

Select Committee on Opportunities and Barriers for People with Disabilities in the Workplace

Panelist Biographies

Dr. Olivia Raynor, Ph.D. | Disability Policy Consultant

Dr. Olivia Raynor brings over 45 years of experience to her role as a national leader in policy development, implementation, and advocacy across various domains including secondary transition planning, inclusive higher education, employment, disability arts and access, and adult service systems for individuals with intellectual and developmental disabilities. As the Director Emerita of the Tarjan Center, a University Center for Excellence in Developmental Disabilities and Adjunct Professor of Psychiatry and Biobehavioral Sciences at the University of California Los Angeles (2000-20022), she has a substantial background leading state and federal systems change projects. Founder and Director of the UCLA National Arts and Disability Center (1994-2023), she has been and is a prominent advocate for the intersection of art, culture, and disability.

Dr. Raynor has contributed to numerous state and national boards and committees, including as President of the Association of University Centers on Disabilities and member of the California State Council on Developmental Disabilities. From 2000-2021, she was appointed by Governors Davis and Brown to the California State Council on Developmental Disabilities. In January 2023, Governor Newsom appointed her to the California Arts Council. Dr. Raynor also currently serves on the leadership team of the California Transition Alliance and acts as an advisor to VoteRiders. Dr. Raynor earned her bachelor's degree from Boston University and master's degree from the University of Southern California in occupational therapy, and a PhD in educational psychology from UCLA.

Paula Tobler | Attorney, Disability Rights California

Paula Tobler has been a member of the California bar since 1990. In 1998, she was in a major automobile accident that resulted in Posttraumatic Stress Disorder and Traumatic Brain Injury in addition to physical injuries. She has worked in insurance defense, risk management, and labor and employment law. She has also worked as a conservator in a tribal court system she helped to develop and, most recently, has immersed herself in the field of disability rights, particularly in the area of employment. She is currently working as a Supervising Attorney in the Pathways to Work practice group at Disability Rights California, where she is involved in advocating for Department of Rehabilitation clients, social security disability beneficiaries wishing to return to work, and employees with disabilities seeking reasonable accommodations.

John Bolle | Executive Director, VistAbility

John holds a Bachelor's and Master's degree in Business Administration and Finance. He spent the first 10 years of his professional life working in institutional finance for non-profit organizations. Through the relationships John forged, he developed a passion for mission driven work and began volunteering on the Board of Directors of several non-profits serving people with developmental disabilities. In 2015, his calling led him to a career change, as he left the financial industry for a new journey as CEO of Central Valley Training Center. After a few years at the helm, John was offered a position as Executive Director with Contra Costa ARC, now known as VistAbility, where he has served for almost 6 years. In his spare time, John enjoys spending time with his wife, Angelica, and their two children, Aiden, age 8, and Ava, age 6.

Aaron Carruthers | Executive Director, State Council on Developmental Disabilities (SCDD)

Aaron Carruthers is the Executive Director of the California State Council on Developmental Disabilities. He has worked in civil rights policy and programs for over twenty-five years, including as an appointee of two Governors, for California's Attorney General, and in the State Senate and Assembly. He is currently carrying out the Council's goals: health, home, and work. This includes phasing out subminimum wage and creating a statewide Employment First Office. Last year, SCDD's work impacted more than 5.1 million Californians and it was named "Employer of the Year" for people with disabilities. He is a child of parents with developmental and other disabilities, is a person with disabilities, and is the parent of young man with disabilities. He is a graduate of the National Leadership Consortium on Developmental Disabilities and was a Coro Fellow in Public Affairs.

Silas Wagner | Teacher, California School for the Deaf

Silas Wagner III, with a humble commitment spanning 21 years at the California School for the Deaf in Riverside (CSDR) as a residential cottage counselor, a CSDR steward since 2018, and a recent contributor to the SEIU Local 1000 Bargaining Unit Negotiating Committee (BUNC) team; proudly representing the fifth generation of a deaf family legacy, extending to the seventh with his deaf great niece, and a graduate of Gallaudet University.

Bobby Dutta - Association of California State Employees with Disabilities

Bobby Dutta, a civil servant in California, is an advocate for the underserved community of persons with disabilities and serves as the President of the Association of California State Employees with Disabilities (ACSED) and co-chair of the Statewide Disability Advisory Council (SDAC). SDAC helps departmental Disability Advisory Committees (DACs) by sharing ideas for improving the representation of state employees with disabilities. Additionally, SDAC

advises CalHR to help increase and improve employment opportunities for people with disabilities in the California State government.

Bobby also collaborates with various state entities to identify and address the barriers preventing persons with disabilities from obtaining equal opportunities in state government.

Noah Lebowitz | Attorney, Law Office of Noah D. Lebowitz

Noah D. Lebowitz is the founder of the Law Office of Noah D. Lebowitz (www.ndllegal.com) in Berkeley where he represents employees exclusively in all types of employment cases, with a specialty in representing plaintiffs in the areas of disability discrimination and medical leave related issues. Prior to opening his practice, Mr. Lebowitz was a partner in the San Francisco-based firm Duckworth Peters Lebowitz Olivier, LLP.

Mr. Lebowitz is a past member of the Executive Committee of the Labor & Employment Law Section of the Bar Association of San Francisco (2016-2020), the Executive Board of the California Employment Lawyers Association (CELA) (2010-2014), and the Executive Committee of the Labor and Employment Law Section of the California State Bar (2007–2010). Mr. Lebowitz is the Chair of CELA's Civil Rights Council Regulations Committee. For nine years, he served as Judge Pro Tem in the San Francisco Superior Court's Law & Motion Department. Mr. Lebowitz also is an independent arbitrator and a member of the American Arbitration Association Employment Panel and Consumer Panel. Mr. Lebowitz frequently speaks at and organizes continuing education events on topics related to disability discrimination, family and medical leave, and general litigation topics.

Mr. Lebowitz received his JD from University of San Francisco School of Law and his BA from the University of Wisconsin - Madison.

Ashley Hoffman | Policy Advocate, California Chamber of Commerce

Ashley Hoffman joined the California Chamber of Commerce in August 2020 as a policy advocate specializing in labor and employment and workers' compensation issues. Before joining the CalChamber policy team, she was an associate attorney in the Sacramento office of Jackson Lewis P.C., representing employers in civil litigation and administrative matters as well as advising employers on best practices, including compliance with laws such as the California Labor Code, California Wage Orders, and the Fair Employment and Housing Act. She previously worked as a litigation associate and a summer associate at Gibson, Dunn & Crutcher, LLP, Los Angeles, representing clients in a variety of matters including employment discrimination, consumer protection class actions, trademark disputes, immigration matters, and other issues. Ashley also was a law clerk in the U.S. District Court for the Western District of

Tennessee in Memphis and a judicial extern for the Ninth Circuit U.S. Court of Appeals in Pasadena.

Hoffman holds a B.A. with high honors in political science from the University of California, Santa Barbara, and earned her J.D. from the UCLA School of Law where she was a Michael T. Masin scholar, an editor at the UCLA Law Review, and staff member for the Women's Law Journal.

Heather Sweeney | Manager of Workplace Accommodations, Health Net

Heather Sweeney is from Centene Corp, the largest Medicaid managed care organization in the United States. In California Centene is known as Health Net of California. Heather brings over two decades of expertise in Human Resources. Heather spent several years in HR Leadership in big-box retail and has spent the last nine years honing her expertise at Centene Corp. Her expertise lies in leave management and accommodations, reflecting her adeptness in navigating complexities while prioritizing employee needs and upholding regulatory standards.

Laurie Rodriguez | Director of People Services and Strategies, SMUD

Laurie Rodriguez brings 20 years of experience in the areas of Human Resources, Leadership and Organizational Effectiveness and has successfully provided extensive workforce support to small, medium and large operations in a number of industries throughout her career. During Laurie's successful career with United Parcel Service, she held key workforce positions including Workforce Planning, Labor & Employee Relations, Training & Development and Health & Safety supporting a district of 3,000 employees.

She currently provides vision, leadership, direction and management oversight for recruitment, hiring, classification, employee benefits, fair employment, policy, payroll, employee/labor relations, culture, learning and development as the Director of People Services & Strategies at SMUD - the nation's sixth largest community-owned electric utility. Laurie and her teams' approach include embedding diversity, equity, inclusion and belonging into enterprise-wide strategies, services and solutions.

Joe Xavier | Director, Department of Rehabilitation

Joe Xavier, Director of the Department of Rehabilitation (DOR), has over 38 years of experience in business and public administration as well as many years participating in advocacy and community organizations. As an immigrant, a blind consumer, and a beneficiary of DOR's services, Joe has the experience and understands the challenges and opportunities available to individuals with disabilities, and the services required to maximize an individual's full potential.

Joe believes in the talent and potential of individuals with disabilities; investing in the future through creativity, ingenuity, and innovation; ensuring decisions and actions are informed by interested individuals and groups; pursuing excellence through continuous improvement; and preserving the public's trust through compassionate and responsible provision of services.

Brian Winfield | Chief Deputy Director, Department of Developmental Services

Brian Winfield serves as Chief Deputy Director, Program Services at the California Department of Developmental Services, where he has been Chief Deputy Director since 2018 and has served in several positions since 1998, including as Deputy Director, Assistant Deputy Director, Acting Deputy Director, Branch Manager, Section Chief, Assistant Section Chief and Community Program Specialist II. Also, he was Case Manager and Resource Developer at the Alta California Regional Center from 1995 to 1998 and Program Director at Cole Vocational Services from 1991 to 1995.

Eric Steward | Director of Work Skills, Meristem

Eric Steward began his teaching career in 1996. He taught special education at a high school 20 miles west of New Orleans in one of our nation's poorest communities. In his second year of teaching, he brought students on a "transition planning" field trip and saw firsthand just how limited the options were for the students he served. He knew then if he had the opportunity to support and build something better, he would. Since then, his focus has been on employability for young adults with developmental disabilities, and his passion has only grown over the years. Today, Eric leads the Meristem Work Skills department and the Transformative Autism Program. He finds the most satisfaction in building a sustainable alliance between someone who is neurodiverse, their support network, and an employer.

Harrison Lane | Transformative Autism Program Coordinator, Meristem

Harrison Lane is Meristem's Transformative Autism Program (TAP) Coordinator and a success story of the program himself. In his professional role, he trains employers in the best practices for hiring and retaining neurodiverse employees. He also supports job seekers and works with community partners. Harrison is the co-host of Voices of Community, a podcast about people breaking workforce barriers and building equity and inclusion.

From Harrison:

I have struggled with sensory integration issues and learning difficulties all my life. In the 6th grade, I was formally diagnosed with autism spectrum disorder (ASD). I struggled in high school making friends and completing assignments even while thriving in other areas, like theater. After high school, I became an environmental activist, sought work (without much success), and found

my way to Meristem in 2016. I participated in the program and cafe internships and, through the experience, formed friendships that continue to this day. I was part of the initial group of neurodiverse people that launched the Transformative Autism Program enacted in 2018 with California Senate Bill 866 and have worked as a professional supporting people with disabilities and advocating for them in the workplace in a variety of roles since 2020.