



Community and Housing- Central to Life By Melissa Mitchell, 2018

My name is Melissa Mitchell; I am a single woman with a passion for full life participation for everyone, especially those with significant and complex disabilities. I work as an advance skills trainer for service dogs working with people whose disabilities affect their mobility in Bellingham, WA.

NeighborWorks America's training institute was so large that it was spread across three locations. Each location featured ADA accessibility features, including basic things like accessible restrooms, automatic doors and ramps. The large hotels hosting the event offered multiple options for power wheelchair accessible rooms with roll-in showers, larger floor plans for more room to maneuver, raised electric outlets, lower height beds and shower chairs to borrow. The event's shuttle service featured accessible buses so that I could utilize this service easily, getting from locations while enjoying the time it gave me to connect with other institute attendees. The professional nature of this institute also allowed me the freedom to come and go without anyone being disturbed or thinking that I was uninterested in the content. Everyone was trying to meet multiple time masters, sometimes needing to come and go to take urgent calls or deal with things at the home office.

In the United States, there are about 57 million people living with disabilities (about 19% of the population), and everyone needs somewhere to live. Yet, according to the US HUD, less than 5% of units have features to assist those living with moderate mobility disabilities, such as steps between rooms or a bathroom with grab bars, and less than 1% of units are wheelchair accessible. The lack of



Melissa with Arrow Stage Lines Bus Driver

housing means that people are left without options, forced into nursing home or assisted living environments that the person doesn't need or want or forced to make choices to stay in inaccessible housing, which puts their physical safety at risk.

This conference gave me an opportunity to learn about initiatives in affordable housing, community development, small business incubation as a path the employment and advocating for communities inclusive of all members—with and without disabilities. I came home feeling connected, empowered and energized to continue working on thriving communities for all.

The Conference Accessibility Initiative gives people with disabilities—and the disability community as a whole—the ability to participate, never being left out of the conversation, and the opportunity to share the unique perspectives that disability brings to any field.

Melissa Mitchell is a service dog trainer, a classroom para educator, and a volunteer disability advocate. Over the years, she has worked to promote the inclusion, support, and employment of people with complex developmental disabilities. She also served for two years in AmeriCorps, working in communities to support youth literacy and community disaster preparedness teams.



Melissa as a Disability Ambassador