

Transcript

00:00:02

The.

00:00:06 Cassie

Welcome to disability voices. The podcast brought to you by ability Montana, where we amplify the stories that deserve to be heard in this space. We're dedicated to exploring the diverse and empowering narratives of individuals with disabilities.

00:00:18 Kendra

Each episode will dive into the lives of remarkable people sharing their.

00:00:21 Kendra

Challenges and unique perspectives.

00:00:23 Cassie

We'll also sit down with service providers, advocates and experts.

00:00:27 Cassie

Who are dedicated to creating a more inclusive and access?

00:00:29 Kendra

World. So join us as we embark on a journey of empowerment, education and inclusion.

00:00:34 Kendra

Disability voices is more than just a podcast. It's a platform for connection and a testament to the incredible strength within the disability community.

00:00:41 Cassie

So subscribe now and let's amplify these powerful voices together.

00:00:45 Cassie

Is disability voices.

00:00:47 Cassie

Where every story matters.

00:00:52 Michelle

Welcome to get involved. The segment where we empower you to take action and make a difference. Advocacy is at the heart of creating change, and every voice has the power to shape a more inclusive future in this segment.

00:01:06 Michelle

We break down the issues, share opportunities to engage and show you how to make your voice heard.

00:01:11 Michelle

Because when we get involved, we create a world that works for everyone. Let's dive in.

00:01:17

And.

00:01:20 Kendra

Hi.

00:01:20 Kendra

Welcome to disability voices.

00:01:22 Kendra

Today, we are thrilled to announce our brand new segment.

00:01:25 Kendra

The series is your guide to advocacy, equipping you with the tools, knowledge, and confidence to make your voice heard during the 2025 Montana legislative session.

00:01:34 Michelle

Advocacy isn't just about speaking up, it's about shaping the laws and the policies that impact our lives.

00:01:40 Michelle

Together we'll breakdown key issues, connect you with resources and show you how your efforts can drive the real, lasting change.

00:01:49 Cassie

Whether you're a seasoned advocate or just stepping into this space, this is your call to action.

00:01:54 Cassie

Your voice matters, and together we can build a future that's inclusive.

00:01:58 Cassie

Equitable and empowering for all.

00:01:59 Cassie

So let's get involved because change starts here.

00:02:02 Kendra

The series is hosted by me, Cassie, Me, Michelle and me. Kendra. On this series, you can expect weekly episodes with updates from the week prior.

00:02:11 Kendra

Forward into the next week and all the action steps needed to get involved.

00:02:15 Kendra

Today, we're really.

00:02:16 Kendra

It is the opening day of the legislative.

00:02:19 Kendra

We're recording this on January 6th, but Cassie and I are really excited to get introduced. One of our favorite people, Michelle, who will be helping us on this series.

00:02:28 Kendra

Michelle has had a lot of experience and advocacy going way back before. Her time heritability. And so we're hoping that we get to learn a lot from her about how to be involved this session.

00:02:39 Kendra

So welcome Michele.

00:02:40 Michelle

Thank you for.

00:02:41 Cassie

Having me, Michele, as you know, we admire you so much and all that you've.

00:02:45 Cassie

Advocacy wise and so like Kendra said, you've been doing this for years. Can you tell us?

00:02:49 Cassie

About how you got that fire inside of you to be an advocate.

00:02:53 Michelle

Well, actually it started with my involvement with the Western Service Area Authority, which started in 2005. And so I became involved as an advocate and as a potential board member at that time.

00:03:08 Michelle

And as we learned more about the legislative session and what was going to be involved there, our involvement with.

00:03:15 Michelle

What was called the addictive and Mental Disorders Division and are right and need to collaborate with them on the services provided to those with mental health struggles in the state of Montana.

00:03:26 Michelle

I became fired up because I was one of those recipients of the services and felt really, really passionate about making a difference, and I got a lot of support actually from those people saying, you know, Michelle with your articulate nature and your ability to speak, we'd really like.

00:03:43 Michelle

To be involved.

00:03:45 Cassie

And and do you think someone like planted that seed in you where it's like I see the good that you have to offer?

00:03:50 Cassie

And then fanned that flame a little bit.

00:03:53 Michelle

Definitely. I remember just who it was.

00:03:55 Cassie

I think that's so amazing because we see goodness in people and like their capabilities to be advocates. But sometimes we don't see it in ourselves.

00:04:03 Cassie

To have someone announce it to you and be like, hey, look alive. You've got it in you, right?

00:04:09 Cassie

Just because someone wants you to be an advocate doesn't mean you know how to do it. And I think a lot of times we operate out of a fear that we're not going to be good enough or we're not going to know how to do it. So what?

00:04:17 Cassie

You do to educate yourself, to be ready to show up, which I imagine was in person.

00:04:23 Cassie

A lot, and probably by phone.

00:04:25 Cassie

What did you do to prepare for that?

00:04:27 Michelle

Well, I think one of the first things is I found my people, ones that I knew would not necessarily judge me, but really acknowledge what I was trying to do.

00:04:40 Michelle

I can remember the first time that I spoke.

00:04:43 Michelle

On behalf of the Western Service Area authority at the legislature and.

00:04:47 Michelle

And I came to the legislature and was committee actually. And there was these great big microphones that no one really talked to me about until right before it happened.

00:04:58 Michelle

I was just not.

00:04:59 Michelle

But people were there for me and I think that is really what's key. And I think the people at ability.

00:05:05 Michelle

Here and and the support we can provide to people.

00:05:08 Michelle

In our process, is really, really critical to growing and supporting advocates.

00:05:15 Kendra

I think that's why we're so lucky to have you as a part of this, because you will think of all those little things that maybe we'll miss and we are definitely here to support people and teach the process, but it is different being the one that's actually up.

00:05:29 Kendra

Giving the testimony, which we don't always do.

00:05:33 Kendra

As ability, because we would rather amplify the voices of the people that it's affecting the most.

00:05:39 Kendra

Is it coming from us all the time?

00:05:41 Kendra

Don't think it has the same.

00:05:43 Kendra

So we're here to be that support system, but then for your perspective of being, you know, someone affected by a policy that you're speaking on and kind of the nuances that come with sharing your personal story and.

00:05:57 Kendra

Just the actual physical act of getting up there is definitely something that is understated.

00:06:03 Kendra

Think in in prepping to give testimony.

00:06:06 Michelle

One of the things that I did that was really helpful in the beginning was I wrote.

00:06:12 Michelle

My testimony out word for word.

00:06:16 Michelle

And that was really important when I was learning how to do it because it gave me something to look at and something to focus on. However, as I moved along in my journey, I found it most effective to actually just write little sound bites for myself.

00:06:31 Michelle

And look at the legislators, because the legislators, the one thing to to remember, is that the legislators need to be educated and they want to be educated. So many of them say thank you.

00:06:43 Michelle

For helping me understand better your story.

00:06:46 Cassie

It's incredibly vulnerable to get up there too.

00:06:49 Cassie

And so you know, you're not just getting U to speak on behalf of something you're speaking on behalf of yourself.

00:06:55 Cassie

So do you have some tips for folks? Obviously writing it out is helpful.

00:06:59 Cassie

I love your tidbit about, you know, 'cause. Personally, I like, don't want to read either, but.

00:07:04 Cassie

Some days emotionally, I'm like all I can do is read this to you. And so in order to prepare for it, what are some other things you do 'cause you don't always probably feel like it when it's time to get up there.

00:07:16 Michelle

Well, I think I stay connected to my sources OE.

00:07:20 Michelle

And that's really important because sometimes this legislation and the things that are up there are, like you said, very.

00:07:27 Michelle

Make me feel very vulnerable, especially when I am speaking to the people making the decisions and know that they might not have that answer and they might not have this information.

00:07:37 Michelle

I feel so passionate.

00:07:39 Michelle

About giving them information that can make a difference.

00:07:42 Kendra

A lot of your experience comes from going to the legislature.

00:07:46 Kendra

And like providing your testimony in person, there are some other ways of getting.

00:07:51 Kendra

Have you tried any of the other forms of contacting legislators, or is that kind of your specialty is given?

00:07:59 Kendra

The your verbal word.

00:08:00 Michelle

My favorite way is to give the verbal word, because I think that makes me feel like I've done all that I can.

00:08:07 Michelle

But I also know there's been times.

00:08:09 Michelle

We live in Montana.

00:08:11 Michelle

Weather hits. We got to find a way to make it count this these votes are happening. Whether the roads are bad or not, and ever since COVID we've been able to, and perhaps before.

00:08:23 Michelle

That's when I started using. It was the.

00:08:27 Michelle

Call in or the zoom portion.

00:08:31 Michelle

And I still was able to feel pretty powerful because I was able to.

00:08:34 Michelle

Kind of stand up and do my thing, even though nobody could see me, I was still able to stand tall.

00:08:41 Michelle

Down proud for what I believed in, and I think that that was helpful to stay involved and I have written emails.

00:08:51 Michelle

I haven't felt as good about those 'cause I get too lengthy and I'm not as impactful.

00:08:56 Michelle

Don't feel and I didn't even understand really what was happening to them once they went.

00:09:01 Michelle

The.

00:09:01 Michelle

Like, how were they getting to the right people?

00:09:04 Cassie

There's nothing like looking someone in the eye and seeing them kind of nod along like I hear what you're saying. And you're right about that. Like when.

00:09:12 Cassie

Your testimony, if you're not reading off the paper, then you're telling it to someone.

00:09:16 Cassie

Putting it in their soul, you're asking for empathy.

00:09:18 Cassie

Saying I am here.

00:09:21 Cassie

This affects.

00:09:22 Cassie

Please make the right decision. One of the issues that we do know is that.

00:09:28 Cassie

Things are affecting us all the time and we don't know that they're voting on it.

00:09:31 Cassie

So how do you stay connected to like what the bills?

00:09:34 Cassie

What are things that you've done over time to make sure you're kind of have a pulse on what's going on so that you can show up 'cause?

00:09:40 Cassie

That's the number one barrier is you can't show up if you don't know that it's going on.

00:09:45 Michelle

Right. Well, there's a couple of ways. Usually when I'm involved with the legislature and things that impact me and things that I'm passionate about, I'm usually connected to a bigger group.

00:09:58 Michelle

So I was connected to Montana's peer network for a while.

00:10:02 Michelle

And in the peer support world, and through the mental Health Advance Directive and things like that.

00:10:08 Michelle

And so I was connected to someone who could help me stay connected.

00:10:11 Michelle

And now I'm connected. Of course through ability, Montana. But one of the other ways that I actually.

00:10:17 Michelle

Am involved in is going to lg.mt.gov and so there you can navigate the website and it'll tell you all about the bills of the current session, the bills of the past.

00:10:30 Michelle

And when you look at a bill, you as long as you know the the number to the bill and if it's a House bill or a Senate bill, you plug it right.

00:10:37 Michelle

And it tells you its path.

00:10:39 Michelle

And so that's something I didn't understand right away.

00:10:42 Michelle

I'd like to give that information out soon.

00:10:45 Michelle

Is to just say that's one way you can.

00:10:46 Kendra

Do it and I'll say that website when we'll have links to any of the websites or phone numbers and stuff we talk about. But that website is very easy to navigate.

00:10:55 Kendra

Done a really good job with their updates to it, especially this session. I feel like the way it's laid out is really nice.

00:11:00 Kendra

All you have to do is go to.

00:11:02 Kendra

Mt Gov. And you can navigate through how to contact your legislators, how to find who your legislator is. You can find all their contact information, but ability Montana is really looking this year at how we can be the support system for people who want to be.

00:11:18 Kendra

And maybe don't know these paths on their own yet, and so.

00:11:22 Kendra

Really encourage you to reach out to us and you can do it through our disability voices.

00:11:26 Kendra

Disability voices.

00:11:28 Kendra

At ability Mt or RG and depending where you live then we can work through what it looks like to support.

00:11:36 Kendra

But that's that's our huge goal. This session is to make it more accessible for folks to to join because I think one of the biggest.

00:11:43 Kendra

Barriers and there's several that we could talk about in our town is.

00:11:48 Kendra

Just the lack of education on how to do it.

00:11:51 Kendra

'S nobody's teaching us how to do.

00:11:53 Kendra

And so if you're, if you're not just seeking it out on your own, it's difficult and it feels overwhelming to take that jump.

00:12:00 Cassie

So yeah, and to that end, Michelle, is there a format that someone should follow when they stand up to provide testimony that you can touch on?

00:12:08 Michelle

Sure. So one of the things I want to mention is that we typically have 3 minutes.

00:12:15 Michelle

I try to keep it to two because when the lines get long, the chairman says.

00:12:19 Michelle

We're a lot of times they want to cut it off.

00:12:22 Michelle

And so I try to keep it to two minutes.

00:12:25 Michelle

I can.

00:12:26 Michelle

But when you go up to the microphone, they're no longer these great big foam microphones anymore, by the way, they are.

00:12:33 Michelle

Pretty easy and you know small which is great, but you make sure that you can be heard.

00:12:39 Michelle

The microphone in front of your mouth and say.

00:12:41 Michelle

My name is Michelle.

00:12:44 Michelle

MICHELLEW, you know Lewis, you spell your name out and then you say whether you're proponent or whether you're an opponent.

00:12:52 Michelle

And then you say.

00:12:55 Michelle

Good afternoon.

00:12:58 Michelle

Mr. Chair and members of the committee, and so you're addressing the Chair 1st and then the rest of the committee.

00:13:04

A.

00:13:05 Michelle

And then I think that's actually when you say I'm a proponent of, I can't remember exactly how it.

00:13:12 Michelle

I'm sorry I can't remember.

00:13:12 Cassie

No.

00:13:13 Cassie

And we can write that out for folks too, and kind of have that available, but yeah.

00:13:13 Michelle

Order, but yeah, so that that.

00:13:17 Michelle

And then and then when you give your testimony just.

00:13:21 Michelle

However, is most comfortable for you and to stay honest to yourself and the most comfortable thing and the other thing I want to share with you from before is that really just say what you're comfortable with? I mean, we have a lot in our story if we're passion.

00:13:35 Michelle

About something, we have a lot in our story.

00:13:38 Michelle

And there's been a time or two when I've gotten up there and wanted to say a little too much, too many Dee things about myself. And then I was like, woo, I started crying and things were happening.

00:13:50 Michelle

So you know, we want our experiences to be good and things that we want to expose and and things that we want to share with people that we feel comfortable doing so.

00:13:59 Michelle

So you know, that's why sometimes practicing it in front of the mirror before you go up there and do it, you know where you're.

00:14:05 Michelle

To hit those little bumps.

00:14:06 Cassie

I'm just kind of curious too. I feel like a lot of times our testimony is a little bit more powerful if it has emotion, but it's not emotional.

00:14:15 Cassie

Would you agree with?

00:14:16 Cassie

That I think sometimes if we show too much of A disgruntled edge or you know, while we might feel that that might not be the appropriate way to portray it, to get our needs met, right. And so do you have any advice about that?

00:14:31 Michelle

Think that it is important to show emotion and to show your passion.

00:14:32

It.

00:14:36 Michelle

There's a difference between passion and emotion.

00:14:39 Michelle

Passion means This is why I believe in this versus emotion is.

00:14:42 Michelle

Is why I'm angry and you're going to hear it.

00:14:45 Michelle

You know, I think.

00:14:46 Michelle

We just like in any other form of advocacy in our life. We can burn bridges and just because we don't know these people doesn't mean we can't burn the bridge.

00:14:56 Michelle

Don't hear the message.

00:14:58 Cassie

That's the number one thing we see and I I think that as we work side by side with folks, we've seen folks that burn bridges that they later need to cross and.

00:15:08 Cassie

Of keeping in mind, how do I give this information in a way?

00:15:12 Cassie

That builds understanding without saying too much, and so it's a balance.

00:15:17 Cassie

So it doesn't need to be stressful, but it is OK to have someone read it.

00:15:20 Cassie

OK, to reach out and say would you mind helping?

00:15:23 Cassie

These are my thoughts like don't feel like at any point. This is a I'm on my own thing and I love what you said earlier is that.

00:15:30 Cassie

You found a.

00:15:31 Cassie

You have your peers, and that's what this is all about, is that we're all in this together. You know, Medicaid expansion is a really big conversation for this legislative session that impacts 220,000.

00:15:43 Cassie

People across Montana, we need to protect Medicaid.

00:15:47 Cassie

So how do we have these discussions?

00:15:48 Cassie

How do we help people know that it impacts them?

00:15:51 Cassie

Because there's probably 200,000 of them that have no idea this is happening or that they need to speak up to.

00:15:58 Cassie

And so how do we get the message out and and staying involved is a really important way that we want to help folks do that.

00:16:05 Kendra

Yeah. And I think maybe one thing that would be helpful.

00:16:08 Kendra

Now for folks that maybe this is all brand new to them is just quick lesson on how bills kind of go through this process and kind of the stages you can get involved in because.

00:16:12

A.

00:16:19 Kendra

I didn't know this information until I actually worked at the legislature as a page in high school, and that was like my crash course.

00:16:26 Kendra

How it all works?

00:16:28 Kendra

But I know that again, it's like there's that little video of like, how a bill becomes a law that everybody has seen. But when it's on the state level and what we're talking about here in Montana is really specific to our own process, I think.

00:16:40 Kendra

Little bit so quickly like a bill gets drafted and then it gets assigned a sponsor either in the House or the Senate.

00:16:47 Kendra

So whichever side is sponsoring it, that's the side it starts on, and it goes into committee.

00:16:53 Kendra

And the committee is the time that we get to give.

00:16:57 Kendra

That's when, if the bill is being heard as the committee, that's the time that we would be able to go and those would be the legislators we speak to would be the ones in that specific committee. And then they have to vote on it in the committee to.

00:17:09 Kendra

It out to the floor of the side of the Congress.

00:17:13 Kendra

On.

00:17:14 Kendra

Gets to the.

00:17:15 Kendra

There's a vote of the entire house or the entire Senate.

00:17:19 Kendra

But when that one goes up, then all of the legislators are on the floor and they might be debating back and forth reasons for against the bill, but that the public can only watch those you don't get to be involved in speaking, but you can go and there.

00:17:33 Kendra

Seating and they've redone the galleries of both the house and the Senate.

00:17:37 Kendra

So there's a lot more accessible seating and stuff, so you can go and watch.

00:17:40 Kendra

But there's no public participation during a vote.

00:17:45 Kendra

Kind of in being able to give testimony or speak then if it passes that floor, it goes to the opposite side.

00:17:52 Kendra

If it started in the house, it now moves into a committee.

00:17:56 Kendra

On the Senate side, or if it started in the Senate, moves to a committee in the House and then it has to do this whole process again.

00:18:02 Kendra

So then it has to pass committee.

00:18:05 Kendra

So there's another time to give testimony at committee on the opposite side, committee has to vote.

00:18:11 Kendra

It goes back to.

00:18:13 Kendra

The floor again same.

00:18:15 Kendra

And then if once it's passed the second side, then that's when it goes to the governor's.

00:18:20 Kendra

And then he has to also sign it to make it become law. If he vetoes it, there's the opportunity for the Congress to try to override his veto.

00:18:29 Kendra

2/3 vote. Then it could just go into law without his signature, so being involved.

00:18:35 Kendra

In giving your your testimony during those two committee meetings is really.

00:18:40 Kendra

But there's also other ways to be involved throughout the whole thing, and especially with your legislator, because when it's on the floor being voted, then your appeal is really to your own personal legislature from either the house or the Senate district that you live in.

00:18:55 Kendra

And so there's multiple ways of contacting that person directly to try to persuade them to vote the way you want them to because.

00:19:02 Kendra

Ultimately, they were elected by their congregation, and so their votes should reflect what the majority of their congregation wants and when they don't know, like if it's a topic that they're not well versed on, that's what they will default to is what the majority of their people are.

00:19:19 Kendra

Them.

00:19:19 Kendra

And so if we're not telling them anything, then they don't know.

00:19:22 Kendra

They don't know how to vote, so a couple of the other ways to be involved then is emailing them, calling them that contact information for your legislators. On that website we mentioned earlier.

00:19:35 Kendra

And you can search it if you don't know who they are. There's maps on there that'll help you find who it is and then gives you the contact information directly to them. Then the last way I'll say of contacting them, which as a page was an interesting thing.

00:19:49 Kendra

Know about before going.

00:19:50 Kendra

Is that there's a switchboard that anybody can call into and it's just.

00:19:55 Kendra

One number that everybody calls, which is 406-444-4800.

00:20:00 Kendra

Again, I'll put that down below, but if you call that number.

00:20:04 Kendra

You get a relay person and they take your.

00:20:07 Kendra

Your statement down and they mark whether you're for or against whatever issue you're calling.

00:20:13 Kendra

And then they put those on these postcards and then they deliver the postcards to each of the Congress people that you've asked be delivered the note.

00:20:22 Kendra

And so as a page, that's what we used to do is on the day of floor votes especially, we would pass out the postcards to everybody.

00:20:31 Kendra

Visually, very easy to see what the people wanted, whether they were for or against a bill, and a lot of legislators would look at that and they'd be like, OK, I'm voting yes on this or voting no based on what their little postcard stacks were. So those.

00:20:44 Kendra

Of the ways of contacting your legislature that I can think of. But.

00:20:49 Cassie

Yeah, we'll just make sure that that information's available to you.

00:20:52 Michelle

Of the things that we need to know about committees is and then why is it so important is that amendments will be added or?

00:21:02 Michelle

Things will happen to a bill in order for it to go out of committee.

00:21:07 Michelle

And so when it crosses over to the other side, then they want to make amendments, then it's got to go back and it just keeps going back and forth like kind of like volleyball or tennis, you know, until and you're and you're just like, what's happening to the.

00:21:21 Michelle

What's happening to the bill?

00:21:23 Michelle

So those kinds of things are happening that.

00:21:27 Michelle

Is part of it.

00:21:28 Cassie

I just had one more question for you, Michelle, have in your time of being an advocate and going up to the legislature to advocate, have you seen a change happen like have you spoke on behalf of something and saw them vote?

00:21:39 Cassie

In favor of that thing. And you think that testimony mattered?

00:21:42 Michelle

Absolutely. One of the things that happened that I was really, really involved in two things or a couple things was the mental Health Advance Directive, was very involved in creating that.

00:21:55 Michelle

And having that happen, not really creating it but being a part of supporting it and pushing it through another thing was the bill for peer support, specialist designation certification. And I was involved in speaking at both of those.

00:22:10 Michelle

Commit the committees on each side of the House and Senate.

00:22:16 Michelle

So that was really, really, it's really, really gratifying.

00:22:19 Michelle

Just got.

00:22:20 Michelle

Say and then last year I was involved in.

00:22:25 Michelle

Going to the legislature and saying, you know, you're not paying the PC as the personal care tenants enough. And I was really really able to sink into exactly what personal care attendance did for me and do.

00:22:38 Michelle

For me, and that felt really good to look at people and say, wow, you're getting this, you're getting this and having it make a difference. I mean, I've I've talked a lot about different bills, and I have really involved, been involved with.

00:22:54 Michelle

Legislative Day for Mental Health, which is where you go up and you just talk about your story and why funding for mental health is so important.

00:23:02 Michelle

And people are like, you know, they're crying.

00:23:04 Michelle

It's great to watch them.

00:23:06 Michelle

Like gotcha.

00:23:08 Michelle

You know? No, really. I I've been involved and now I'm really getting involved in the disability community and.

00:23:16 Cassie

Yeah, because your work was a lot with mental health before, and now you're kind of a more holistic, like the whole body, the whole self, the mind, all that cross.

00:23:24 Michelle

Ross.

00:23:26 Cassie

And.

00:23:27 Cassie

And just seeing the impact it makes.

00:23:31 Michelle

Think knowing that.

00:23:33 Michelle

I think the other thing to remember is that while we're frightened and we're up there by ourself and we're thinking, oh, this is if I don't get this, this is going to be terrible or this is going to be great if I get this. We're not talking about.

00:23:46 Michelle

Just ourselves, we are up there with a group of people that are for and against.

00:23:52 Michelle

These bills, and so we are making an.

00:23:55 Michelle

I mean, we are shaping the future and I know that may even put a little more pressure.

00:23:59 Michelle

But in a way it's.

00:24:00 Michelle

It kind of spreads out the.

00:24:03 Michelle

It's like, hey, it's just not on me.

00:24:05 Kendra

Yeah, you're part of this bigger movement and.

00:24:07 Michelle

But I can really make an.

00:24:09 Michelle

I mean, I have to say this Medicaid expansion thing.

00:24:13 Michelle

I'm wondering how many people understand that their life is literally affected by this.

00:24:17 Michelle

They know that they're expanded, that they're.

00:24:20 Michelle

Medicaid, do they get?

00:24:22 Michelle

Do they even know when you're talking about 220,000 people?

00:24:26 Michelle

Do they even know?

00:24:27 Michelle

I mean, I literally know somebody who is involved with that, who's very, very dear to my heart and I wrote them and said, hey, get involved it is.

00:24:37 Michelle

When you know someone who knows someone, who knows someone.

00:24:40 Michelle

How you get involved?

00:24:41 Cassie

And we have said on this podcast from the beginning, like, let your voice be heard. And so now we're presenting ways to actually do.

00:24:48 Cassie

And I think just kind of taking seriously that if you have something inside of you that.

00:24:52 Cassie

It's like I can help.

00:24:54 Cassie

I can do.

00:24:54 Cassie

I can do something and as we know, advocacy starts at all kinds of levels, so maybe you're not comfortable going up to the legislature, but you're more comfortable writing an e-mail.

00:25:05 Cassie

Start there, then make a phone call like set a little To Do List for yourself of challenging yourself.

00:25:11 Cassie

It's hard to be uncomfortable, but the the win of it is great.

00:25:15 Cassie

If you start working out of your comfort zone to build up to getting up and testifying in front of the folks that are making decisions about your life.

00:25:23 Cassie

That's where impact really, really matters.

00:25:25 Cassie

And we have every two years to practice it.

00:25:28 Michelle

Well, and I think that's what's so great about ability getting so involved in supporting individuals to advocate is that.

00:25:37 Michelle

It's not unlike other things that we've done for the community.

00:25:41 Michelle

People can get involved and when we start to get involved, we decide how far that involvement will go.

00:25:47 Michelle

I'm just going to go and check out that caffeinate and advocate.

00:25:52 Michelle

But I'm not sure if I can really do it.

00:25:54 Michelle

I just want to try.

00:25:55 Michelle

I just want to sit with.

00:25:56 Michelle

I just want to be with other people who are concerned and that's how it starts.

00:26:01 Michelle

How it started for me.

00:26:02 Michelle

I didn't think when I started with the Western Service Area authority that I was going to be up at the legislature.

00:26:08 Michelle

In just a year that I would, I was going to like, I'm going to see.

00:26:13 Cassie

And I think part of it too, is once you do it, it's kind of addicting, don't you think?

00:26:20 Cassie

Just like, OK.

00:26:21 Cassie

You listened to me, and when you listen to me, I felt heard.

00:26:25 Cassie

I felt like you were making an educated decision.

00:26:28 Cassie

And I played a big role in that, like, that's satisfying. And I think all of us across.

00:26:34 Cassie

Any platform can do that. We can do that as we know on our local level, we can do that on our state.

00:26:39 Kendra

Level we can even go bigger and I think doing it with a group like Michelle has said too is really special to be a part of.

00:26:45 Kendra

Other people's passion and other people's advocacy, and it helps, like grow this community that.

00:26:51 Kendra

Is really your people and that are there to show up and to fight for the same things that you're fighting for, like is really is really special too.

00:26:58 Cassie

Yeah. And it kind of grows our roots together where it's like, OK, these are my people. This is how we're.

00:27:04 Cassie

Do it then. You can also have those people to listen to you to practice with. Like we love that and we were able to do that here in the Butte office last year when we were doing advocacy locally. And I think we all are changed people from that.

00:27:19 Cassie

Because we know.

00:27:21 Cassie

How profound community is when it comes to making change?

00:27:23 Kendra

And so that's why we're starting in the Butte office again, what Michelle mentioned was the caffeine advocate, which is going to be weekly in person meetings here in our Butte office.

00:27:34 Kendra

Morning starting at 9:30 and we want to we want to grow and like, hold the space for this kind of group to grow here.

00:27:42 Kendra

Here, but if you live somewhere else, we would still really encourage you to contact us because we can zoom you into those meetings or we can help connect you to your local resources that are doing similar work.

00:27:54 Cassie

I think we also want to point out our friends at Summit Independent Living, Travis Hoffman, for many, many years has done what we call the Action Alert system.

00:28:02 Cassie

You can sign up.

00:28:04 Cassie

Think on any of the Center for Independent Living's websites. For those action alerts.

00:28:08 Cassie

And he is just.

00:28:11 Cassie

He distills down what needs to happen, what you need to say.

00:28:14 Cassie

Gives you step by step how you can make action happen.

00:28:17 Cassie

We would highly recommend you sign up for them.

00:28:20 Cassie

And so I think what we'll do now.

00:28:23 Cassie

As we'll talk about what's coming up like, what are we looking to?

00:28:26 Cassie

Going on.

00:28:27 Cassie

As we said, Medicaid expansion is a huge discussion. That's like on the.

00:28:32 Cassie

I misspoke. So it's as of September, over 220,000 people statewide received health coverage from Medicaid.

00:28:39 Cassie

That's probably across the board, so.

00:28:42 Cassie

Medicaid expansion, I think has been like largely been misunderstood, right, because it it came around, I think it was approved in 2017.

00:28:48 Cassie

We've had it for quite a while and so it's sunsetting their saying and so that's why we have to really say.

00:28:54 Cassie

Who benefited from?

00:28:55 Cassie

What impact did it make? And from our own personal experience, and maybe you're listening and it's you as well folks, that apply for Social Security disability insurance when you apply because your disability is significant enough that you can't work and earn a certain amount of money.

00:29:12 Cassie

You don't get health insurance for 24 months.

00:29:16 Cassie

Well, you're applying for a disability benefit because you need health insurance.

00:29:21 Cassie

Need something to help with whatever you're.

00:29:23 Cassie

Dealing with Medicaid expansion filled that 24 month gap for folks in really important ways.

00:29:29 Cassie

So that that has helped take what was super stressful and make life livable.

00:29:35 Cassie

Made it so that you could.

00:29:37 Cassie

Your you know your medications, your personal care, all the things that you need to just stay as well as you can.

00:29:44 Cassie

Those folks in particular that we've seen like that's a big group of.

00:29:49 Cassie

There's also other people that we don't know that are benefiting from Medicaid expansion and and a lot of times you might be.

00:29:56 Cassie

Up at your hospital or at your clinic because they see you're underinsured and so they'll help you do.

00:30:02 Cassie

And so there's all these people across Montana that have been helping folks sign up for this coverage that may not even know that this is happening.

00:30:10 Cassie

So if you don't know, let's get to the bottom of it. Give a call.

00:30:15 Cassie

Call somebody and let's figure it out.

00:30:16 Michelle

Well, I think there's also a misnomer that people that have Medicaid are poor and that that's all the people that get this Medicaid are poor people.

00:30:28 Michelle

I think there's a misnomer about that across the nation, actually, and about how people who are working 40 hours a week and they're still needing some insurance, actually do qualify for Medicaid expansion.

00:30:41 Cassie

That's a really good point. Someone you know has Medicaid and someone you know needs Medicaid. And we need to do everything we can to protect it.

00:30:51 Cassie

So what is happening related to that is there is a rally for Montana Medicaid on Wednesday, January 15th at 12 O clock PM at the Capitol Flag Plaza in Helena.

00:31:02 Cassie

So there's going to be a big rally to fight for Medicaid. So what?

00:31:05 Cassie

Think that means is we have signs. We need to make.

00:31:08 Cassie

Need to.

00:31:08 Cassie

Say we need to come up with powerful statements about why it matters that we need Medicaid, that our neighbors need.

00:31:15 Cassie

Kid, when Montana is healthier, Montana is better.

00:31:19 Cassie

Like that's just, that's just how it is.

00:31:21 Kendra

And this is one of those times where if you can make it to Helena, the more bodies that are there and present, that is what is going to be representative of whether or not.

00:31:31 Kendra

Congress takes this bill seriously, is how many people showed up, and you don't even have to come with anything or to say anything but just to stand in the crowd.

00:31:39 Kendra

And that presence is enough to say like, yes, I support this and I want you to support it too.

00:31:44 Cassie

Sometimes I think that's the magic of being alive is when you're part of something bigger than yourself.

00:31:49 Cassie

And this is a time to do that.

00:31:51 Michelle

And I don't think that people realize that when you say.

00:31:54 Michelle

When we're healthier, we're better.

00:31:57 Michelle

When we're healthier, the economy.

00:31:59 Michelle

When we're healthier, you know my friends and neighbors are able to partake in the community and isn't community everything.

00:32:07 Cassie

Yes, yes. Community is our favorite word around here.

00:32:08 Kendra

Yeah.

00:32:11 Cassie

And it.

00:32:12 Cassie

It matters that we take care of one another.

00:32:14 Kendra

What else is coming up this session that we should be keeping?

00:32:16 Cassie

O an an eye on this Thursday, January 9th at 3:00 PM in Room 152 of the Montana Capital is House Bill 38. And so this is a follow up session bill to House Bill 598 from the 2021.

00:32:32 Cassie

Session and it serves to modernize Montana's disability accessible parking laws.

00:32:38 Cassie

We know that folks are parking in accessible.

00:32:41 Cassie

That should not be parking in them, and that happens all the time and there's really no structure to give them a fee, right? We say there's \$100 fee.

00:32:48 Cassie

You ever seen anyone be ticketed for that?

00:32:51 Cassie

No, no.

00:32:52 Cassie

And so I think they're really trying to clear up what we can do to deter people from doing it in the first place. If you've ever been impacted by accessible parking and how there's barriers to it or people are parking in it or.

00:33:05 Cassie

Just the issues you're seeing, I think it would be important to just.

00:33:08 Cassie

Go up there and say how it's impacted you.

00:33:13 Cassie

I know.

00:33:13 Cassie

We've probably talked about this.

00:33:16 Cassie

Time, time and time again. Right, you'll go to Walmart or you'll go somewhere, and it's like, no, that's not right.

00:33:23 Kendra

That's not a.

00:33:24 Michelle

Parking space as far as the disability access, but you know, I think there's some people that don't even know about that for the longest time and until I actually worked here to build.

00:33:34 Michelle

I didn't understand what those little yellow lines meant.

00:33:37 Michelle

I didn't know that they meant, hey, I'm giving space to a person who needs to get out of a van, and without that, they're stuck or they can't get back in their van.

00:33:48 Michelle

So these things are important.

00:33:50 Cassie

And so even if you're part of the community, you might not know.

00:33:54 Cassie

And I think something that we say around here is when you know better, you can do.

00:33:57 Cassie

And so that's kind of the part of going up to the legislature as well is saying, hi, I don't know if you know this, but this is how this impacts folks and.

00:34:05 Cassie

We want to be really clear in the way that we are creating laws so that this doesn't continue to happen.

00:34:11 Cassie

Obviously there's always going to be people that are going to do what they want to do, but how can we make it so that that's happening less so that that's something really important.

00:34:19 Cassie

That's happening on Thursday and so we can send more information out about that.

00:34:23 Cassie

So we're just kind of this is the first day.

00:34:27 Cassie

One other thing that's really important is we talked about how you can participate via zoom. If you're going to do that, you need to set an account up first.

00:34:36 Cassie

1st and that's.

00:34:37 Cassie

Participate ledger dot Gov you can't just be like I think I'll testify today. Like you have to create an account and.

00:34:44 Kendra

And you have to reserve it 24 hours before the committee meeting that you plan on speaking.

00:34:49 Kendra

So it does require a little bit of pre planning to utilize that, but it's definitely an option for folks who can't travel to the capital.

00:34:58 Cassie

And to do.

00:34:59 Cassie

And so we'll try to be really good about making sure that that's included so people can just quickly click on a link to do that.

00:35:05 Cassie

It's.

00:35:06 Cassie

It's really important that we stay focused on what's coming up and so that's what we're going to do.

00:35:13 Cassie

Why we're doing caffeine and advocate and we really want you to be involved.

00:35:17 Cassie

Really want to make it accessible? Make it easy, make it understandable.

00:35:21 Cassie

If you have questions, I think Kendra, Michelle and I are all happy to be the folks to help.

00:35:27 Cassie

Refine any statements to talk through it.

00:35:30 Cassie

If it's from your own experience, it doesn't matter what you say, it's your experience, so it doesn't have to be from anyone else's words. If you just say what you want to say. That's powerful. And as we know, it's just kind of addicting to be.

00:35:44 Kendra

I.

00:35:44 Cassie

Did it.

00:35:45 Michelle

It kind of propels you to the next date. One of the things I'd like to say though, is that sometimes these dates come up.

00:35:51 Michelle

Quick and so even if you can just, you know, if you're just beginning and you're just starting out, take a look at something one thing.

00:36:00 Michelle

Start out with one thing, because your voice will be heard at least.

00:36:04 Michelle

One or two or three times. If you pick one bill, we'd love to have you involved in all of them, of course, but sometimes it's daunting to think if I'm going to get involved, I got to be involved in all of these, or if I go to ability.

00:36:16 Michelle

Going to want me to do all these ones at one time and this.

00:36:19 Michelle

Session and I don't think that's how.

00:36:21 Michelle

Going to be.

00:36:21 Cassie

No, and maybe we'll just say that we have no expectations on.

00:36:25 Cassie

We are here to support folks and so just know that like if this feels like pressure, don't let it, but let it feel like just like a spark that you can use to go.

00:36:33 Cassie

Maybe I'll try that this year. I've thought about it in years past, but maybe this is a year I'll do something with it.

00:36:38 Kendra

And if even if this is the year to just learn and to come and spend time with us, as we are also learning it and diving deeper like just, yeah, take one step towards what what feels like passion for you.

00:36:51 Michelle

And I think part of it too is.

00:36:53 Michelle

Of these action steps.

00:36:55 Michelle

Can come pretty.

00:36:57 Michelle

I mean, one day it'll be, you know, in draft in the next day, it's in a bail form.

00:37:02 Michelle

Then it goes right to committee, and so it's it's kind of scary.

00:37:07 Michelle

It's like it all comes so fast.

00:37:09 Michelle

And that's one of the things I really appreciate about ability being involved.

00:37:14 Michelle

Is that we're going to keep them, you know, informed. We're going to keep them abreast of what's going on and what and these things don't have to feel like they're coming up on you so fast without support.

00:37:25 Michelle

I think that's really really key because when I first started out and it was go here or go there, we have this to do. But now we've got ability kind of helping out.

00:37:34 Kendra

Yeah. And so we hopefully touched on a lot of different ways to get involved in future episodes, will continue to touch on those and direct you on exactly how to find the information to do that.

00:37:44 Kendra

And then again check out the show notes, because everything will be linked down there.

00:37:47 Kendra

Easy for you to find.

00:37:48 Kendra

Find and don't hesitate to reach out to us at disability voices at abilitymt.org with any questions or wanting to be involved in Will will get you connected.

00:37:59 Cassie

Thank you. Thanks everyone.

00:38:01 Kendra

Thanks Michelle.

00:38:07 Cassie

Thank you for tuning into disability Voices, a podcast from Ability, Montana.

00:38:11 Cassie

Please subscribe and leave a.

00:38:13 Cassie

You can follow us at disability voices on Instagram for updates and upcoming episodes.

00:38:16

I.