**Down to the Struts**

Season 5, Episode 5: Access Opportunity

Host: Qudsiya Naqui

Guest: Eli Dvorkin

Transcript by Qudsiya Naqui

For more information:[www.downtothestruts.com](http://www.downtothestruts.com)

**Introduction**

“We're not firing on all cylinders as an economy if we're not designing our economy to be fully accessible and and we're in fact really hurting New York City's economic well being, if we're not doing that.”

[jazzy piano chords, bass strumming with smooth R&B]

Qudsiya Naqui:

Hi, this is Qudsiya Naqui, and welcome to another episode of Down to the Struts, the podcast about disability design and intersectionality. Today we'll listen in on my conversation with Eli Dvorkin. Eli is the editorial and policy director for the Center for an Urban Future in New York, Eli and I talked about CUF’s new report, Access Opportunity: Expanding Economic Opportunity for New Yorkers with Disabilities in the Post-Pandemic City. The report found that nearly 17% of disabled New Yorkers were unemployed in 2021. Up from a 7.4% unemployment rate for disabled New Yorkers in 2019. Eli and I discussed the factors that contributed to this devastating increase in unemployment during the COVID 19 pandemic, and the role that public institutions should play to ensure that equitable opportunities are available for all disabled New Yorkers. Okay, let's get down to it.

Qudsiya Naqui:

Thank you so much, Eli, for joining me today. And I'd love it if we could start off by you introducing yourself and sharing a little bit about the path that led you to Center for an Urban Future?

Eli Dvorkin:

Sure, yeah. Well, thanks so much for having me. So, yeah, my name is Eli Dworkin, I'm the editorial and policy director at the Center for an Urban Future. I've been with CUF now for about six years. My background is a little bit eclectic, maybe not totally traditional for someone who ends up in the policy world. I'm really a journalist at heart. And by training, that's where I got my start writing about music and culture and the arts in New York City. Then I kind of took a couple of forks at the same time I worked in, in the arts, producing arts events and cultural projects and exhibitions all over the country. And then I also took my journalistic and editing experience and applied it toward policy first working on US Foreign Policy and International Relations. And then eventually, merging all of my interests to be able to focus on public policy in New York City, with a with a real focus on expanding economic opportunity and reducing inequality and building a stronger and more inclusive economy, which is where I am today.

Qudsiya Naqui:

That's really fascinating. what a what a rich journey you've had. And what brought you here today is that you have recently published a report that's called Access Opportunity: Expanding Economic Opportunity for New Yorkers with Disabilities. Can you tell us a little bit about what the impetus was for this research?

Eli Dvorkin:

Sure. Well, listen, we know that there are nearly 1 million New Yorkers who are living with a disability today. They are ourselves, our friends, our colleagues, our neighbors, folks that we work with and interact with every day. But for a lot of reasons we've seen in New York that we are not one of the leading cities in the country when it comes to employment for New Yorkers, for people with disabilities, and also be a city with a lot of accessibility challenges in general, whether that's in the workplace, in our subway system, in schools and our offices, there's so many ways in which New York is not a particularly accessible city or a city that's particularly progressive in terms of its ability to be the accommodating of all New Yorkers, including those folks with disabilities. So we knew this going into this research, we knew that there were some really deep challenges there. What really struck me and our focus at the Center for an Urban Future is really on building a more equitable economy, what we can't have a more equitable economy in New York City, we can't have an equitable economic recovery from the pandemic, if it's not inclusive of and in many ways, really prioritizing New Yorkers with disabilities. And yet what we've seen time and again, and this research really led me to feel compelled to move forward with the project that we that we undertook, we saw, even just looking at the data, that in the aftermath of other economic downturns, whether that was the 1970s in New York City and the fiscal crisis, or in the aftermath of 9/11, or the more severe economic downturn that took place during the Great Recession, when we saw each of those instances that New Yorkers with disabilities were more likely to lose employment, more likely to remain unemployed or underemployed for longer, much slower to recover economically than New Yorkers without disabilities. And we felt really concerned that this pattern was going to repeat itself again. Now, unfortunately, part of what our report shows is that this is happening again. We know now that the unemployment rate for working age New Yorkers with a disability has skyrocketed from about seven and a half percent in 2019, to almost 17% in 2021. And at the same time as the unemployment rate for New Yorkers without disability has actually fallen pretty sharply since December of 2020, we saw that the unemployment rate for New Yorkers with a disability actually rose between 2020 and 2021. So, you know, I'm alarmed by this, obviously, it shows that we are in the process of unfortunately, repeating mistakes of the past, we are now in the middle of a slow painful, in some ways, really difficult economic recovery, that is, as it has, as has been proven in the past, not including New Yorkers with disabilities to the extent that it should. So, you know, that was really our starting point for this research, which led to some pretty important questions like, why is this the case? And obviously, what do we do about it, and we wanted to really understand from folks that are on the ground, living these experiences every day, but also working to address some of these inequities in our in access to employment opportunities and access to career training programs that are effective, you know, understanding by talking to and we did for this report, dozens and dozens and dozens of individuals with all of this lived and learned experience. Well, what's the problem here? And what can we do? What can what can we elevate to help policymakers understand not only the challenge, but the opportunity, and what specific steps might be taken? So that's what we tried to do.

Qudsiya Naqui:

That's really exciting. I mean, that is just shocking that unemployment rates for people with disabilities went up by 10% Over the course of two years. Can you talk a little bit about what your research revealed in terms of the factors that contributed to that incredible increase in the unemployment rate,

Eli Dvorkin:

we saw a couple of different things. One, a lot of New Yorkers with disabilities were employed in some of the industries that were hit hardest, they found employment opportunities in the hospitality industry, in many industries connected to the tourism economy, in hotels and restaurants. And so many of those jobs were wiped out at the beginning of the pandemic, and were very slow to recover. So unfortunately, for that reason, there was just a real exposure, a lot of New Yorkers with disabilities were were over indexed in some of these industries that were hit the hardest. And that's only part of the story, but it's definitely an important piece of it. We also saw that certainly as employers, were either furloughed employees or laying off that at least anecdotally, you heard that more often than not, if there were employees with disabilities on staff, that they felt like they were often the first to be let go. And the last people we hired, I'd say more than a dozen of the organizations that we spoke with, told us explicitly that their clients with disabilities were among the first to lose their employment in the beginning of the pandemic, and in many cases had been, had still not been rehired even a year into the pandemic. So, you know, we know that there's discrimination there, we know that there's a lack of awareness of the contributions that New Yorkers with disabilities can make in the workplace. And a lot of employers were hesitant to, to hire folks that had just recently been laid off. So there are a lot of different factors at play there. And then there's also some additional challenges around helping folks get reemployed. So we've looked at both some of the factors that were driving these elevated rates of unemployment during the pandemic, but also some of the factors that led to what we found was pre-pandemic level unemployment for New Yorkers with disabilities, even before the COVID-19 crisis. I mean, that's the reality for problem look at the data on employment and unemployment in New York City. Even before COVID, we saw that New Yorkers with disabilities were experiencing unemployment rates that were about triple the citywide average. So this was not a although COVID has exacerbated a lot of these challenges. They didn't create them. And if any, if anything, it seems to have exacerbated many of them. And that was, you know, that kind of confluence of factors, I think led to what we now see, which is more than doubling of the unemployment rate for New Yorkers with disabilities.

Qudsiya Naqui:

And one of the preexisting challenges that you allude to in the report, which I think most people don't really know about is this strange paradox that disabled people who receive disability benefits find themselves in when it comes to accessing employment? Could you unpack that a little bit and like talk about some of the policy solutions that you propose to address this strange paradox?

Eli Dvorkin:

Yeah, I'm really glad you asked about that. I mean, many folks that we spoke with for this report, including several organizations that work specifically around employment for folks with disabilities through the site of this, what they went through what's known commonly as the benefits Cliff as a major disincentive. So the challenge here, at least as I understand it, in New York, and of course, this is a problem nationally as well, is that there's a real challenge a real disincentive to work. If that opportunity, that employment opportunity comes with a level of income, that will that will push that individual over the limit for which they are eligible for for benefits for federal and state pension. But so, you know, the issue here is kind of understandably, is that folks who are already dealing with a whole range of economic challenges aren't in a position where they can risk losing this, this fundamental safety net, this backstop of their finances, to be able to pursue competitive employment opportunities that are not guaranteed, you know, you could end up with a job, you could lose that job, then you're in the process of having to reapply for benefits and recertify. And all of that needs to be more renumerated than, than if you just simply held on to those benefits in the first place. And there's this constant fear that even a modest boost in hourly wages, or in weekly earnings, you know, could result in the loss of SSDI, The Social Security Disability Insurance benefit, the other benefits as well childcare benefits, subsidized health care, housing, you know, other supports, and all of this can lead to greater financial precarity. So, you know, there's no easy solution here. But there are things that can be done. In New York, in particular, at the state level, you know, some of these decisions are able to be made at the state level in terms of creating, for instance, an income disregard, even if it was just temporary, so that folks who are in a qualified training program, let's say, are able to not have the income that they generate for, let's say, a year count against their eligibility for specific benefits that are administered through the state. So it's a little bit wonky and technical, but the mechanism exists to be able to create a disregard like that. So you know, this is something that other advocates can push for as well,

Qudsiya Naqui:

yeah, it's just such a strange, perverse disincentive, in many ways where you, you want to have more earned income, but, it's not going to be sufficient for you to meet all of your needs. And you still need that as you were describing the safety net. And it's just you have to choose between one and the other, which is just such a such a difficult position to be in financially and just for your own sort of even mental and physical well being. But on a somewhat brighter note, you you lift up this example, in the report of a small business in East Harlem, a restaurant called Contento, which is owned by two wheelchair users that has really developed some really innovative practices around creating access for both for patrons and employees. And how policy and investment can take this example, and implement similar types of practices and policies that would make employment more accessible to people and design workplaces that are better inclusive and provide access for disabled people.

Eli Dvorkin

This is a small business in East Harlem , a restaurant run by to two guys who are both disabled. And you know, they've been understandably passionate about making sure that their restaurant is accessible to disabled patrons, as well as prioritizing employment opportunities, not just a limited array of employment opportunities, they're really making sure every role in their restaurant from the kitchen to the front of the house is as accessible as possible. You know, they're doing this out of a certain amount of self interest in that they have been passionate about expanding opportunities in the restaurant industry that experienced discrimination have experienced the hardships of being able to access them some of these roles, and they're doing it differently by, you know, in their own restaurant. But there is something I think though, that Contento was actually part of something bigger that's been happening, which is other employers recognizing that they can't be firing on all cylinders without being inclusive workplaces, for folks with disabilities that are leaving incredibly talented people out of their talent pool, they're making it harder for themselves to, you know, hire, to retain, to attract the best talent, to be more competitive, but also to recognize that you know, that this is an imperative that companies that are prioritizing accessibility are better positioning themselves for the future in a lot of different ways. So Contento is doing this in a really, in some sense, in a really small way, with one single restaurant in East Harlem that, you know, makes delicious food and has been getting great reviews, and isn’t just seen as sort of a social enterprise, but it's seen as a terrific restaurant that is also a really accessible restaurant and doing something really smart in both in terms of who and how they hire, and how they accommodate patrons. But it's demonstrating, I think, to other restaurants as well, you know, you don't have to have a founder who's a person with a disability to make some of these improvements, you can expand the number of folks that you're able to hire, you can make a recipe, you can expand the number of patrons that are gonna be able to come and enjoy your food. And all of that can be both good for your bottom line, and frankly, just make you a better a better neighbor and a better member of the community. So that's happening on a small scale. And on a larger scale. We're seeing other companies are taking some some pretty big making some pretty big changes as well. They're doing things like creating single consolidated pools of funding to be able to integrate the systems technology or other accommodations as they hire folks so that hiring managers don't actually have to worry about am I now now going to have to now now that I found this candidate that I love, I have to go to somebody else. In my organization and fight for money to be able to, you know, to make these accommodations, I mean, that feels backwards to me. And I think some companies are recognizing that saying that shouldn't be at all part of the hiring process, we instead, we need to make it clear that anybody making hiring decisions that that budget is here for you to use. And it should have there to have no bearing on the decision that you're making, you know, bring in the best person for the job. So that's the piece of this, this puzzle. You know, we've also seen other employers, but mostly, frankly, larger employers taking other steps to become more to make their workplaces more accessible, but also to prioritize a concept of diversity. And it's inclusive of people with disabilities, which hasn't always been the case. But where I see there's a real gap in the middle is what do we need to do as a city to help more of our smaller and even some midsize companies take some of these steps as well, you know, when I talked about some of the companies that are that are doing these these entities, more innovative things? Well, a lot of them are large, multinational corporations, fortune 500, companies, companies with significantly more resources. Contento kind of bucked the trend, because they're a small business with one location in East Harlem, but they're obviously motivated by the passion of their two founders. I think the question then becomes, you know, in a city with, you know, where most of the jobs in our in New York City are in smaller businesses and businesses with fewer than 100 employees, where so much of the hiring demand right now is from small businesses that are actually struggling to get folks in the door, where there's a complete lack of awareness of what reasonable accommodations mean, or what they look like, or how costly they are, there's potentially sources of technical assistance and guidance to help business owners implement some of these practices and make some changes to their physical layout, you know, do things like make sure that they can accommodate employees, you know, there's a learning curve there, there's a lack of information, we spoke with several folks and talked to other researchers as well corroborated that, you know, employers, there's a fear factor there. And a lot of it is completely incorrect, but, but needs to be confronted with accurate information to be able to help folks get over some of their reservations, understand what's in it for them what the opportunity is, there's resources to help. And we call for a new program to do just that. The recommendation that we have around on those lines, is to actually create a public private partnership with America champion, providing grants and low cost loans, coupled with technical assistance to small and medium sized businesses to provide accommodations for employees with disabilities, and to actually make their physical spaces more accessible.

Qudsiya Naqui:

Thanks, Eli, that was really comprehensive. And I appreciate you know, all the different recommendations you've laid out that are targeted at employers, I wanted to turn it over for a moment to thinking about workforce development, sort of the other side of the coin, the employees and the potential disabled employees. One of the critiques of vocational rehabilitation, as it was originally conceived of, is that it sort of places these non disabled quote, experts in charge of sort of helping disabled people overcome their disability and access employment. As you mentioned, at the top, you spoke with many different types of training and rehabilitation type job placement services, what are some of the recommendations that you've developed that sort of try to reimagine and reframe how we think about workforce development, job training and rehabilitation for people with disabilities?

Eli Dvorkin:

Yeah, there's a lot there, for sure, a lot of issues challenges, but also, again, some real opportunities. And I'll mention a couple up front, you know, first of all, the states, the state administers the access VR system in New York, this is the adult career Continuing Education Services Agency or office that administers the vocational rehabilitation rehabilitation program, essentially, you know, functioning as a referral system. The outcomes for folks through that, that move through the access VR system are I mean, unexpectedly low, you know, in the last year, and granted, this was a very difficult period, the employment outcome rate for folks that participated in the access VR system fell to a now all time low of 27%. So that means that, you know, almost three and four people that went through that system didn't end up with the job and the other side of that, that that experience. That's a huge problem for New York, especially given that that system is relatively well funded compared to a lot of smaller nonprofits, because it gets the lion's share of the federal funding for those kinds of services. So, so there is a huge issue with the outcomes of that system. We heard certainly, I think, in fairness, we heard from several folks that participate on both sides of that system that worked for access VR, but also that had been clients of the system or that partner through the neural network, that the system itself is still overstretched that the caseload for individual casework managers and in that system is incredibly high doesn't allow for a lot of one on one services and it could use some some support. But I think there's a bigger issue here which is, you know, we haven't been systematically as a city and state, putting public dollars towards the sorts of programs that deliver the best results. So a couple of examples of this, I mean, New York is fortunate to have some really excellent nonprofit career training workforce development organizations that are built specifically to serve New Yorkers with disabilities. And those programs, the ones that are, you know, generally delivering results that are helping folks get into employment opportunities, but also helping people train for career pathways that are exciting to them, you know, moving up the ladder economically, and really achieving economic mobility. But most of those organizations are serving no more than a couple of dozen to maybe 100, or 100, or 200 individuals a year when the demand I think is there to serve 1000s. And be most of those organizations told us public dollars, in particular, city funding is less than 5% of their overall revenue. And this isn't because they're, you know, they're unwilling to apply for city contracts or that they're not trying, but it's more so that those contracts that are available, really aren't designed to meet the needs of the programs that are actually most effective. You know, a couple of examples there. One, you know, provider told us about more than one but several providers told us about the most effective relationships they have with employers take a lot of time, they need to do a lot of what they described as business development and job development, you know, building those relationships with employers, understanding their needs, helping to tailor their programs, to really fill specific roles and opportunities in their companies, helping those companies understand how existing roles or hiring that they have, could potentially sync up well with the kinds of programs that some of these nonprofit providers operate. And all of that takes a lot of time that generally speaking, doesn't get funded through these public contracts, then there's the amount of time it takes to actually lead to successful employment outcomes through a contract may only reimburse if there are positive outcomes within six months or a year. And some of these programs that we've spoken with said, Hey, we're the best at what we do. But to really have transformative outcomes on folks lives, we might need to be able to, to engage with them over a span of 18 months or two years or more. And the contracts just simply don't reimburse us for that. So we need to look elsewhere for funding, because we're not going to compromise the quality of our program just to be able to get more public dollars. But the reality is then that these organizations really struggle to grow to meet the demand. So so there's a couple of pieces there that I thought were really striking. Some of this is simply because there just isn't enough public funding and parts of the system. I mean, we found and it was pretty shocking to me, frankly, that the main source of city funding for programs serving New Yorkers with intellectual and developmental disabilities specifically has plunged 82% Over the past two decades. So it was up around $70 million to 20 years ago, is now down to just $12.6 million. Today, that's just means that there's simply fewer dollars public dollars in the system period, even as the demands that those organizations see has risen. At the same time, we've actually seen some new workforce related initiatives that are showing a lot of promise, the mayor's office in New York City for people with disabilities and OPD has developed a really effective program called at work, which is leading consistently to good employment outcomes, folks are coming through that program, you know, earning family sustaining wages, starting out over $50,000 annually. You know, these are folks in some cases who've never really had stable employment before, or only ever been employed in low wage or minimum wage jobs. So that program is really promising. And the idea here isn't that the mayor's office should simply run that program and scale it forever, but more so that additional funding could help that program both grow, but also develop new partnerships with other nonprofit workforce organizations to scale the model itself. But what we found in our research is actually at the mayor's office in New York City for people with disabilities has less funding than almost every other comparable agency and other cities around the country. So in New York City with nearly 1 million New Yorkers with a disability, the Mayor's Office for People with Disabilities receives an annual budget allocation of about $820,000 a year, you know, that is basically less than $1 per capita. And it's significantly less than than comparable offices in Houston, per capita funding in comparable offices in Houston and Boston and Seattle, Los Angeles and really most other major cities around the country. So, you know, there's there's just some real issues in terms of where we've allocated our resources in the past. You know, the last thing I'll say briefly about the workforce piece of this is many of the organizations I talked to, including some of the organizations specifically focused on Workforce Services for folks with disabilities that, hey, it's not just us in this ecosystem, you know, New York City is fortunate to have a large complex, you know, robust network of workforce development organizations, ideally, many of which, the best of which have really strong employer partnerships are focused either on specific industries or sectors or have really deep roots really good connection. is a particular segments of the city's economy that are really employer informed and have that engagement if sustained engagement over many years. But those organizations, those larger kind of general workforce organizations, well, what I learned in this study, they really don't know how to best serve their clients with disabilities. Although, as many told us, in the course of our research, they those organizations that do assess, or know how many of their clients have a disability, told us, as many as half or more of our clients are folks with a disability. Many other organizations said some variation of you know, we don't collect that data. And we don't really know. But given those organizations that did answer that question for us, they were able to give us a window, it wouldn't surprise me if most of the workforce organizations in New York City have a significant share of clients who have a disability of some of some kind, but many, many organizations don't actually know. And so what really struck me here is two things. You know, one, some of those organizations said to us point blank, we need to get a lot better at serving clients with disabilities, we were a little bit unsure of what to do, we don't have the technical knowledge or expertise in house, we, you know, understandably, we don't have any funding, but allow us to, to invest in making our programs and services more accessible. You know, we're already strapped just to be able to kind of deliver our programming with some of these public contracts that frequently, if not almost across, the board failed to meet the full cost of delivering their services, and they don't know where to turn for help. So one of our core recommendations from this report would be for Mayor Adamsto launch the nation's first ever accessibility training challenge grant, this would be a $10 million program specifically designed to help workforce development providers, integrate accessibility best practices throughout all of their programs and services, hiring consultants, folks with disabilities to actually come in and help them out with their existing programs and services, inform better better practices, invest in new technology, you know, invest in aging, physical infrastructure, and make all of these different changes needed on the programmatic level, so that they're better able to actually deliver results for their clients with disabilities, some of whom are actually struggling in their program. So, you know, there's a bigger issue there, which is really that the broader workforce sector needs an accessibility overhaul. And we think that ideally, this report can help to make more organizations aware of the need to actually apply that accessibility lens to all other programs and services, but also help policymakers understand that in addition to helping the relatively small number of really high quality disability focus providers scale up, and there's an even bigger opportunity to help integrate accessibility into the broader workforce ecosystem.

Qudsiya Naqui:

That's really interesting. And I'm curious also, both among the programs that you described, that were kind of struggling in workforce development for people with disabilities, and those that were successful, how many of those were actually even, like, led by people with disabilities, or including actual workforce development services, staff that have disabilities who are probably, you know, the best poised to help a client seeking those services navigate the workforce development space,

Eli Dvorkin:

similar to understanding their own client base, I think a lot of organizations actually don't fully understand their own staff, you know, to the extent of which there are folks that work for and within all of these organizations who do have disabilities, but where it may not be something that their senior management even knows, you know, obviously, disability takes so many different forms, and not everything, you know, rises to the surface, even if it does that can be problematic to make assumptions. And folks don't feel comfortable to ask, you know, so for a lot of organizations that are really uncomfortable even talking about these issues, they don't know how to begin, and it creates this, frankly, really, really negative feedback loop where, you know, at every level, especially I think, in the management level, organizations are reluctant to talk about these issues, they're nervous that they're going to say the wrong thing, or you know, or get get get get flack for not discussing these issues in a sensitive or thoughtful way. They certainly, then that reinforces a culture of just don't talk about it. It makes folks who work on staff in these organizations feel reluctant to speak up if your folks who do have a disability or you know, care for a loved one with a disability or have some insight, some perspective from their own lived experience. But they don't always feel like they're actually being encouraged to kind of stand up and say that, and then, you know, on top of that, I think you'll see that there are, you know, absolutely there's a need for more organizations that are serving New Yorkers with disabilities to be led by and guided by individuals with disabilities, whether they're members of their boards, or advisory boards are obviously in senior leadership roles. And, you know, there's under-representation I think, across the city's entire economy, it's not just the painfully high rates of unemployment, underemployment, but also a lack of representation in decision making roles and leadership roles. So there's a lot of challenges there that frankly, were even beyond the scope of this report. To be able to unpack, but I do see that there was, I would say, a consistent expression of interest, at least across the board and understanding where and how organizations could are potentially failing some of their clients and or staff members with disabilities. But maybe more to the point, a real desire for better information and an infrastructure to support applying best practices, accessibility best practices across the organizations, and more than anything else, I saw a genuine willingness to make some of those changes happen, a real lack of understanding about how to even start, and that's an area where I do think government can play a role and to be able to say, you know, let's make it as easy as possible to, to understand how to audit and assess your existing services, how to improve them make each element of your operation more accessible, and therefore more inclusive.

Qudsiya Naqui:

And I think this is part of where I think the limitations of our existing disability laws come into play. You know, for instance, I think part of the, what you're describing in terms of the discomfort and the fear is further exacerbated, exacerbated probably by the fact that if we were to dig into this deeper, people are concerned about lawsuits, and if they talk about the disability, then will they be accused of discrimination and etc, etc. And so I think, you know, taking an approach that's more proactive, as opposed to reactive, like you're describing, which is building in and baking in access and inclusion, for disabled people, even before you have a disabled employee stepping inside the door, having those things sort of already in place, and being a welcoming environment where someone would want to work just makes that conversation so much easier. But it's sort of counterintuitive, because our disability laws aren't set up that way.

Eli Dvorkin:

Yeah, I think that's absolutely right. And, you know, we certainly heard about this quite a bit on the from the perspective of workforce organizations, including many that are focused specifically on serving clients with disabilities, in terms of how they speak with employers, you know, that there's just so much fear out there, a lot of which some of which is understandable, a lot of which, frankly, is just based on kind of misinformation, but that they need to get over that meaning those those workforce organizations need to help those employers really kind of address and overcome some of those concerns, so that they can move forward. Yeah,

Qudsiya Naqui:

that's great. And do you, you know, in the course of your research, you look at you reference a couple of models from other cities that are doing this? Well. And, you know, what are those cities? And are those best practices that they've developed translatable in New York?

Eli Dvorkin:

data certainly shows that there are other cities where folks with disabilities tend to have better outcomes. So for instance, you know, Seattle is a city where they've done a lot of things, right, they're their central kind of Office for People with Disabilities certainly is a better resource than the similar offices in New York. You know, they've also been very proactive in terms of, I think, integrating disability into their broader kind of equity frameworks in terms of how they design and develop assess the impact of, of public policies. There's a lot there. But we've also seen, I we've also seen just looking at the data that the outcomes are significantly better than about 51% of working age, Seattle residents with a disability are in the labor force in New York City, it's, you know, barely a third. So. So there's, there's a lot of room I think, to learn from from other cities, and implement some of the things that they're doing well, you know, but I would also say that New York has got some things that we're doing well, you know, ourselves, they're just operating at such a tiny scale, you know, like that NYC at Work Program, administered by the Mayor's Office for People with Disabilities, you know, it only has a, basically a budget for about, you know, five staff members, there's no full time business developer, and they've been able to somehow make about 500, and more than 500 job placements since the program started, you know, five years ago, but you can imagine the difference that would make if that program were funded, I think, at the commensurate with the level of need, and honestly, there's even a lack of just basic research out there to better determine, you know, to really establish an evidence base for more of these potential best practices, you know, there are examples of programs or policies that that have been tested, but haven't been evaluated, or the evaluation was, you know, a little bit left something to be desired in terms of, you know, how strong the evidence was for the efficacy of this particular intervention. But I think there's there's a need for you know, for stronger, stronger evidence base around it really strong, rigorous, you know, studies of some of these interventions, so that we can improve the case for policymakers to make significantly bigger investments.

Qudsiya Naqui:

All of that being said, you know, you've really been immersed in the data and in talking to so many people so coming in emerging from from that work, what do you what is your vision for the participation of disabled people in civic and economic life?

Eli Dvorkin:

I think part of it being that you know, there needs we need stronger mechanisms to integrate New Yorkers with the voices the perspectives of New Yorkers with disabilities into the policymaking process and It hasn't happened in a systematic way. So, you know, my first thought there is really well, part of the vision here is that New Yorkers with disabilities need to be at the table when these decisions are being made, they their voices should be elevated in this process, there needs to be, you know, and frankly, some of the very same barriers that make workplaces and accessible or schools and accessible or government buildings or processes inaccessible, you know, those are the same barriers to participation in the city's policymaking life. So, you know, there really needs to be a major overhaul in terms of, you know, not seeing accessibility as an afterthought. But really, we saw several examples throughout our research of, you know, a, an RFP for a workforce development program that the city was going to issue where real public dollars would go toward, you know, workforce programming. And the idea even of integrating even a mention of serving clients with disabilities, people have disabilities, or how can this the respondent and successful respondents RFP ensure that their programs and services will be accessible was an afterthought, it either it didn't happen, or it came in really late in the process. And, you know, that was often the case. You know, we heard these these stories and saw this, this, you know, there's evidence of this kind of pattern repeating itself. accessibility needs to be built in from the beginning, it has to be front loaded to this process. And it needs to be part of how you develop every RFP, not just one that you think is going to be specifically aimed at the nearly 1 million New Yorkers serving nearly 1 million New Yorkers with disability, having consistent high level feedback from New Yorkers with disabilities in the policymaking process, creating opportunities for that feedback, soliciting it actively, and really making sure that policies are designed collaboratively with, you know, directly affected New Yorkers at the table. But also making sure that you know, accessibility stops being a at best an afterthought or a late addition in the policymaking process, and is really injected from the beginning, which means, of course, having, you know, directly having folks with the lived experience of a disability there in the room, we're not firing on all cylinders, as an economy if we're not designing our economy to be fully accessible. And and we're, in fact really hurting New York City's economic wellbeing, if we're not doing that. And in doing so, we're making our economy better for everybody.

Qudsiya Naqui:

Yeah, I really appreciate that. And I appreciate the emphasis on giving leadership and power to people with disabilities to decide their own economic fate, in having a seat at that table. So I really appreciate that. Well, thank you so much. Like, can you can you tell us where we can find the report and where we can learn more about the work of the Center for an Urban Future?

Eli Dvorkin:

Absolutely. Well, thank you again, so much for this opportunity is such a pleasure. You know, you can read all of our research for free online at nycfuture.org. You can reach me on Twitter, I'm @WetWax, w-e-t-w-a-x. And we're also @NYCFuture on Twitter. And if you have any feedback, ideas, suggestions or critiques, you know, let me have that and you can always find me there on our website and my contact information is there as well.

Qudsiya Naqui:

Thanks so much, Eli. And we'll be sure to share a link to the full report as well as the link to your website on our in our show notes. Thank you so much. And it was so great to have you.

Eli Dvorkin:

Thank you so much. It's such a pleasure.

Qudsiya Naqui:

Thanks for joining us for this episode of Down to the Struts. This podcast would not be possible without the energy and creativity of our audio producer Ilana Nevins and our social media manager Avery Anapol . Special thanks to Claire Shanley for designing our logo, and Eifel gangsta beats for our theme music. You can become part of our Facebook group Down to the Struts Podcast to join our growing community. You can also find us on Twitter and Instagram at Down to the Struts. And finally don't forget to subscribe rate and review the podcast at Apple podcasts, Spotify, Stitcher or wherever you love to listen. Thank you again for your support. And stay tuned for our next episode so we can get back down to it

Transcribed by https://otter.ai