

This podcast is brought to you by the law firm of Carlson Black O'Callaghan & Battenberg located in downtown Madison. Carlson Black specializes in commercial real estate, business and tax law. Carlson Black is proud to represent many DMI members in helping to build a vibrant and inclusive downtown.

Welcome to the Downtown Download podcast where we hear from our members every month and learn something new about downtown Madison. All right, let's get into it.

Hello everyone welcome back to another episode of the downtown download podcast we are excited today to have one of my favorite guests. And yes you can tell every other guest that's already been on that I said you're one of my favorites. We have Jason Beloungy the executive director newly named executive director of Access to Independence a great partner of DMI. Welcome Jason. How are you?

Doing well, thanks Jason. And I assume because we share a name that's why I get that esteemed title of favorite guest so far.

Oh absolutely. There's no better name in the world than Jason and you can tell everyone I said that. I will say it is a little bit confusing. We're doing a lot of work now with Access to Independence and everyone seems to be involved in this issue of working for the rights of people with disabilities has Jason. You have Jason Beloungy from Access Independence, myself and then Jason Glozier from the disability rights commission at the city so literally just say Jason and you've got the whole group figured out. So how are you? You doing Well?

Doing well, thank you. Been busy.

Good. How's everything at Access?

Been very busy, as you mentioned I started in my role as executive director on March 1st. I've been with the agency for nine years before that and worked as an assistant director so I oversaw staff programs. I did a lot of community engagement, worked on a lot of systems advocacy efforts and so just a number of different activities for our small organization and jumping into my new role I've been really excited because it allows me time to obviously run that organization but really put a lot of focus and effort into more systemic advocacy around access and inclusion of our people all disabilities all ages here in our area.

Well congratulations on this. I think much welcomed appointment of you as executive director. We are so excited to work together more but what is Access to Independence and what do you do?

Sure. So we are a local nonprofit organization. We provide advocacy resources and services to people of any type of disability and of all ages. We serve all of Dane County as well as Columbia, Dodge and Green counties. What's unique about Access to Independence is that we are what's called consumer controlled so by law the majority of people who work for our organization, that's our direct service staff administrative staff and our management, are all people are the majority of whom are people with disabilities. I myself have a mental health disability and so we use that that lived experience whether it's running the organization or providing services to our benefit to the benefit of those who receive our services. By also being consumer controlled, we have our board of directors, a majority of whom are also people with disabilities.

How did you come into this work to begin with?

Sure. So my background is in social work and I got connected to the Independent Living Movement 15 years ago I worked for our sister organization out of La Crosse specifically in the Richland center branch office, Independent Living Resources is the organization. And so I was a direct service staff for six or seven years and I did all the services that we provide as centers where all, there's eight centers like access here in Wisconsin, we're all federally recognized and funded what's called independent living centers. So when I said before about we're required to have a majority of people who are people with disabilities that work for the agency and serve on our board that's what I was

referring to there. So I worked in the rural southwest part of the state and was very excited to be a part of that of this network because the consumer control function was also really great about it is that we not only do direct services we do systems advocacy, community education. So not only helping with removing barriers and improving independence and empowerment of individuals but improving communities. And so did that for several years and then I was able to work in Washington D.C. for our National Council on Independent Living which is our national membership organization. And there was a policy analyst working on health care, long term care, voting rights a number of different policy areas. And right during the Obamacare legislative process too. So that was just perfect timing to get in there and work on a systemic level, at a national level, to being involved and making sure the voices of people disabilities was a part of that, that people were educated empowered to act, to make sure that we had a health care law that worked for all people with disabilities and so having that connection is what I love about the individual living movement. My family continue to live here in the Madison area. So I was commuting back and forth and thought well, we're going to all live in D.C. or going I'm going to come back to the Madison area at some point. I thought well if something opens up in the Independent Living World in the area that will bring me back and within a few months the assistant director role opened up after that conversation so I was able to come back and work at an administrative level and like I said do the both the systemic work and work of the agency level.

Well it sounds like we're lucky to have an advocate like you for people with disabilities here in the community. We're lucky to have a group like Access to Independence now, you guys are doing so much, just a huge amount of things. What are you most proud of that you have accomplished?

As an agency?

Yes, and as an advocate yourself.

Oh well I think just my personal excitement is obviously systemic work so my discussion around the Affordable Care Act effort. So we did a lot around Medicaid for long term care. There was a provision related to accessing a long term care insurance which didn't come to fruition. It was in the law but it didn't come to fruition. But work like that was really important to me. And as far as a local level here at Access I'm really excited that we've been building the organization, building visibility, providing services to more people in our area, being more available to folks again of all disabilities and of all ages to do things like information referral, peer support, advocacy. We do transition services, youth services, we have an assistive technology program. So I'm excited that we've been able to really improve the scope of what we do, expand what we're doing and become more visible as a result of that. So those are things that I've been really excited about with the organization.

How many people do you guys work with on an average year? These numbers are so so high for me.

Sure. So we have last year for example we had about 350 individuals who opened up a file and set goals related to a variety of topics: housing, transportation, advocacy etc.. From there we also had about fifteen hundred individuals who contacted us for information and resources. We had a number of folks who did groups and classes. So there's a variety of individuals that we serve throughout the year.

So I think one interesting point with why we're having the conversation is that the relationship with DMI started about a year ago and it's an interesting story about how you started to work with us and it's maybe a misstep the DMI made to begin with and some of our advocacy and our diversity and inclusive work. Do you want to run through sort of how that relationship started?

Sure. So with the inclusive committee there was a conversation and an effort more of a task force perhaps you could call it the time related to change the sign so looking at the international symbol of accessibility and a movement that's been out there to change that traditional person, stick figure if you will, in a wheelchair logo to more of a motion centered logo kind of embracing empowerment and activity and people not being stuck, but being on the go and doing things as they wish. And there was a member of the inclusiveness committee who reached out to our agency to get input because we do

systemic advocacy work. We also do ADA compliance work and things like that. And so I had met with the change the sign group and the inclusiveness committee as well and talked about that the issue itself isn't a bad thing to want to improve how we reach folks with disabilities and the perception in the general community but that there's two issues one there still wasn't a lot of good legal precedent around changing that logo that what it means for folks who maybe don't follow the rules because the sign isn't the official symbol. Also the visibility and awareness for those who may have to use signage with that symbol and also there's other issues to be addressing first. You have a lot of accessibility and inclusion issues for people disabilities in just in downtown Madison alone that should be addressed first and that's how that conversation came about. So that's how we got connected and just through the real, what I thought was an honest and determined view by this organization from you Jason as well as members of that committee, to say hey we want to make sure that we improve inclusion and access and we realize that there's a broader issue at play and we want to have Access to Independence involved in some ways is what led us to become a member then we formed that Beyond Compliance Task Force I was able to become chair of that and work with the committee members as well on that. And so here we are now really moving things forward through what's been just from the beginning, really I think a busy, fast but focused approach.

I think it fit perfectly in with the work that you are trying to do and our model through diversity and inclusion is to listen learn and leverage. We need to listen to the actual community itself right. What is happening with people with disabilities? How can we help them? We shouldn't come over the top and try to be a savior if we don't know what's going on. You have provided us the ability to have that community engagement. We're learning from your organization daily and we're leveraging those resources you already have. So what came from this great early relationship and a big testament to you and continuing on and saying hey let's pivot this and try to learn is the creation of the downtown Madison accessibility report. A report that you and your committee, the Beyond Compliance task force here under the DMI diversity and inclusion committee created to say hey here are the barriers that are in place in downtown right now in mobility, in transportation, in community events and a whole series of items. You took the time to reach out to nearly 100 people with disabilities to say here are the barriers. Why is this report so important for downtown Madison and making downtown more an inclusive environment for everybody?

I think one of the things that was really valuable in this process you mentioned before about how do we as an organization work to improve access and inclusion. And you talked about listening learning and leveraging and the disability community uses a mantra called nothing about us without us. And those two kind of discussion points collided here and they had to that where you talked about a misstep with a change a sign was there was a committee that was well intended and had done homework and had people involved who had a perspective and a view to do something which was fine but was the community locally asked about what was their priority what did they see as barriers. And so that was what this was an opportunity to take a step back. Not to say that the change a sign was a bad thing but let's actually find out from the community itself what are the issues that we should that we DMI, the broader community, the city should be addressing. And so that's what was a real good opportunity to what you said listen. So this report was the first step, listening. So asking the right questions what are barriers that people of any kind of disability whether it's physical mental health sensory like vision or hearing loss someone with a brain injury somebody who has an intellectual or developmental disability what are barriers and a variety of folks face. And so this survey went out to numerous people within our area connected to or a part of the disability community asking particular questions. What was also really great about this process we used a focus group made up of people with disabilities from a variety of disabilities who helped us put this report together. There are questions for the report, let me back up, the questions for the survey to ask the right questions because if we would've said well we think we know what we want to know that doesn't always help. So if people from a variety of disability saying well if you ask it this way you may not get what you're trying to find out in terms of my community in the struggles we face when it comes to mobility or transportation for example. So I think that was really critical and again DMI has embraced that approach saying yeah let's have this done right let's get that feedback correctly. So as you alluded to we had nearly a hundred respondents to the survey by comparison Oakland California a much larger city did a similar process a few years ago and they had nearly a hundred and twenty respondents to their survey. So relatively speaking we had a strong response rate to this. And I think

that's something that DMI can also be proud of that a lot of partners got behind it a lot of folks in the community embraced it. A community that feels exhausted and many other marginalized communities where feedback input is provided and change doesn't happen. And this report was just one step in the change that we're trying to see.

I think that if anyone wants to see this report they should go to the downtown Madison DMI Web site downtownmadison.org can find a copy of the report and all the different great work that's gone into it. Before I go any farther I thought, I do want to make sure to acknowledge a few people that were key to the process. One was Jason Glozier and the disability rights commission in Madison and all the commissioners that were a huge help in guiding this conversation and also to Urban Assets and Melissa Huggins and her team who did the yeoman's work to make sure the report looks good. The questions were asked correctly. They're the professionals and community engagement know how to take that data and turn it into something special. So a huge thanks to them. Now this report is approved by the DMI board. This month we're going to ramp this up, work with our partners at the city to try and launch this and try to overcome some of the barriers. What are the biggest barriers that you see in this report coming directly from the community?

Definitely. And so I'm glad you brought up the city and the DMI because when you look at accessibility and inclusion a lot of people think immediately of the Americans with Disabilities Act or ADA and that is a compliance or a starting point and we're looking beyond that. That's why we call beyond compliance task force. And so what we've found in this report was the first part is there's two aspects in terms of what the city can do. So you reference Jason Glozier, the Disability Rights Commission but there's also a whole host of other departments within the city that this report touches. So what can the city be doing and there's things that that the city can be talking about in the coming months that they're already doing and that they want to be doing to address issues in this report and then there's the aspect in terms of business owners and then property owners as well. And there's aspects in here that address both of those too. So looking through the report I think it's interesting because there's some topics set where they seem universal like parking. And people think well parking is an issue for anybody in a urban area including downtown Madison. What makes parking for people disabilities more of a barrier. And so this report gave us some real tangible data highlighting that parking was an issue to route not just because there's a lack of it but because the lack of accessible spaces near locations of interest. parking ramps that have ticketing options that are not accessible or not large enough for an accessible vehicle to pull into, things like that were very unique. What I think was a strength about this report was that we looked at a few different areas. So one was mobility looking at how people can get to and from different locations. Again parking came up as a part of getting from A to B. The path of travel is often what we think of mobility but where you start at is a part of that that's where parking comes into play. But one issue that is not gonna be avoidable even with weather climate and a whole host of issues is snow and ice and how property owners, private residences and the city itself can be addressing those particular topics and then certainly looking at crosswalks, intersections is really important there. So that was some of the highlights around mobility. Around public transportation one of things was interesting there was people felt that access using Metro to get downtown was good but there was questions and concerns related to shelter infrastructure both in downtown and outside of downtown. And we talk about infrastructure it isn't just that the bus pad or a shelter to keep you dry but it's also what kind of signage route information. If someone uses a wheelchair, the path of travel to get to and from that location and then also on the bus itself. What's that communication like in terms of visual and audio information to help somebody to know at any time what's the next stop coming up, when is their stop coming up and how do they get on and utilize the bus at that time too. So there are some real good feedback around there. The downtown business area was looking at the private business so under the ADA that's what people referred to as Title 3. So public accommodation. If somebody wants to go into a business or an entity that's open to the public that provides goods and services, there is rules related to accessibility for getting into the building, getting around the space for that particular business, restroom access, things like that. And so the entrance and exit obviously was the biggest one that came up that was not a surprise but it was good to see that. That people recognize that throughout downtown Madison there are a lot of locations that people simply cannot get into because they lack either a ramp or a lift or a zero step entry to get into that location. But also it highlighted areas that folks in the disability community recognized but this puts it out there more broadly. It's not just getting in the door it's getting around a store. So a lot

of businesses have a lot of good merchandise or a lot of good services to offer and they don't lay out the circulation patterns or the aisles in a way that makes it navigable for people using mobility device for example or someone who is blind it may use a cane that doesn't see protruding obstacles and how people are not aware of that and that's was very prevalent throughout the report.

I think that's one of the, I just want to step in and I think this is where the idea of beyond compliance is so important that it's not just about meeting the ADA requirements. It's not just about getting a wheelchair in and out of a location. Let's take a coffee shop right. You go into a coffee shop you want to make sure that barista serves a sighted person the exact same way they serve a non sighted person right. And is staff trained to work with anyone and everyone? Because that's how you make downtown more inclusive for everybody. And when you have an inclusive downtown you have a downtown that's stronger for the whole community. And so by having these barriers listed and saying these are the things that we can work on we can make a difference. Now how do we, Jason, the million dollar question, how do we move from this report into action so we see tangible differences to make this a more inclusive downtown.

Definitely. Well the first part again is listening right. The engagement process doesn't stop with a survey. We want to engage the disability community. We want to engage the city. We want to engage private business owners and property owners to help identify the strategies and solutions to get there. As I mentioned earlier on, a lot of different people have their hands in different aspects this report that outlines the barriers. So listening to the folks who are directly impacted, the disability community itself, and the folks who we need to help make that change like the city and business folks for example. So that's gonna be the first step and I think that's what having that this this media rollout to talk about what this report says in July and to be looking at the strategies and what DMI itself can be doing is going to be important for that too. Once we get those solutions and how they address these barriers it's prioritizing what resources we need to accomplish that. Who are our partners and not still not at the table that we need to be at the table. Those are all ways that we need to start moving forward on this. But I think this gives us a framework of what are some of the areas that are our priorities and maybe there's some similar particular barriers in here we can address first because it might be easier to address. That doesn't mean we stop looking at the rest of them moving forward.

From a DMI perspective, Jason, the work that you've done and the work that Urban Assets and the Beyond Compliance committee is a pathway moving forward on how to make downtown Madison more inclusive for everyone by listening to different communities to make sure that this downtown works for everyone. We cannot thank you and your team at Access to Independence enough and everyone on the beyond compliance and the inclusiveness committees enough for your continued commitment to try to make downtown everyone's downtown. Thank you very much Jason for all that you do, we are very appreciative.

Thank you as well.

Thanks for listening. Be sure to tune in next month to learn something new about downtown Madison.