Joe Krigsman, 48, is an average Jewish Baltimorean by most accounts; he has a wife and four children, davens regularly and commutes to Washington, D.C., where he has managed computer systems at Gallaudet University for 18 years.

But statistics indicate that employers would think twice about hiring him because he’s deaf.

Dr. Andrew Houtenville, director of research for the Institute on Disability at the University of New Hampshire, said, based on a bureau of labor statistics job report, the number of employed people with disabilities has decreased by 4.3 percent from December 2014 to December 2015. The institute released its year-in-review report during the first week of February, which is Jewish Disabilities Awareness Month.

A wide range of disabilities affects approximately 56 million Americans, and while the job market in general fluctuates, the challenges of finding employment for people with disabilities are constant.

Part of the challenge stems from peoples’ perceptions of those with disabilities.

“I happen to be deaf. I don’t consider myself deaf first — I’m Jewish first,” said Krigsman, who speaks and reads lips but also uses American Sign Language. “Other hearing-impaired people [might] say they’re deaf first and Jewish second,”

Krigsman, who moved to Baltimore from New York, got his job at Gallaudet University, a private university in Washington D.C. for the deaf and hard of hearing, after excelling in a computer course.

Krigsman’s abilities are what earned him his job, and several experts emphasized that a person’s skills — even when they are disabled — can be utilized well if they are given the right tasks.

But challenges for finding employment can begin with how — and if — a person with disabilities completes a high school education.

“Some individuals with disabilities graduate [high school] at 18,’ said Mira Labovitz, Baltimore coordinator for Yachad, a global organization dedicated to addressing the needs of Jewish individuals with disabilities. “If they are in a special needs school, some are on a diploma track, and some are on a vocational track.”

Labovitz added the vocational track connects students with state employment agencies that help them find a career path based on their skills and desires.

And, as Eric Adler, whose son has autism, told the Jewish Times last October, even if students do
graduate, they may not be equipped, or qualified, to hold down a full-time job.

While disabled students are entitled to certain benefits from the Developmental Disability Administration, if an individual graduates at 17 or 18, they aren’t entitled to any services from the DDA until they are 21.

“When the school bus stops coming, they don’t have much to do during their day. So they sit on their parents’ couch,” said Jennifer Mizrahi, president of RespectAbility, a national nonprofit that works for the inclusion and empowerment of the disabled community. “When their parents die, they sit on their siblings’ couch. This is a huge problem for them.”

According to statistics provided by RespectAbility, 300,000 people with disabilities age into the workforce each year — when they turn 18.

“There are many myths and stereotypes surrounding [autistic spectrum disorder], and employers can be reluctant to hire people on the spectrum,” said Theresa Ballinger, treasurer of the Howard County Autism Society, via email. “Employers need to understand individuals with disabilities like ASD are an untapped resource. Many who work are very excited about their jobs, and they’re really dedicated. All they need is a workplace that’s accommodating and welcoming.”

Randy Duchesneau, 30, director of the national leadership program at RespectAbility, has felt the impact of public perception. At Cornell University, he was an exceptional student who easily nailed interviews and landed internships. Then during his senior year, a gymnastics accident left him a quadriplegic, and he underwent a year of rehabilitation. When Duchesneau returned to Cornell, despite having an excellent resume, his experiences with interviews and internships changed.

“If I disclosed my disability in a cover letter I wouldn’t be selected [for an interview] at all,” said Duchesneau.

Struggling to find employment, he went on to earn a master’s degree in public health from Yale University. It was there he learned to leverage his networks and eventually landed an internship at the Department of Health and Human Services.

“People think I’m intelligent because I have these degrees [from Cornell and Yale]. But for people who don’t have these degrees from top universities,” said Duchesneau, “there’s an additional stigma that [employers] think [people with disabilities] are limited in what they are capable of doing.”

But that perception, claims Krigsman, could easily be ameliorated.

“[There’s] not enough education about what we do. What is normal in our world may not look normal in yours,” he said.

For example, some people in the deaf community might beat a tabletop with their fist, which could be misinterpreted as anger. But Krigsman said it’s done to get someone’s attention because a deaf person feels the vibrations.

“Sometimes we don’t realize how loud that can be,” said Krigsman.

He added that people apologize to him when they find out he is deaf.

“What are you sorry about? I didn’t do anything to make you feel sorry,” said Krigsman. “Why do they keep saying that? It’s because it’s something new to them.”

“There’s always hesitation that [the employer doesn’t] know anything about these individuals,
and they are weary of what the [individual] brings to the table,” said Jack Gourdji, executive director of the Jewish Union Foundation in New York, a partner of Yachad. JUF works with individuals on social skills, workplace skills and behavior to help prepare people with disabilities for a business setting. It then finds volunteer and employment opportunities based on his or her skills.

“We always send job coaches with them,” said Gourdji. “The responsibility of a job coach is to assist the individual to the point that they can handle things on their own.”

Gourdji explained job coaches give employers some reassurance about hiring people with disabilities. With a coach present, the employer knows the task will get done.

However, Gourdji emphasized that jobs are earned, not just awarded.

“I never place somebody as a favor,” said Gourdji. “I do it because I feel over a period of time, if not immediately, I believe they can succeed at the job.”

Devorah Lieberman, 31, lives in Brooklyn, N.Y, and has used Yachad’s services since she was 12. When she came of employment age, she also turned to JUF. She, and her mother, Andrea, credits the organization for her success in gaining employment, despite having Down syndrome.

“The confidence they’ve given her and the abilities they’ve given her are wonderful,” said Andrea.

“People should not be afraid to let your child do something. They are very optimistic about what they can do. Just let them try and go as far as they possibly can.”

Now, Devorah has three jobs: one at a clothing store in Manhattan; another at the Foundation for Jewish Camp; and a third at Yachad. Her message to the nondisabled community is concise.

“[They should] not make fun of my syndrome,” said Devorah. “They should treat me with the same respect [as anyone else] and not judge me by [my] disability.”

Positive experiences employing people with disabilities can be the incentive for some business leaders to make more hires and encourage others to do the same.

“I think the best motivation doesn’t come from governors, it comes from business leaders talking to each other,” Delaware Gov. Jack Markell said. “When they can say, ‘[Employing someone with a disability] has helped our company,’ then that is more powerful.”

Markell, who has championed employment of people with disabilities during his time in office, launched the initiative “A Better Bottom Line: Employing People with Disabilities in 2012” as the chair of the National Governors Association.

Markell’s reason for taking up the cause, he said, was his experience visiting a bank several years ago. He met a disabled man who was creating T-shirts for promotional material. Markell asked him what he did before getting that job.

“I sat at home watching television with my parents,” the man said.

“A light bulb went off in my head about how much his quality of life improved because of this job,” said Markell. “He had a purpose and a reason to get up every day. It was a big quality-of-life improvement for him and his family because he...”
wasn’t sitting around doing nothing.”

Despite the negative perceptions held by some, businesses have thrived because of people with disabilities.

“Baking lends itself beautifully to people with certain disabilities,” said Sarah Milner, who has spent most of her career helping people with disabilities as a social worker.

Milner, with co-founder Laurie Wexler, also runs Sunflower Bakery in Gaithersburg, Md. In addition to running a full production bakery, they aim “to prepare individuals with developmental or other cognitive disabilities for employment in baking and related industries through skilled on-the-job training.” They offer 10-week courses, and students work alongside people without disabilities. Similar to JUF, students learn skills necessary to be successful in any work place such as promptness and self-advocacy.

Milner said some disabilities are conducive for the precise procedures of baking such as making exact measurements, following recipes and making repetitive motions.

Another business known for hiring workers with disabilities is Sinai Hospital in Baltimore. Sinai’s workforce development program, called VSP, tries “to maximize the employability of persons with barriers to employment,” said Mira Appleby, manager of program development at VSP, such as employee Walter Beatty.

Milner added there is a moral responsibility to be considered as well.

“If every Jewish employer “[regardless of his or her type of business] would hire one person with a disability, what a great thing that would be,” she said. “We are all responsible for one another, and it’s not except for the people with disabilities.”

Beatty, 57, grew up in Baltimore City and struggled with alcoholism, something one in 12 Americans experience, according to the American Psychological Association.

After completing six months of rehabilitation, he was determined to change his life around and credits VSP for helping him do it.

“VSP taught me how to speak with people and how to be courteous to people,” said Beatty, who works as a cook at Northwest Hospital. “VSP taught me how to stand up properly, how to act toward people. They took the bad attitude from me and made me change my attitude around.”

Beatty is celebrating six years of sobriety and said spending time with his niece’s children every day after work keeps him motivated.

While Beatty doesn’t have the same challenges as those who are physically or mentally disabled, he did face the doubts and criticisms of others who didn’t think he would be successful. Despite that, he’s been recognized at the hospital as an exemplary employee and takes pride in helping others succeed.

“While there may be some accommodations that have to be made,” said Markell, “what most [employers] will find is that people with disabilities are great employees. They show up, they are grateful for their job, there is less turnover, and they do a good job.”

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