

- Good morning, Virgin Islands. This is Ability Radio, You and Your Life. I'm your host this morning, Archie Jennings. And Ability Radio is about persons with disabilities in this community of the Virgin Islands. And we have a special guest. One of our major organizations we do partner and training with is the Northeast ADA Center. We have Mr. Joe Zesski. Morning, Joe.

- Good morning, Archie. I'm glad to be here today. Thanks for letting me join you.

- Great.

And give us a little bit of background about the Northeast ADA Center.

- Absolutely. Well, we are an organization, a small center that is part of a larger entity, the Cornell University, which, of course, is based in Ithaca, New York. We are in the school's industrial and labor relations, school, which, obviously, deals with issues around employment and labor concerns. Within that school, there's an institute called the Yang Tan Institute. And within that institute, there's a focus on disability, and we at the Northeast ADA, we are our own small center that focuses on the Americans with Disabilities Act, which is a civil rights law protecting the rights and equal opportunity for people with disabilities. We also address other disability laws and issues and concerns that people have. We're out there to provide information to the public. We provide technical support, as well as training, like you mentioned. And we also conduct research in different issues related to people who have disabilities, so...

- What area does the Northeast ADA cover, as far as jurisdiction, what...

- Right. Well, we're one of ten centers. Our center focuses on the, or is covered New York, New Jersey, Puerto Rico, and here in the US Virgin Islands. There are other centers, other places around the country, and they all serve a specific territory. For example, we have a neighbor to the north called New England ADA. And they serve states like Vermont, Maine, and Massachusetts, New Hampshire, Connecticut. But every state and territory of the US has a center that serves it. So, whether you're here in the Virgin Islands or you're in America Samoa, or another area that the US covers, Alaska, all the way down south to Texas. There's an ADA Center that serves you and is there to answer questions. We, I should mention, I suppose, that we aren't there just for employers, but we're there for people who have disabilities, we're there to answer questions for state and local governments, media, we answer questions from family members, or just people in the public who just generally have a question about the ADA, what it is, how it applies in different places, in different situations, and folks who might just have questions about the rights of people with disabilities.

- Well, Joe, I'm always interested in how people got into their profession. Will you give us a little background about yourself?

- Absolutely. My career path to where I'm at now has been a little bit winding. I am the program manager at the Northeast ADA, and what I currently do is I assist our director, who is Wendy Strobel-Gower, with running the program from our main grant, The National Institute of Disability. Independent Living and Research is part of the health and human services. And our main grant comes from that organization, and my responsibilities are to help plan and direct how we're going to carry out the various goals and commitments that we've made as part of that grant. So for example, this opportunity for me being here comes out of one of our, one of our commitments we have for this grant. We are now planning to visit twice a year to the Virgin Islands and, or Puerto Rico. So, we visited in the past and some folks out there may have met us in that capacity, and we can touch on that in a minute or two. But this new commitment represents serving upgrade in terms of our presence here in the islands. And so, we have affiliate here, which actually, The Disability Rights Center is our local affiliate. But our main staff does come to visit. So I help to, for example, plan those events, as well as other goals that we have. For example, to work with small employers, health care professionals, facility access professionals. There are specific goals that we have in those areas to create partnerships, to support people, and for us to learn information to develop research. So, I assist with that. I do also provide technical assistance. I mentioned a moment ago that our center provides information to the public. We have an 800-telephone number, which I'll be giving out later in the program at some point, if I have the chance. And through that line, we answer questions from the

public about the ADA and the rights of people with disabilities, again from all sectors. So, employers, businesses, governments, family members, and again, individuals with disabilities. That number is confidential and free, and I assist with that service one day a week. So that's some of my current responsibilities.

- You might as well give the number now, Joe. It'll...

- It's a good opportunity. Yes

- Yes.

- So, let me do that here. It's 1-800-949-4232. So, that's 800-949-4232. That number is available 8:30-4:30 Eastern Time, Monday through Friday. We aren't open on Federal Holidays, but otherwise, we're there and available. We always try to respond right away. We do have limited staffing on the 800 number. So, if you call and get a voicemail, don't hesitate to leave your name and number. We'll get back to you. We do have a message indicating that we'll get back within two business days. But, honestly, we get back much sooner than that. But for various reasons, we need to make sure that people are aware, there may be a delay responding. However, typically, we get back to folks ASAP, within the same day. So don't hesitate to call and talk to either myself, or my co-workers, my colleagues, Christopher Sweet, who does the primary responsibility for our technical assistance. Or we also have a Access Specialist in, you know, maybe we'll touch on that a little bit later. We have an access specialist. Her name is Jennifer Perry, who is our expert in-house about all things related to building accessibility, building code questions, and design for accessibilities. So, there's a lot of good individuals.

- So, with the, basically it's team approach. Isn't that correct? So...

- It is. We're very much based on a team approach in colleagues. Our main headquarters is in Ithaca, but we have people around the territory that we cover, so I mentioned you and the DRC here in the Virgin Islands, in Saint Thomas and Saint Croix. We have an affiliate also in Puerto Rico, with MAVI, that's The Independent Living Center, and our point person there is Yessica Guardiola. Jennifer, who I referred to earlier, and myself, are based, physically based in New Jersey. I also serve as the New Jersey affiliate, in addition to my role as program manager. And we also have people who are based physically in Ithaca, New York. And so, we're, do a team approach to handle this. We're a small staff, but I think we accomplish quite a bit and do quite a lot with the resources, and funding we have. And we work very closely on various different projects that the center does. Technical assistance is one of the more obvious things that we do in that that public would see, but we also have projects that were gone teaching individuals to train other community entities about the ADA. And some folks who are listening may have heard of that, the ADA Trainer Network or ADATN. The number of people I know, who I've spoken to here in the islands, have gone through that program. And we are looking maybe to move ahead and continue that program in the years to come, and months ahead. We also do research on various topics related to disability, and how disability impacts people's lives and participation in the community. We also do trainings that are on demand. So businesses, government entities contact us and, you know, may ask, well, you know, we need some assistance, we need help doing the training on how to work better with customers with disabilities, how to serve them more respectfully, and to give them a better customer experience. Or we may have people contact us, who are employers, who say we need training for our HR staff on reasonable accommodations. What are our obligations under the ADA? What can our process look like, or what should it maybe look like to make sure that, you know, we're meeting our responsibilities under the law. And so we get all sorts of requests on different topics, and in different themes, and it varies. We also do information, offer information through various webinars. We have had a variety of topics that we've done. Everything from the importance and relevance of web accessible design, to reasonable accommodation to the experience of students with autisms, and the autism spectrum in the educational system. So, we do a wide variety of information, and so we, that involves a lot of teamwork, coordination, and working together with individuals, who have different talents and focus areas. My particular area, the, in the center, that I focus on, has been web accessibility and the importance of that, and the various regulations that come through that. But I also have done a bit of work in the area of public accommodations. You may think of them as business, as sort of a common term for that. So, each of us

at the center have a different strength, and we try to draw on them together to make a, very much a collegial approach, very much a team approach together.

- Yeah, employers, and take note, as well as the government, because this information is when you, they call in, it's confidential, is it not?

- It is and I didn't say earlier, but I should mention, the northeast ADA, remember, it's a small center that's part of a university. We are not part of the federal government or any government. We don't have any enforcement capacity. We're there to provide information to the public, and we're not there to report discrimination claims. We're not there to divulge any information. Everything is kept strictly confidential. We don't provide legal advice. We provide technical assistance and technical information. So an employer that calls us, let's say you're an employer, and you're working with an issue with an employee, who has a disability and you have no idea about the various parts of the ADA, and how it applies. We're not gonna be there to say, aha, you know, you're doing this wrong. You need to do this a different way. We'll tell you what your requirements are under the law, what the rights of the individual are, and that's what we do. We will, we'll not do any reporting. If you've done something "wrong" or if you handle the situation badly, that's not who we are, or what we're charged to do. We, or also, we're not advocates either. That's part of our funding. We're not permitted to advocate for individuals. Again, we provide information, training and research, so...

- What, the best part of your, you're part of a, other nine national organizations, is that correct, or under one umbrella?

- Exactly. We all share the 800 number I gave out earlier, the 800-949-4232. And while my center serves the New York, New Jersey, Puerto Rico and US Virgin Islands, the, you know, if there are people out there in the audience, let's say that are, you know, visiting Saint Croix or Saint Thomas, or there are people out there who are listening on the internet. Yeah, I know a number of people from Florida are often here, there's an ADA center that will serve you wherever you are, and so, if you dial that 800 number, you should be connected to your local center. That telephone number routes telephone calls based on the area code from where someone is dialing. So, if you dial from a 340 area code, you should reach us at the Northeast ADA, but if you dial from a 727 phone number, I believe that's a Florida exchange, you should reach our sister center, the southeast ADA. So, wherever you are, you should be able to connect with your regional center.

- Well, why I brought this up, especially for employers, is that ADA is fairly new to a lot of employers. You're not just getting a minute approach, you're getting a national view of how the law should be applied in your circumstances.

- Exactly, exactly. And the ADA is the same, whether you're in New York City or Miami, or Dallas, Texas, or if you're out in America Samoa. The, it's a federal law, so it applies the same to all the state and territories of the US. So, you should get consistent information from whatever center you contact. Now, that being said, there are local variations not under that law, but under local state or territory law. So, while the ADA has its specific areas it covers, there may be some variation or additional protections offered by state or local laws, and that's a place that each center generally can provide more additional information from. So, for example, in our region, the ADA, well, the ADA covers employers with 15 or more employees. But within the region two, which is where the northeast ADA is located, the state of New York has its own civil rights non-discrimination law called the New York State Human Rights Law. And it covers employers, I believe, with four or more employees, so it provides similar protections to what the ADA does, but it drills down to a, even smaller level, smaller businesses. So, that's where it might be useful, well, to contact your regional center. Even if you think well, maybe, I think we're too small for the ADA. That might be true. But you still could be covered by local laws. So, keep that in mind, and something to also be aware of too is that in terms of the federal law, in terms of the ADA, it looks at the total number of employees in an organization, so just because maybe you have four employees located here, and maybe another 12 located in another location, it doesn't count your total, your organization's total number of employees by each separate locality. They would view it as you have 16 employees in that instance. So, be aware, there's different things to know about the law, and that's some of the things

that our centers are there to provide, and the northeast ADA is certainly always here to do that too for folks who live in our region. So I encourage you to call us if any questions.

- Again, it's about the NEADA and your center being there to help employers and feel free employers to tap into the resources and information, and use the training services.

- There are. There are a lot of different things. Like you were saying, we do have, you know, we're there to help. We're not there, as I said, to, you know, condemn anyone for doing something wrong. We're there to provide accurate information so that things go according to what the law requires, and again, we don't do any of the enforcement part of it. We're just there with information. But if you need training on reasonable accommodations, and, you know, what do your human resource representatives, what do they need to know? Or maybe you're a smaller company, very, you know, maybe you have 25 people working for you, and you wanna know, well, maybe we don't have a regular human resource department, maybe it's, you know, our organizations, you know, a little more informal. We don't have a whole process. We just wanna learn more in terms of our supervisors, and in terms of our executives. You know, we can provide trainings on a whole range of topics. It could be reasonable accommodations. It could be about how to do interviews without violating the ADA, because there are issues around not inquiring about disability in the interview process, which are, you know, very, you know, very clear, and you should be aware of, or during the application process. So, there are all sorts of different topics, and in terms of the information that we have, again, our technical assistance line is free and confidential. So, we get questions on all sorts of things from, you know, I'm trying to work with this employee to find an accommodation for them. Do you have any suggestions? We help people think through that, to think through how an employee's disability affects their ability to do their essential job functions, and, you know, we're there to assist people, employers in thinking through that process, or employers may have questions around, I know one issue we often get questions about is parking for employees. Let's say, you have...

- Well, before you get to that, Joe.

- Uh-hmm.

- And before we move on to that subject...

- Certainly, yeah.

- ...wanted, take a little break so that we can have our sponsors give it, keep us on the air. So, we'll get right back to you on that parking issue. Have a battery issue.