

History of the Center for Disability Inclusion

The Center for Disability Inclusion is a nationwide organization that partners with businesses to advance their disability inclusion efforts. This is an overview of our history since the organization was founded.

- 2009** GKCBLN, also known as the Greater Kansas City Business Leadership Network, was founded through the support of the SHRM-Kansas City chapter and a grant from Kansas Works as an affiliate chapter of the USBLN (also known as US Business Leadership Network). Founding president was Keith Wiedenkeller, (retired) Chief People Officer of AMC Theaters and he served as president for five years, 2009-2013. Quarterly educational programs were the foundation of the organization and the primary source of awareness through 2014. The generosity of board members with their time, talents, expertise and resources was invaluable to the success of this new organization. A part time ED Lori Maher.
- 2010** The Disability Champions Award was created to recognize companies who demonstrate excellence beyond compliance in their disability employment effort. Employers self-nominate and submit an application for consideration. Since 2010, the awards luncheon for employers and the Volunteer of the Year award has been held each October with 100+ attendees, a national speaker and John Holt, Fox4News evening anchor as our emcee.
- 2011** GKCBLN was recognized as the USBLN Affiliate of the Year at the national conference in Orlando Florida for our success in engaging business.
- 2011-2015** GKCBLN was actively involved in the Add Us In Consortium through ODEP and the UMKC Institute for Human Development. This five-year grant focused on disabled and disadvantaged youth in the urban core. The Urban Career Academy was launched, curriculum developed, classes held and approximately 180 students completed the program with the majority finding employment or pursuing higher education. In 2011 GKCBLN received the national affiliate of the year award.
- 2013-2014** USBLN recognized the scope of accomplishment in the Kansas City area and Keith Wiedenkeller was elected USBLN Board Chair for a two-year term, 2013-2014. In that role, he was the driving force behind the USBLN Disability Equality IndexSM that is now the leading benchmark for organizational effectiveness in disability employment.
- 2014** Brenda Perkins, (formerly) Partner/Consultant with Joshua Communications served as president in 2014. During this year, Rob Hoffman joined GKCBLN as Executive Director. Three significant grants were secured that have been instrumental in propelling our efforts and success.

1. The three-year grant from **Poses Family Foundation** (October 1, 2014 through September 30, 2017) was the catalyst for the KC@Work initiative and the Nexus consortium of service providers. Working closely with businesses in their disability employment efforts, KC@Work's goal is 700 employed individuals with disabilities during the three-year period.

2. A three-year grant from the **Missouri Council on Developmental Disabilities** provides funding for development of a web-based business resource to connect business with qualified candidates with disabilities. The online tool launched in April 2016.

3. The multi-year grant through **Show-Me-Careers** supports community collaborations to assist youth and young adults with disabilities gain work experience and employment.

- 2015** David Westbrook, SVP of Strategy & Innovation at Children's Mercy Hospitals served as president in 2015. Under David's leadership and the KC@Work initiative, the first annual Disability Inclusion Summit was held at the BEST Conference Center at KU Edwards Campus in April. This full-day event with national speakers and breakout sessions attracted 135 attendees. In August, the first annual Thought Leaders Luncheon was held at the Federal Reserve Bank. Jill Houghton, Executive Director of the USBLN addressed the 50 attendees at this invitation event. The 6th Annual Disability Champions Event was held in October at the Ritz Charles where Dr. Jennifer Arnold, Medical Director at Texas Children's Hospital and star of the television program, Little People, was our keynote speaker.
- 2016** Teresa Salinas, EEO, Affirmative Action Specialist with Cerner was elected president for a two-year term, 2016-2017. GKCBLN received its second national affiliate of the year award and was recognized at the annual conference.
- 2017** Mary Beth Majors, VP Talent Acquisition with UMB was elected president for a two-year term, 2018 – 2019.
- 2018** In July National announced a new brand changing from USBLN to Disability:IN. The IN stands for inclusion and all affiliates are required to re-brand using the same name and their city. By December grants ended and Executive Director Rob Hoffman resigned.
- 2019** January 2019 Darla Wilkerson was appointed Executive Director. We began the process of re-branding, creating strategies to roll that out to our partners and the community. Our re-brand was announced as Disability Inclusion of Greater Kansas City, also referred to as Disability:IN GKC. In March, Brenda Perkins was contracted with to be the Business Relations Consultant to continue outreach and communication to current partner and potential partners. In June we launched the Kansas City Disability Inclusion Network, meetings being held monthly to connect business, pivotal partners and academic partners together to elevate disability inclusion in greater Kansas City. For the first time we designed a partnership option for community provider agencies and are calling them Pivotal Partners. Educational/Academic partners have begun attending the network meetings. Also, in June we launched our new job board "Our Ability Connect" (a

partnership with Disability:IN New York) this is another tool to help connect our business partners with candidates.

2020

Disability:IN GKC transitioned all programs/events to virtual events due to the pandemic starting in March. We provided 10 webinars, 3 trainings in partnership with the Greater Kansas City Chamber and 8 partner company presentations on disability awareness. Hosted Diversity & Inclusion Consortium meetings with Michael Gonzales and co-host the Construction Round Table with Cecily Bee at Performance Contracting Group. Held all three annual signature events virtually, 6th Annual Disability Inclusion Summit, 11th Annual Disability Champion Award and annual Thought Leaders Event. Hired a part time social media coordinator Jill Webb and added 9 new business/community partners.

2021

In February, Jill Webb was contracted to be the Assistant Director to continue outreach and communication to current and potential community agency partners. We continued to experience significant growth with new corporate partners, community agencies and strategic partnerships across the region. Based on extensive conversations with organizations in Omaha, we expanded our efforts in that area. Due to our sister affiliate in St Louis discontinuing operation, and a number of existing partners having their corporate office there, we also began expansion in that area. We held all 3 annual signature events virtually, 7th Annual Thought Leaders Forum, 7th Annual Disability Inclusion Summit and 12th Annual Disability Champion Award. In September, we launched our new name and new brand – Center for Disability Inclusion – at our Annual Summit and became an independent organization. That month, we also contracted with Meaghan Walls to be the Director of Business Relations in Nebraska.