

SUCCESS STORY

Health and Human Services

"It's 'this ability,' not 'disability,' that matters."

Talent comes in all kinds of packages. I think we owe it to America to hire the best talent no matter the package.

- Dr. Wanda Jones, Director and Deputy Assistant Secretary
U.S. Department of Health and Human Services (HHS)
Office on Women's Health (OWH)



Babette Couser

Meet the Employee



Babette Couser is a proud new employee of the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services (HHS) Office on Women's Health (OWH). OWH was established in 1991 as acknowledgment that there are in fact differences between women's and men's health needs and because women's health needs were not given serious consideration. Babette's pride comes from helping to support OWH's mission to "provide leadership to promote health equity for women and

girls through sex/gender-specific approaches." She supports staff with a wide range of activities, including planning travel, coordinating meetings, communicating with the general public and distributing OWH's 4,000+ publications.

Babette's employment journey was not an easy one. In 2000, an illness caused her to leave the workforce for several years. When she was ready to return to work, armed with an MBA and a professional background connecting people with necessary services, she proactively gathered the resources and support team she needed to find a job. She became a client of Maryland Department of Rehabilitation Services and conducted her own Internet research to find disability employment resources including the Employer Assistance & Recruiting Network (EARN) and the [Job Accommodation Network](#) (JAN). At times, she struggled to maintain her optimism and was uncertain how to handle the question of her disability with employers. "When

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you can't see someone has a disability, it can lead to misunderstandings." She applied for a few jobs through EARN and other disability employment sources where she thought employers would be more disability-friendly, but still was not contacted for interviews.

The Career Fair

Then Babette heard about a HHS Career Fair being held in Washington, D.C. in May 2008 through EARN. Part of her felt it would not be worthwhile to attend but another part of her decided to give it a shot. The career fair turned out to be a good opportunity to share her resume and network with employers.

OWH Director and Deputy Assistant Secretary Dr. Wanda Jones had also attended that career fair. Dr. Jones had long been a proponent for people with disabilities, having previously been involved in the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention team responsible for planning the first conference on women and disability in 1998. "[That conference] taught me more [about disabilities] than I could learn in school. I became a convert. Here [at OWH], we focus on the ability. It's 'this ability,' not 'disability,' that matters."

HHS managers at the career fair were asked to sign up for a pre-training to understand the resources available to them

as well as the law such as the Rehabilitation Act of 1973. While much of this was not new information for Dr. Jones, she felt that it clarified disability issues for the other managers, who maybe were not as familiar with the issues. She did learn of an excellent resource for federal agencies: CAP. CAP (INSERT HREF) provides assistive technology and services to people with disabilities, Federal managers, supervisors, IT professionals, and Wounded Services Members.

At the career fair, Dr. Jones picked up 70 to 90 resumes. She was impressed by many of the jobseekers' backgrounds but only had one job to fill. She took seven or eight resumes to her managers, who then picked four to interview. Babette was one of those four and was hired after giving a strong interview.

The Hire

OWH decided to fill the position using the [Schedule A hiring authority](#), a federal authority permitting agencies to hire qualified individuals with disabilities without going through the competitive process. With some follow-up, reassurance and assistance from HHS' EEO officer, OWH was able to move quickly to bring on Babette as a staff assistant.

The office staff was aware Babette was hired through the career fair for people

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with disabilities before she started. Babette said everyone was supportive and welcoming. She has not needed any accommodations to do her job although she says she would feel comfortable asking if needed in the future. Dr. Jones encourages her to do so and says that getting her staff the tools and training they need is an integral part of their culture, regardless of disability. "We want to pair Babette with others to develop and grow. I have a former support staff person who is now responsible for managing events."

When asked what advice Babette would give to other jobseekers with disabilities, she recommends they stay focused. "Surround yourself with a good support team and don't give up. I almost didn't go to the career fair. I know it's easier said than done and I've given up in the past

but know that there are resources there like EARN and you will eventually meet your employer."

Dr. Jones advises people with disabilities not to undersell themselves or apply for jobs that do not match their skill sets. She was frustrated that people she met at the career fair had law degrees, for example, but were interested in mailroom positions. At the same time, employers must not discount jobseekers with disabilities to fill all levels of positions within their organizations. Dr. Jones advises other managers to hire people with disabilities. "Talent comes in all kinds of packages. I think we owe it to America to hire the best talent no matter the package."

Share Your Story

If you have a success story you would like to share, please email us at: earn@earnworks.com.



From left to right, Babette Couser and Dr. Wanda Jones.

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