

Celebrating disability visibility

By **Melissa Henderson**

July is disability pride month, an opportunity to celebrate pride, visibility and solidarity with our neighbors who experience disabilities. The definition of an individual living with a disability is someone who has a physical, mental, intellectual or sensory impairment that may hinder their full and effective participation in society on an equal basis with others.

This month is significant because Thursday, July 16 marks 34 years since the Americans with Disability Act (ADA) was signed into federal law. Passed in 1990, this landmark legislation provides civil rights to individuals experiencing disabilities so that they can enjoy the same opportunities to work, learn, travel and recreate as everyone else.

The ADA guarantees many basic civil rights, however, there is much more we can and should do as a society to ensure our family, friends, coworkers, classmates and neighbors living with disabilities experience life to its fullest.

According to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), 1 in 4 Americans has a disability. People with disabilities are the largest and most diverse minority in the U.S. It is a group that any one of us can become a member of instantly. Disability spans all ages, abilities, races, ethnicities, religions, income and education levels, and more. Yet disabilities remain stigmatized.

While some disabilities are visible, many are not. Disabilities can be physical, cognitive and intellectual, mental illness, sensory or undiagnosed. Individuals experiencing a condition may choose how visible they would like their disability to be. In the U.S., mental health disorders are the most common type of disability. These can include depression, PTSD and anxiety.

Despite growing awareness and understanding, individuals living with disabilities experience more negative health outcomes than their peers. According to the CDC, adults with disabilities are three times more likely to have heart disease, stroke, disabilities or cancer and are more likely to smoke tobacco. Women with disabilities are less likely to receive a recommended mammogram.

Our neighbors with disabilities are also less likely to participate in normal parts of daily life like experiencing life as a student, employee, employer, elected official or parent. It is important to go beyond simply inviting an individual with a disability to the table to join a conversation or share their feedback. As neighbors, friends, family, coworkers and leaders, we need to do more than the basic minimum to support individuals with disabilities in participating fully in daily life. This starts with overcoming any discomfort you might have asking about someone's disability and be open to learning how you can best support them in being a part of their community.

At RiverStone Health, we partnered with Living Independently for Today and Tomorrow (LIFTT) to complete a physical assessment of our facilities, implement improvements and promote disability inclusion in our workplace and programming. Over the past year, RiverStone Health has used this

assessment to make improvements, including improved automatic door access, reduced trip and slip hazards, accessible restrooms and seating areas, improved signage and communications and a drive-up drop box for permit applications and payments. Our disability inclusion task group has also organized trainings and guest speakers for staff and is developing an internal awareness campaign. While we are just getting started, we are committed to being a part of making disability visible in our community.

Melissa Henderson, MPH, CPH, is the Senior Director of Community Health and Safety for RiverStone Health Public Health Services. To learn more, call 406-247-3305.