

Sharon Ohmberger ([00:00](#)):

So I'm Sharon Ohmberger, I'm the Community Engagement Director with Disability Rights Nebraska, and I am all about relationships. So, it's my job to connect with people outside the organization and give them an idea of what it is that we do in ways that the layman can understand. To take it out of attorney speak and policy speak and find those connections between people and organizations. So, Mr. Meurrens, why don't you tell me a little bit about yourself and about the organization? We'll let you get rolling on what this is all about.

Brad Meurrens ([00:52](#)):

Well, sure. Thank you, Sharon. My name is Brad Meurrens, and I am the Public Policy Director at Disability Rights Nebraska. Disability Rights Nebraska is the designated protection and advocacy organization for persons with disabilities in Nebraska. One of our main charges is to advocate and protect the rights of persons with disabilities here in Nebraska. We want to share our knowledge and our work with state and federal policymakers, to individuals who historically don't get invited to the table. Where the disability perspective often is not considered, or only considered by those who don't have the unique lived experience of disability.

Brad Meurrens ([01:42](#)):

Our policy internship program, since we have a developed and longstanding public policy program here at Disability Rights Nebraska, we thought that, that might be a unique tool we can use to accomplish our goals. The purpose was to provide a unique experience benefiting from our public policy and legislative work, our reputation, and our connections, both in the state legislature, state agencies, and/or federal legislators and agencies.

Brad Meurrens ([02:21](#)):

The way we operate our public policy internship program is we see it as having four main pillars. The first main pillar and outcome that we want to see in our internship program is that we want our interns to learn new content, new material, to learn about disability issues they may not know about, they may not have been introduced to, and probably would not be introduced to them in any other format or area.

Brad Meurrens ([02:56](#)):

The second thing we want to accomplish, and one of the outcome pillars of our program, is that we want the interns to understand and be engaged directly in the

state legislative process. Some of the things that we traditionally do to accomplish this pillar is to ask the interns to work on developing a position letter on one or two of the bills that is within our legislative agenda. To go research the issue, develop a position statement that we can submit to the legislature on a bill that we've identified as having an impact on persons with disabilities here in the state.

Brad Meurrens ([03:40](#)):

And we also strongly encourage our interns to consider testifying at a public hearing on a bill that's contained within our high priority section of our legislative agenda. Again, the idea is that we want to help them get directly connected and directly involved in the legislative process. To meet people and to meet the policymakers that are making decisions on legislation and other policies, rather than just reading about it in the newspaper. We think it's important for persons with disabilities to be visible in the legislative process.

Brad Meurrens ([04:20](#)):

We think that's one strategy that can help people with disabilities not be an afterthought in the discussions and the analysis of public policies. We want our interns not to get coffee, but to have coffee. We want them not to go get coffee for us, or to go get coffee for someone, but we want our interns to

have the confidence that they can go and have coffee with the Senator. So you have the confidence to set up a meeting and say, "I'm a constituent. Here's my perspective."

Brad Meurrens ([04:57](#)):

The third pillar that we have in our program is that we want to provide our interns with an experience that their peers won't have. I used to tease them, I would say, "Are any of your friends working on writing comments to federal agencies regarding accessibility procurement for NASA, the General Services Administration and the Department of Defense? Probably not. Are any of your friends sitting up and participating in meetings with the Disability Integration Office at FEMA? Probably not."

Brad Meurrens ([05:33](#)):

And I think the last pillar or meta-lesson that we want our interns to leave with, is a sense of confidence, a sense of connectedness to the community and to policymakers in general. And to have the critical thinking skills to go forth and succeed on their own advocacy agendas, either for themselves or for others.

Brad Meurrens ([06:01](#)):

We want them to understand that they don't have to have all the answers, and that sometimes the answers to policy problems and the solutions come through the discussion at being at the table involved and raising awareness of disability issues and disability perspectives on a variety of different policy issues. And that not thinking you have all the answers or being uncomfortable that you don't know all of the material on a particular topic, should not be a barrier to engaging in advocacy because it's okay to not know something. And that shouldn't prevent you from going and seeking, claiming a seat at the table and having your voice being heard. And that, sometimes, it's just really important to just provide the disability perspective and awareness. You don't always have to have an agenda or a target solution, but raising the issue of disability perspective sometimes is enough to plant the seed of the application of the policy to persons with disabilities.

Brad Meurrens ([07:17](#)):

I do want to commend our interns this year because this was an interesting year. Aimée kind of got a late start on the legislative process. And as you all know, the legislature was recessed for a while due to the pandemic. So, that kind of threw a wrench into our traditional legislative plans. But I think the other meta-lesson that

we wanted to demonstrate to the interns is that in the policy world, you have to be ready to pivot, and be able to pivot quickly. And to know where you're going and to be able to adapt to your environment, your living situations. Life, it does intervene and things will come into play and distractions will come in regardless. So you've got to figure out how you can pivot, how you can adapt, and how you can still achieve what you can achieve, given all the content in the context that you're living in.

Brad Meurrens ([08:14](#)):

So what we did this year, we trenched up a little bit differently this year. We wanted to then focus on sort of the hidden behind the scenes aspects of policymaking. What goes on before things even get to the legislative step? We wanted to demonstrate that there's more to policymaking and policy than just testifying at the Capitol and walking away. It's sort of like a duck on the water, to use that metaphor. You don't see the activity under the water or, in this case, behind the scenes that lead up to the testimony at the legislative hearing on a particular bill. We also had some opportunities on the federal level to provide some comments on some federal regulation changes that were proposed. So we thought that might be another way to learn some of those lessons, maybe a little

bit differently, but to learn those meta-lessons. So we focused on learning different content, what goes into policy-making, how do we do these things behind the scenes and focus on that rather than strictly on writing letters or testifying at the Capitol?

Sharon Ohmberger ([09:42](#)):

That sounds like an exercise in adaptability.

Brad Meurrens ([09:47](#)):

That it was.

Sharon Ohmberger ([09:48](#)):

So for the two people that took part in the internships this year, we're going to hear from these two people. And the first one is Mar Lee and Mar is a person with disability currently living in Central Nebraska. And they are a college student. And the second person you will hear from will be Aimée Folker, and Aimée lives in Omaha. She's a mom and a grad student and a person with a disability. So now let's hear from them.

Mar Lee ([10:27](#)):

So I worked on a few different issues while doing this internship position. During the legislative session, at the beginning, I helped write out testimony on a few different bills like LB853, as well as LB918, and LB875, which all, of course, had a disability aspect to them. So LB853, specifically, we wanted to support because it was helping people with disabilities who are vulnerable to financial exploitation.

Mar Lee ([11:03](#)):

And then there was LB875, we opposed it because it included coverage for forced treatment, or involuntary commitment to facilities, which is also a personal issue for me because I've been involuntarily committed. So, that's something that I had really close to heart and was kind of working on writing up testimony and trying to meet with senators about, but of course, then the legislative session kind of got shut down for a while. And it didn't come back up again later, but then there was LB918, which supported the creation of the African American Commission. And we wrote in to try to have a representative on the condition that also had a disability because African Americans and black people there are disabled people within that community as well.

Mar Lee ([12:02](#)):

So we wanted to make sure that that was being included. So those were just some of the bills that I worked on, but then in lieu of COVID, things kind of shifted gears because the session shut down. So I kind of shifted more towards kind of looking at emergency response and emergency preparedness of people with disabilities and started doing research on emergency preparedness plans. And I ended up making a list, like a checklist, of things to go through. So that way people can help get prepared for types of emergencies, whether it's a pandemic or flooding like the experience last year, or a tornado, or things of that nature just to be prepared for. And then finally, another issue that I worked on was kind of looking into the evictions. And looking into eviction rates in Nebraska and also was just kind of trying to look up general statistics and information about evictions happening because they do harm people with disabilities more often and finding accommodating housing is more difficult often. So yeah, those are in general, the issues that I was working on.

Sharon Ohmberger ([13:25](#)):

So what do you feel you came away with from the experience in terms of skills?

Mar Lee ([13:30](#)):

One of the biggest things I feel I came away with from this internship was a new lens on what my role is in advocacy work. And that is all the time that I used to always want to come in and just have the answers for things and wanted to just come in and fix things. But I kind of realized that's not my job and that's putting a lot of work on me when that's not my job to be doing that. That's the job of the legislators. They're the ones that's supposed to figure it out. We're supposed to come in and say, "Hey, this is a problem. We have a problem with this or this," or, "Hey, this is good. We like this. Support this."

Mar Lee ([14:09](#)):

And kind of advocate in that vicinity, but not taking it all upon myself that I also have to have the answers to how to fix the problem. Because again, that's not my job. My job is to just make sure that, in general, that the realm of disability and people with disabilities aren't being left out of the conversation and that issues that affect us are being discussed and that we're being involved in the conversations. And that we have a seat at the table, and not only have a seat at the table, but a voice at the table.

Sharon Ohmberger ([14:45](#)):

Wow. Just having met you, and I remember our first conversation and how passionate you were and to see how you've grown as an advocate is really, really cool.

Mar Lee ([15:03](#)):

Thank you. I really appreciate that. It's definitely been a long journey over the past couple of years since I first started doing advocacy work in general. So, a lot has happened in that time.

Sharon Ohmberger ([15:18](#)):

Yeah. It does sound you've already kind of answered this, but were there any elements of the internship that surprised you or particularly inspired you? Is it going to affect your life moving forward?

Mar Lee ([15:36](#)):

One of the things that I would say kind of surprised me is just how often the issue of disability, or making sure that things are accessible is not even an afterthought. It's just not thought about. It's just completely, for a lot of people, it's not something that they think about. And that's something that I've observed in terms of just media in correspondence with different people and looking at

governmental entities. And it's discouraging in some ways to think that, "Okay, people aren't talking about this." But it's so encouraging as well for me. It kind of pushes me further and drives me more to be like, "Okay, obviously if this isn't even an afterthought, if people just aren't thinking about it, someone like me needs to be in the room. We need to be here to make sure that this is not only thought about, but it's shoved up in people's faces and said, no, this is an issue and we're going to address this because we're people as well." And people who have disabilities, they're more deserving and more worthy than just being an afterthought.

Sharon Ohmberger ([17:02](#)):

What would you say to someone who was considering applying for an internship with Disability Rights Nebraska?

Mar Lee ([17:12](#)):

I would tell them that they should definitely apply and that they should also just be prepared to learn new things. I feel I learned a lot. I already was somewhat well-versed, experiences of testifying in the legislature, but then really how to do that and kind of where to focus my energy while doing that. Those were things that I kind of took tips from. From Brad, of course, and his mentorship definitely

helped out a lot in kind letting me know that, "Okay, I'm not the only one who's as passionate about this. And that there's other people who are just as passionate, if not more, about these issues as I am. And that they also experience a lot of the same setbacks and issues that I do." So having someone to give that kind of mentorship and guidance through experiencing those kind of, especially, emotional setbacks that I would experience with things maybe not going the way we wanted them to, it was definitely helpful to kind of have someone to give me that guidance and someone to turn to in those moments.

Mar Lee ([18:27](#)):

So, that's something that was completely ... It was such a valuable experience that I feel anyone, everyone should get the opportunity to have. Especially, it's really cool to be able to go and converse with senators. I got to go to the senatorial dinner that the Arc of Nebraska had. And go and see just this room full of people who had been committed to working for disability rights and disability advocacy. And that was an experience that also just encouraged me even more. So I had these wonderful experiences and met all these wonderful people. And that I hope anyone else wanting to apply to this internship, that they're going to have a great time and they're going to learn so much.

Mar Lee ([19:19](#)):

And it's really going to open up their eyes to a whole new experience and side of the advocacy world that I feel is often disconnected from at least the rest of, in general, Lincoln community, that I was a part of doing advocacy work. There wasn't a lot of people focusing on these kinds of issues. So, having one more person out there focused on this and also getting that experience is something that they'll just take away forever.

Brad Meurrens ([20:01](#)):

And again, just to demonstrate that we have a unique experience here at Disability Rights Nebraska, and we want to share that with individuals with disabilities who have an interest in advocacy and an interest in engaging in advocacy efforts, either on their own or with other groups. The idea is, if they are confident about their knowledge of a particular issue or issues, they will be able to make their own connections and to engage in public policy advocacy on their own. Certainly, with the help of the connections that we will help them establish, they can go to those connections and make their own. And we believe that when they have that confidence in themselves about their advocacy skills, the way in which we do legislative and policy advocacy. And with their own knowledge of

issues and demonstrated experience learning about different issues, we want them to feel confident that they will be able to make their own connections and engage on their own in public policy discussions and advocacy.

Sharon Ohmberger ([21:24](#)):

Why don't you just start at the beginning and tell me how you found out about the internship?

Aimée Folker ([21:31](#)):

A couple of years ago I was approached about doing the internship here. And while I was very excited about that, I was unable to do that at that time due to life circumstances. So, I waited until the pandemic and said, "Well, I've got all this time on my hands." I'm kidding, of course. But it seemed like the right time. I was coming to the end of my own career. I was finishing up at Creighton, let's put it that way. So I had some time. So I said, "Well, why not now?" One of the things I was most excited about on doing the work in this internship was getting more legislative experience. And that was definitely one of the skills that I felt the internship really helped me with in terms of understanding how to read a bill, how the legislature works with the lingo of the unicameral means, things like that.

Aimée Folker ([22:43](#)):

I knew a bit about it, but I didn't have that in-depth experience that I wanted to further my own advocacy work and the advocacy that I do with other organizations. So this really provided me the experience and the support and the education to sort of take that to the next level. I remember on the first day talking to Brad, I was like, "I don't understand the bill." And he says, "It's like learning a foreign language. The more you do it, the more it will make sense to you." And that's really what this internship provided in a way for me, was learning that language and being able to read a bill, not just with confidence, but to have the confidence to say, "I don't know what this means. Somebody helped me." I think when you first go into advocacy work, sometimes it moves so fast, especially when it comes to policy-making.

Aimée Folker ([23:48](#)):

It's like, you wait, you wait, you wait, and then all of a sudden everything's happening at once. And I think that can be intimidating, coming in and beginning, but meeting organizations through DRNE and through the network, I was able to learn that even the most senior policy advisors have to bounce things off each other and be like, "What exactly does this look like?" So, it gave me a lot of

confidence to sort of take my work to the next level in terms of policy-making and understanding how bills get made, how policies get made, and to not feel so intimidated to just dive in there and ask questions.

Sharon Ohmberger ([24:37](#)):

What were you working on that was most meaningful to you? What were the issues and how did you connect with them?

Aimée Folker ([24:47](#)):

Well, I come from a primarily mental health background where I had significant experience in dealing with mental and behavioral health systems and organizations. I had relatively no experience with the developmental side of things and the physical side of things. So, learning about their unique plights and strengths and challenges and how they're organizations that focus on things like autism and the deaf community and things like that, really helped me see how we're all in this together. At the same time, we're not in it the same at all. And one of the projects that I worked on was the access board's final rule, which was the Section 508 of the Rehabilitation Act. I got to help Brad write comments on what we thought about the final rule. And what that deals with is website

accessibility, as well as adaptive technology to help people be able to navigate the internet and technology in a meaningful way that helps them.

Aimée Folker ([26:09](#)):

And I found that to be very rewarding because I saw a lot of progress being made.

And I saw the power of what comments and policy and just sort of the gritty work of just beating down, "We need this, we need this, we need this." How it can, eventually, start to make a difference and help people get what they need.

Another project I worked on was subminimum wage and the 14(c) certificate.

That was a little bit more frustrating because it's been around for so long and it's so detrimental. And there are some wonderful advocacy work being done in terms of creating the Employment First framework. To find out that people out there are making four cents an hour was really deflating. At the end of the day, you're very glad to learn about those things because now you can do something about them. I started out with the 501(c) and it's like, "Yeah, we're making a difference."

Aimée Folker ([27:26](#)):

And then to find out that, for instance, Nebraska was the one state that hasn't done anything about Employment First was just like, "Oh, come on." Well, then

again, that's what I was doing the internship for, was to learn how to change those things. And other projects I worked on was beginning to start a story bank on seclusion and restraint. And that was very sobering to see, specifically, the damage that is done with some of our policies. And I think just the level of discrepancy for minorities and people with disabilities that these tactics are being used on was very inspiring, at the same time it was very ... You just roll up your elbows and say, "Okay, we've got to change this. We've got to change it now." And thanks to my internship, I now have skills that can really help me connect with people, network with the right people where I can say, "Who do I talk to about that? What's the next step? Let me get together with some of my friends that have autistic children and that are in minority communities and let's just start. Let's just start something."

Aimée Folker ([28:49](#)):

Because of that, I've learned policy really starts in the hallway conversations. It starts in the backyard conversations. There's an idea that everything's sort of like The West Wing and you get all these policymakers in a big room, and sure that does happen, but a lot of the work that I did was just sheer talking to people, from this organization, from that organization, "What are you doing over here?"

"We here at the Autistic Society of America are doing this." "Well, down here at the down syndrome, we're doing this." And just getting all those voices together to create that tapestry of change that we need. So it was just such a wonderful experience. And I really hope to come back again. After I finish my thesis in December, I'm really hoping to come back.

Sharon Ohmberger ([29:51](#)):

It sounds like it's had an amazing impact on you in terms of bolstering your skills and your confidence as an advocate. So what would you say to somebody who wanted to apply for the internship?

Aimée Folker ([30:07](#)):

I would say, "Try not to do it during a pandemic." I was disappointed. The unicameral was, for the most part, on hold during my internship. So, a lot of the policy work that I would have enjoyed getting, I wasn't able to. But I think in any other situation an intern coming in would have that remarkable experience. To be able to interact with the legislature, write letter. I could do some peripheral, and what I was able to do was amazing and wonderful, such as meeting my senators, learning how to write letters. And I think to be able to do that while the legislature was actually in session would be amazing. So I would definitely say, "Be

very excited about the unicameral." Certainly in terms of making a difference, Disability Rights Nebraska is so awesome.

Aimée Folker ([31:13](#)):

Everybody I met was just the best. And I was just amazed that even people who I never met or never got the chance to meet in person, we were chatting about their pets and things like that. So, I really felt part of the community, even though I was just this intern and just a name on an email in the beginning. Everybody made me feel so welcome. So, it was just a pleasure to work with you guys, you amazing people. I think an intern coming in, be excited, but also be prepared for the difficult parts, you do have to face them. The work is necessary and it's necessary because people's lives are being stifled. And they're being treated, in some cases, not as valuable human beings at all, as afterthoughts. And that can be a lot to deal with. So, make sure you've got your support network up and running. And I can say the best support that work is the people at DRNE, because they were always there to sort of, "Yes. I know you've just heard this story, but it's okay to talk through things and manage the stress level."

Aimée Folker ([32:47](#)):

Yeah. It was just a wonderful place to have an internship at. And like I said, I can't wait to come back.

Sharon Ohmberger ([32:54](#)):

The internship has been funded through a contract with the Nebraska Leadership Education and Neurodevelopmental and Related Disorders program at the University of Nebraska Medical Center.

Brad Meurrens ([33:08](#)):

For more information about our public policy internship program, please contact me, Brad Meurrens at Disability Rights Nebraska 4024743183, 18004226691, or Brad, B-R-A-D @drne.org. Thank you.