a Vermont-based organization that empowers people with spinal cord injuries to lead active and engaged lives, helped Roemen get his dream bike.

Organizations like the Kelly Brush Foundation – which also helped Roemen buy a sports wheelchair – are an important part of the adaptive sports community, he said. Some carry the names of well-known individuals who became disabled after an injury. The Christopher & Dana Reeve Foundation is one such example.

A Connor Roemen Foundation may exist in the future. “It's in the early stages, but I'm working on it,” he said.

Another service that he has used is the South Dakota Game Fish and Parks' program that provides free use of an all-terrain Action Trackchair for outdoor activities when reserved through Sioux Falls' Outdoor Campus East. In the past few years, Roemen traveled through fields independently in the Trackchair when chasing game through the

fields on hunting excursions with his family.

Roemen currently has a job at Combined Pool and Spa in Sioux Falls where he performs social media marketing tasks and sells pool and spa chemicals. When he's not at work, he hangs out with friends and takes part in as many activities as he can manage.

Just riding his Bowhead adaptive bike around Sioux Falls makes him an unofficial ambassador for adaptive sports.

“When I ride my bike down 41st Street, some people will stop and talk, and I tell them about it,” he said. “It's great to have these experiences and cool conversations that you didn't think you would ever have.”

Another goal for Roemen: creating and promoting his lifestyle brand, “Endure Anything.”

Using this theme, he plans to post content on social media that will appeal to everyone. Pheasant hunting with his family is one example of the type of videos he intends to include in his brand promotion.

“The message is: whatever your obstacle, just push through and endure anything,” Roemen said. “No matter what it is, you can definitely get over that hump in your life.” •



# SERVING THOSE WHO SERVE

## **South Dakota Service Dogs Organization Helps Veterans and First Responders with PTSD**

According to the U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs, about 7% of veterans will experience post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) at some point in their lives. That rate is even higher among first responders such as EMTs and firefighters, research has shown.

One recognized complementary treatment for this hindering disorder is the assistance of a trained psychiatric service dog. The cost of such a dog, however, can run between \$20,000 and \$30,000 and often involves a waiting list of two years.

That expense is out of reach for many individuals with PTSD, said retired United States Air Force Staff Sergeant Tony Russell of Rapid City, South Dakota. Two and a half years ago, Russell and his wife, Eleanor, formed the South Dakota Service Dogs organization to connect

veterans and first responders with trained psychiatric service dogs at no cost. The organization's current efforts are focused on West River South Dakota.

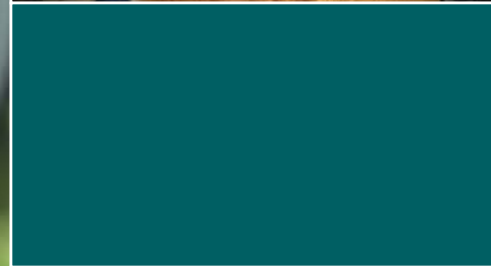
Russell can personally attest to the benefit of such a dog. In 2020, after years of medical injuries, multiple surgeries and service-related trauma, he was gifted a labrador retriever from the Rapid City Rush hockey team. His personal experience inspired him to help others.

"That dog saved my life," he said.

Many of the 178 veterans and first responders who have received trained psychiatric service dogs through the organization tell Russell the same thing when they meet him.

"We can go from potentially losing someone to them becoming an amazing





member of society,” Russell said. “They are out interacting with people, serving in the community. It’s just an incredible thing to see.”

The only paid members of the South Dakota Service Dogs team are four professional trainers and a part-time veteran who performs administrative duties. The Russells and additional volunteers run all other aspects of the program, from screening applicants to seeking donations.

Many of the dogs are donated from breeders, although a few come from humane societies in Belle Fourche, South Dakota, and Rapid City. These animals are usually large breeds, whose size allows them to perform duties often required of a psychiatric service dog. Larger dogs can more easily perform deep pressure therapy, for example, which involves leaning on or lying on their handler to calm anxiety. Handlers with a mobility disability



may also need a bigger dog to help them stand from a seated position.

South Dakota Service Dogs operates a bit differently from other organizations in that most handlers receive their dogs as puppies as young as 12 weeks old. The handler completes tasks and learns to take care of the puppy while creating a strong bond. The dog also becomes used to the handler's scent.

Next the pair completes a 25-week training course before the dog is certified as a psychiatric support dog.

"Everyone receives one-on-one training when it comes to their individual and medical needs," Russell said. "The dog is trained specifically for them."

Involving the handler in the training is a central part of the program, he added.

"If a dog gets sick or has a tragic accident, we don't want to see the person with disabilities get on another two-year waiting list for a trained dog," Russell said. "As soon as they are ready, we can get handlers a new dog and they will be part of the training process again."

Handlers and dogs go through quarterly evaluations and can call for training help at any time. South Dakota Service Dogs also provides all veterinary care and food for the first year.

As a founder of the organization, Russell relates his story to illustrate the challenges faced by veterans with traumatic experiences.

Growing up in rural Western New York state, Russell had a lifelong desire to join the military, eventually enlisting in the Air Force in 2011 and moving to his first station at Ellsworth Air Force Base. There, he met and married Eleanor, who grew up in Hot Springs, South Dakota.

Working as a civil engineer sent Russell and his family – the couple have two boys – on what he called a "world tour." While in Japan on one of his deployments, doctors discovered that he had a heart defect and scheduled him for surgery at an army hospital in Hawaii. The medical intervention did not go well.

"I was actually pronounced dead by the Army doctors and was in a coma for almost a

month,” he said. “I flatlined multiple times.”

A new world greeted Russell as he emerged from the coma. “I knew that things were a bit different, but I didn’t realize how different,” he said.

Blind in one eye, facing multiple additional surgeries, learning to walk again – the challenges mounted. In recovery in Hawaii and at Walter Reed Medical Center in Bethesda, Maryland, Russell had lost his professional career, his identity in his family and his sense of safety. “I slept on the floor of the closet under a pile of dirty laundry,” he said. “It was the only place I felt safe.”

One bright spot: the Walter Reed medical personnel who introduced service dogs into Russell’s therapy noticed a marked improvement in his vital signs and his mood during the animals’ visits with him.

Soon after, a former mentor at Ellsworth Airforce Base reached out to him with news that the Rapid City Rush hockey team had selected Russell to receive a service dog they had sponsored in collaboration with a Sturgis, South Dakota, trainer. Once he medical

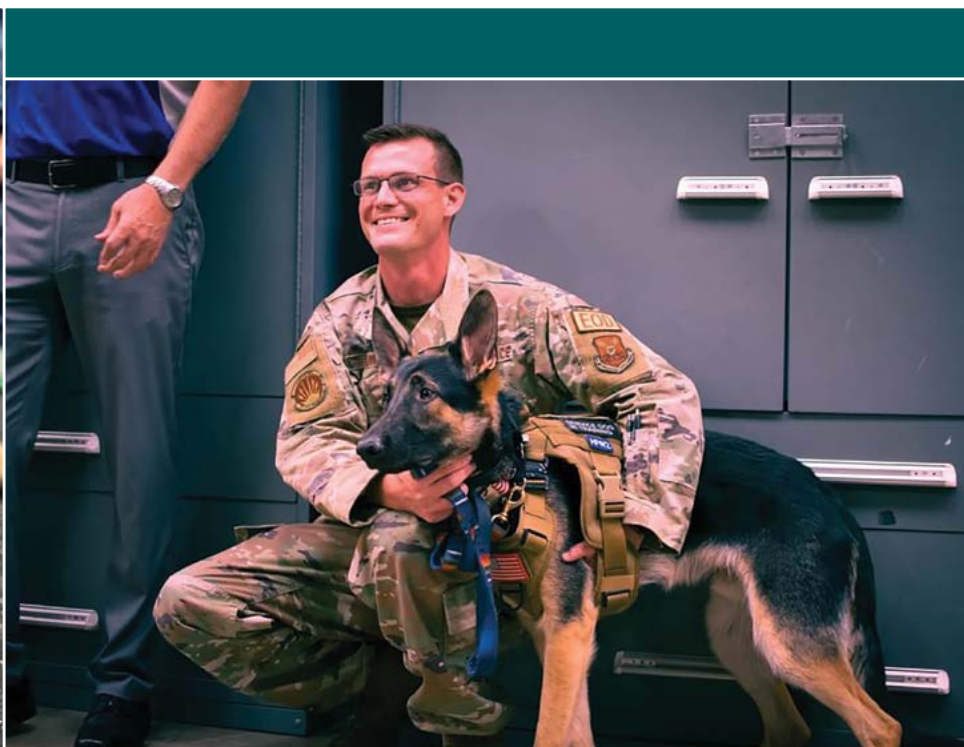
retired from the military, Russell returned to Rapid City and “Rush” became his constant companion, alerting him when he was getting anxious and even protecting his children when Russell’s PTSD caused him to lose his temper.

“These are things I’m not proud of, but when I would yell or throw things because I didn’t know how to manage myself, Rush would shield my children and get between them and me,” he said. “Just creating that barrier allowed my children and me to have a relationship again. Not only did he save my life, but he saved my family.”

“Rush,” Russell’s initial service dog, is now a family pet. “Rip,” a German Shepherd, has taken over his duties.

Although the South Dakota Service Dogs organization focuses on veterans and first responders, it has also worked with outside donors to provide service dogs to people with disabilities such as autism.

“We’re trying to find other avenues to truly help the community as a whole,” Russell said. “There are too many hurting people out there, and this resource is so overlooked.” •





# USD Medical Student Educates Health Professionals About Disabilities

Like every medical student at the University of South Dakota (USD) Sanford School of Medicine, Keely Walker learns about subjects such as anatomy and pathology and participates in clinical rotations. An interest in advocating for people with intellectual and developmental disabilities, however, has added a few more topics to her studies.

The fourth-year student also researches topics such as health outcome disparities and barriers to health care for people with these disabilities. Learning about policies and regulations affecting this population, such as the Americans with Disabilities Act, also fills up her study time.

Walker's research on these subjects and others formed the basis of informational sessions that she presented to other medical students and health professionals as part of a Scholarship Pathways research project performed under the mentorship of USD Center for Disabilities Executive Director Eric Kurtz, Ph.D.

"This topic is timely and important, as over 20% of our population lives with

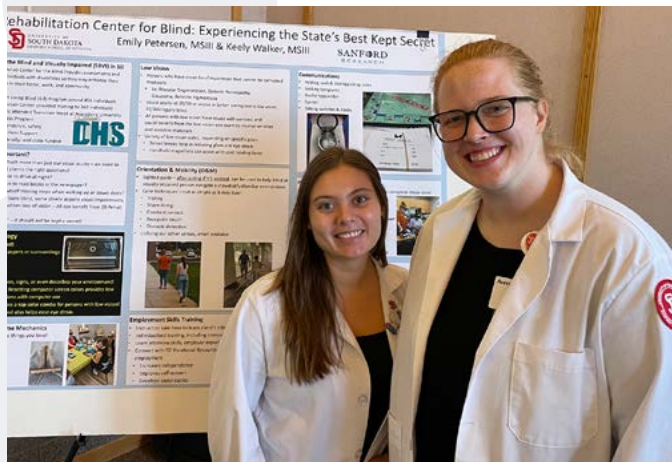
a disability and are likely to experience a multitude of health disparities," said Kurtz. "The training of future health care professionals is an essential part of better understanding of the complexities leading to disparate health outcomes, as well as the development of strategies to address them."

Held at USD's Wegner Health Sciences Library, Walker's presentations included two sessions. The first outlined the history of disability regulations and described topics such as health care disparities faced by those with disabilities.

The second session included a panel of people with disabilities and their caregivers who gave first-hand accounts of their experiences with health care professionals.

"We had really great results," said Walker. "We collected information from participants before and after the meeting to see if their comfort level, knowledge and attitude changed. There was a significant change in people's perspectives."

Her own interest in how people in health care and the community in general interact with individuals who have



Keely Walker

intellectual and developmental disabilities grew from experiences she had as an undergraduate student at the University of North Dakota (UND).

“I got a job as a direct-support professional, and part of my role was to take clients to doctor’s appointments,” she said. “I noticed that in the health care setting there were a lot of people that seemed to treat adults with disabilities like they were small children. I found that frustrating.”

As a shot-putter on the UND track and field team, Walker also volunteered with the Special Olympics North Dakota organization. There, she saw well-meaning volunteers treat the athletes in a similar manner during practice.

“The Special Olympics athletes want to compete. They want to do well,” Walker said. “And people think that they just want someone to clap for them and not give

direction on how they can improve. I think there are a lot of misperceptions surrounding people with disabilities and what they’re capable of.”

An opportunity to educate others and change attitudes came about early in medical school when Walker mentioned a desire to form an interest group on medical care for people with disabilities. Another student encouraged her to pursue turning her idea into a research project through the Scholarship Pathways program at USD’s Sanford School of Medicine. Scholarship Pathways supports independent research by matching medical students with mentors who help direct and support projects related to medical education, research, service or social science.

“Dr. Kurtz agreed to help me with this and the people at the Center for Disabilities have been very supportive,” she said. “They have been my biggest cheerleaders.”

In addition to her independent research, Walker also became one of the three medical student trainees in this year's cohort of the Leadership Education in Neurodevelopmental Disabilities (LEND) program, which provides long-term, graduate level interdisciplinary training as well as interdisciplinary services and care to improve the health of infants, children and adolescents with disabilities. The USD Center for Disabilities manages South Dakota's LEND program, which is funded through the Maternal & Child Health Bureau of the Health Resources and Services.

"It's awesome, I've learned a lot through LEND," she said, noting that the interdisciplinary nature of the program was particularly helpful.

"Being with people from other disciplines made the experience a lot more enriching," Walker said. "For example, I didn't know that both occupational therapy and speech language pathology could both do swallow studies. When people from different disciplines work together, we have a bigger impact."

While she plans to complete a residency in psychiatry after medical school, Walker said she will continue her work as an advocate for people with developmental and intellectual disabilities.

Interest from her fellow medical students demonstrates that medical schools have a responsibility to educate their students about this population, she added.

"The accrediting body for medical education has requirements and guidelines for diversity education," she said. "I think a lot of people, when they think about diversity, skip over people with a disability. Medical schools should recognize that education on this topic is an area of need for their students."

Through her Scholarship Pathways project and participation in LEND, Walker added that she has developed an interest in

disability-related laws and policies in relation to health care. Her thoughts about changes that could benefit the disabled population range from expansive – "The Americans with Disabilities Act hasn't truly been fulfilled to its potential" – to specific – "health insurance provides variable coverage for things like medical equipment."

As a future professional in the medical field, Walker considers it a duty and privilege to learn about and work to improve healthcare for individuals with disabilities. Her newly acquired knowledge and experiences will help guide her as she finishes medical school and moves on through residency and fellowship programs.

"It doesn't get less busy from here in terms of medical education and training," she laughed. "But I intend to continue to be an advocate."

Her mentor sees a bright future for Walker.

"Working with Keely has been an absolute pleasure," Kurtz said. "Not only is she a student of the highest caliber, but she also brings lived experience and passion for improving health care for individuals with disabilities to her research, and clinical skill development. She will not only possess the skills needed to be effective in her role, but I have no doubt she will quickly emerge as a leader in the field." •



Inclusion Equals Success  
at Sioux Falls

# HAIR BOW

Business





Amid the colorful handmade hair bows and accessories on the website of Mary Spargur's Sioux Falls company, The Effortless Bow, shoppers can purchase stickers proclaiming, "Choose to Include."

That little sticker succinctly sums up Spargur's approach to her business, where including people with disabilities on her staff is central to the company's success.

"Everybody is worthy of having an opportunity," she said. "It doesn't matter what you think somebody else is capable of. They have worth and deserve to show you that."

As of early fall 2024, The Effortless Bow has closed its brick-and-mortar studio, is currently on hiatus from creating new items and now focuses on selling their current stock through online orders. The story of the business's founding and development, however, can serve as a useful blueprint for others who may open a similar operation.

The Effortless Bow employed six staff members, including Spargur, four of whom have an intellectual or developmental disability. Together they handmade colorful bows attached to a headband or a clip. Online sales direct to the customer make up the bulk of the company's business.

Spargur, who holds a master's degree in special education with a specialization in intellectual disabilities, started The Effortless Bow after more than 11 years working as a special education teacher in the Sioux Falls School District. The hair accessory company combined her love of crafting with her desire to advocate for people.

It didn't take long for the former teacher to see how certain tasks of her business, which she started in her dining room in October 2021, could be performed by individuals with disabilities.

"That was a big part of how I made decisions," she said. "I didn't want to start



Mary Spargur

paying a manufacturer to hole punch cards, because this is a job for someone. I didn't want to pay a manufacturer to cut the cards, because that is also a job. I just had to find out what I needed to do to be able to hire people."

Spargur contacted Vicky Nelson, district supervisor for the South Dakota Division of Rehabilitation Services, who laid out the groundwork for developing a business that could safely and effectively employ individuals with various needs. One of the first goals was to find an office and studio location. That meant moving the business from Spargur's dining room to a building that was accessible to all.



The creative accessory designer and skilled teacher had to call on some previously untested business and operational skills to make her plan work.

“I don’t even know exactly how it all came together,” she said. “There were so many different things that I needed to check – the square footage, the accessibility, the bus routes, the ability for [Sioux Area Metro] Paratransit to get close enough to the building – all the things.”

In June 2023 she secured the studio location near the intersection of 41st Street and Kiwanis. When it came time to recruit employees for The Effortless Bow, personal connections served Spargur well.

“I’ve been in Sioux Falls my whole life,” she said. “Most of my teaching career was here although I was gone for two years where I taught in a different town. So, I know people in the community and I know the population.”

One employee, Scotty B., who held the position of shipping manager, was recommended by a friend of a friend.

“She said, ‘I think you should hire Scotty. Let me get you his mom’s phone number,’” she said. “And that’s how I got Scotty. He was my first employee.”

An active presence in the Sioux Falls community and on social media – the business runs active Facebook, Instagram and Pinterest accounts – also generated contacts for prospective employees. Spargur’s message of inclusion and empowerment inspired families to reach out to her through case workers and other means.

At The Effortless Bow’s studio location, employees gathered to assemble, package and mail the bows, which come in a variety of colors and designs. Accessories promoting autism and Down syndrome awareness feature prominently among the offerings.

Each employee was an essential part of the process, from creating the bows to packaging

them and mailing them to customers.

“Everybody has different strengths,” Spargur said. “I have one staff member who is excellent at very intricate details. She has a different level of patience and she’s able to do very precise work.”

Other staff members excelled at cutting fabric and coordinating colors and another learned sewing skills.

Tasks that Spargur could potentially outsource to other sources stay in house.

“When I order the cards that we clip our bows onto I could pay extra money to have the company punch the hole and cut the card, which costs a decent amount of money,” she said. “Instead of having the company do it and a machine do it, we do it. We’re creating an opportunity for somebody who has the ability to do it. It’s way more meaningful.”

Her company is just one example of how to include employees with different abilities. Spargur plans to use her experience to promote inclusion at other businesses and in the community.



One way to create an inclusive workplace is to match supports provided to the skills of the employee, she explained. A clear checklist of tasks may work best for one staff person, for example.

Allowing different ways to complete a job is another way to provide support.

“In my business, the customer is getting a box of high-quality beautiful bows,” she said. “How we get there is different for every staff member. I don’t care how the box gets folded as long as it gets folded. If making the bow takes different steps, that’s OK.”

Her successful business is proof that any for-profit company can adopt accommodations, Spargur said. “I’m a business and I have to feed my family. You can still provide opportunities and meet your bottom line.”

Including employees with different abilities in a business opens up opportunities not only for those employees but for other staff members as well, she added.

“This mission isn’t because I feel sorry for anyone,” Spargur said. “All of my staff: I needed them more than they needed me. Honestly, I couldn’t have done this business without them. It is essential that we don’t see people with disabilities as less than and when we start to see them as equals and as capable people.”

“While I have stepped away from bow making, I have not stepped away from disability advocacy or the disability community. Yes, The Effortless Bow’s studio sits empty right now, and the inventory is being shipped to customers from storage, but this adventure is not over. There will be more to come from The Effortless Bow in 2025.”

Even with the pause, the business and business model can serve as an example to others as a way to provide specialized, integrated employment. The benefits of inclusion are exponential. •

# After 30 Years of Empowering Individuals with Developmental Disabilities and Their Families, Arlene Poncelet Retires

When she retired in October 2024 after 30 years at the helm of the South Dakota Council on Developmental Disabilities, Arlene Poncelet left a legacy of programs and partnerships that provide positive, life-altering changes for people with intellectual and developmental disabilities in the state.

“The best part of my job has been getting to know individuals with disabilities and their families and seeing their successes,” said Poncelet, who served 26 of her 30 years at the council as executive director.

These close connections are a natural result stemming from the composition of the council, 60% of which is composed of members who are individuals with disabilities or their close family members.

“I have several council members from 10 to 15 years ago that call in and check on me if I haven’t called them every few months,” Poncelet said. “I’ve watched entire families grow up. It’s been very rewarding.”

The South Dakota Council on Developmental Disabilities is one of 56 councils across the United States and its territories. These collaborative organizations are federally funded, self-governing organizations charged with identifying the most pressing needs of people with developmental disabilities in their state or territory. The U.S. Department of Health and Human Services’ Administration

for Community Living provides funding for the councils.

South Dakota’s Council includes 25 members who are appointed by the governor. In addition to individuals with disabilities and their family members, staff from state agencies are also included in the organization. Members serve one- to three-year terms.

“Councils are tasked with doing systems change, advocacy work and capacity building,” Poncelet said.

During her tenure as executive director, the majority of which Poncelet was the sole paid staff member, the council has developed and supported programs that help people with disabilities in South Dakota live independent and fulfilling lives.

These programs include such initiatives as South Dakota Supporting Families Community of Practice, part of a national program which recognizes and supports the vital role of families in disability policy and practices.

The initiative formed a state team of individuals with a shared interest of supporting people with developmental disabilities and their families to build capacity and make system changes.

“Working along with other states, we learned the best practices for supporting families,” Poncelet said. “For example, in addition to supporting a person with

Arlene Poncelet



developmental disabilities, a program might also review the whole family’s needs when determining the supports to provide. We look at the family as a whole.”

Another program the council administers is Partners in Policymaking, a leadership and

advocacy training program for adults with intellectual and developmental disabilities and their parents and guardians.

“We have been supporting Partners in Policymaking (PIP) for 32 years,” Poncelet said. “I’m very proud to see graduates of

that program go on to be part of other state boards and councils. If you looked at the Board of Vocational Rehabilitation, or the Statewide Independent Living Council or the Department of Education's Advisory Panel for Children with Disabilities, you would find PIP graduates have been a big part of those teams and have been changing the system over those 32 years."

Poncelet can easily list the names of disability-related groups, boards and councils in the state after three decades of work in the field, which she says she entered by "being in the right place at the right time."

"The council had an opening for a support staff, and I applied for that job," she said. "I worked alongside the previous director for four years and when he decided to move on to other activities, he recommended me to the council, and I was lucky enough to be chosen to become the director."

Members of her own family have disabilities, Poncelet shared. These include two first cousins who had significant developmental disabilities and lived for a time at the South Dakota Developmental Center before moving to community-based services.

"I also had a son who was on an individualized education plan for a number of years, so I am somewhat familiar with what parents go through to get services," she said.

These personal connections inspire her to help further the council's focus on taking a "person-centered" approach to disability services, which gives power and resources to people with intellectual and developmental disabilities so that they can identify and access the support they need.

In the years since she began leading the council, she has seen numerous advances in disability services for South Dakotans.

"One of the things I think the council has done really well has been to work with the

state's Division of Developmental Disabilities and other partners to pilot and provide some best practice opportunities for our community support providers," she said. "Also, family support programs were just starting when I came into this role and now there are more than 25 programs across the state."

Even 15 years ago, a person with disabilities in a small community may have had to move to a larger city to receive services, Poncelet said. "With person-centered thinking and moving best practices forward, we have helped provide the message that services can be provided just about anywhere," she stated.

Before retiring, Poncelet led the development of the council's current five-year plan, which includes three focus areas: community supports and services, co-occurring mental health challenges, and advocacy and leadership development.

She praised South Dakota's state legislature and government agencies for backing services for those with disabilities.

"When I've gone to the national meetings, and I hear other states are struggling with services for people with developmental disabilities, I realize we already provide that service or we didn't put up that fence for people to climb over in order to get that service," Poncelet said. "I think South Dakota has been very proactive in providing services to people, and our legislature has been very supportive of providing funds."

Poncelet said although her career of managing a complex program has come to an end, the rewards will linger as she recalls all that the South Dakota Council on Disabilities has achieved.

"The best part of my job has been working with individuals and families and getting to know them and seeing their successes," she said. •

The Center for Disabilities would like to thank all the businesses, organizations and individuals who connected us with the extraordinary people featured in this publication.



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## Center for Disabilities

1400 West 22nd Street • Sioux Falls, SD