

The Drive – Interview with Samantha Handley Transcript

Speaker 1: Welcome to Hubbard Helps, a program that spotlights the people and organizations making a difference in Chicago. Now here's your host, Kara Hernandez.

Kara Hernandez: Good morning. Thanks for joining us. Since 1919, Anixter Center has helped hundreds of thousands of people in the Chicagoland area in their time of need. Today, Anixter Center has focused their efforts on helping people with disabilities, mental health needs, people who are deaf, deafblind, hard of hearing, and other related challenges. With us this morning to talk more about Anixter Center and the work they're doing is Samantha Handley, the President and CEO of Anixter Center. Samantha, thank you so much for joining us this morning.

Samantha Handley: Oh, thank you for having me. It's a wonderful opportunity.

Kara Hernandez: You're the president and CEO of Anixter Center. What led you to the position you're in today, and what sparked your passion for helping people with disabilities and other related challenges?

Samantha Handley: Yeah, well, it was a case of right place, right time. I had served as CEO for Trilogy Behavioral Healthcare for three and a half years, and I've always been passionate about the disability and mental health space and working for an organization focused on inclusion and belonging where we can help people thrive regardless of their disability. At the same time, Anixter's board was seeking a new CEO who could build on the organization's successes, strengthen its future, and ensure that they continue as a vibrant organization advancing their participants' outcomes. Every day since I started working here, I have been amazed and humbled by the work that both our staff and our clients do. Our staff is incredibly mission focused. They work hand in hand with the people we serve to really help the people that we serve achieve great outcomes. So it's just been wonderful and an honor to be a part of this organization.

Kara Hernandez: Anixter's history dates all the way back to 1919. How did the organization get started and how has it grown into what it is today?

Samantha Handley: Yeah, well, Anixter was founded back in 1919 during the last global pandemic, Spanish Flu. Originally, we were founded as an orphanage for children who lost their parents to the Spanish Flu epidemic. After the 1919 flu subsided, we transitioned from serving orphans to serving adults with disabilities. Through the decades, we vastly expanded our services to include people with disabilities, people with mental health and substance abuse needs, and people who are deaf, deafblind and hard of hearing. Now, we're a hundred years later and we're making it through another pandemic. Even though our services shifted from being an orphanage to disability and

mental health services, we have always shown up in the Chicago community and leaned in where we're needed most.

Kara Hernandez: What do you want more people to understand about the struggles people with disabilities and other related challenges face, and are there any common misconceptions?

Samantha Handley: Yeah, that's a great question. First, I just want to say that a lot of people associate Anixter Center only with developmental disability services. We do a lot of terrific work in that space, but we do so much more as well. We offer mental health and substance abuse services, and we have a terrific deaf, deafblind and hard of hearing program. I would love for people to understand that at the end of the day, we are all people, and disabilities and mental illness are so much more common than we think. About one in four Americans have a disability, one in five live with a mental health condition, and right here in the Chicago area, there are over 125,000 people who are deaf or hard of hearing. There's often a misconception that the people we serve need to be fixed. At Anixter, we believe that everyone has the right to belong in their communities and everyone can contribute great things. So our work is really about removing barriers within society so people can have access to everything they need.

Kara Hernandez: According to your website, anixter.org, you offer a wide range of services for people with disabilities, behavioral health needs, and people who are deaf, deafblind, and hard of hearing. What are some of the different programs and services you provide and what impacts have they made?

Samantha Handley: Great question. We serve over 5,500 people across Chicagoland, and even downstate, every year. We have more than 30 programs and services. We provide community based services like employment coaching, therapy, and day services. Through the Chicago Hearing Society, better known as CHS, we offer American Sign Language classes, interpreter services, audiology and outreach services for the deaf community like youth mentoring and domestic violence assistance. One of our newer services that we're really excited about is our Disability Forward consulting. We work directly with businesses to make their businesses more disability friendly, whether it's through talent acquisition or making the workplace more accessible for people who are deaf.

One of our newest pilots has been the After 22 program at Daley College. The After 22 program is funded by Special Olympics Chicago, Special Children's Charities, and is a partnership with Southside Occupational Academy, Daley College, and the Anixter Center. This was launched by my predecessor and is a program that is changing lives for students with developmental disabilities who have aged out of the school system. It's providing a college experience for individuals with developmental disabilities to use their skills and eventually gain opportunities for employment. So we do so many cool things and innovative things in so many different spaces, and again, that's part of why it's so exciting to be here.

Kara Hernandez: This is Hubbard Helps on Hubbard Radio Chicago. I'm Kara Hernandez. Today we're joined by Samantha Handley, the president and CEO of Anixter Center. Anixter Center supports people with disabilities and related challenges to live, learn, work, and play in the community. They advocate for the right of people with disabilities to be full and equal members of society. Does the Anixter Center have any events coming up that listeners can participate in, and if so, what are the goals for these events?

Samantha Handley: Yeah, because we have such a diversity of services, we often have different outreach events. I encourage anyone interested to check out our website at anixter.org to get involved. Also, we do have an annual gala that's coming up in June. We would love to have some volunteers. Our gala is a fantastic way to spread the word about our mission and share our successes, all while raising critical funds for the organization. DHS also offers a lot of opportunities. I know this past winter we had a Christmas party for deaf teenagers in partnership with the Chicago Parks District. We also did a breakfast with Deaf Santa and Deaf Mrs. Claus, and they read stories in American Sign language to a lot of deaf children and their families. It was really an amazing experience. So those are just a couple of the activities that we have recently done.

Kara Hernandez: What plans and goals do you have for Anixter Center in the future?

Samantha Handley: Oh my gosh. I have so many plans for Anixter's future. We want to continue to achieve greater impact for individuals, families, and our communities. So that means that we need to continue to grow to meet the demands for services and supports. We certainly want to continue to grow our services for deaf, deafblind, and hard of hearing people as we are only one of a handful of providers, and in some cases the only provider, of these types of services in the state.

As we continue to deal with the impact of COVID, the need for mental health services and supports have never been higher, so we have a huge opportunity to grow services in that area. In addition, I'd like Anixter to continue its strong history of innovation and employment to continue to enhance employment opportunities for people with disabilities, and we want to continue to form strong partnerships with corporations and businesses, not just to encourage them to employ people with disabilities, but also to include disability into their DEI planning processes in order to enhance accessibility and reduce barriers to the employees they already have.

Kara Hernandez: What's the best way for those listening right now to help Anixter Center as well as help people with disabilities and other related challenges in their families or their communities?

Samantha Handley: Yeah, really the best thing people could do is just to educate themselves. Learn about the advantages and perspectives people with disabilities bring to our communities, our businesses, to help us create the movement of inclusion and belonging. We really, really do want anyone with a disability to feel like they belong in their community. Begin viewing the world from a disability forward lens. We all have something different to bring to the table. It's what makes the world we live in so incredible. We should be building on those strengths as a society. We all have a universal right to be valued and belong. So again, just take that time to learn more about it, do research on it, figure out ways in which you can really see the world through the eyes of somebody with a disability.

Kara Hernandez: Thank you so much, Samantha, for talking to us this morning.

Samantha Handley: I was really grateful for the opportunity to share Anixter's mission and vision with people in the Chicago area.

Kara Hernandez: Our guest this morning has been Samantha Handley, President and CEO of Anixter Center. For more information or to contribute to their mission, visit anixter.org. That's A-N-I-X-T-E-R.org. That's our show this week. Thank you for listening. I'm Kara Hernandez. Hubbard Helps is powered by Hubbard Radio, making a difference in Chicago.