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First neurodiversity-focused chamber of commerce launches in Colorado

In just its first month of existence, the CNDCC has signed several big businesses on as members.

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The founders behind the newly-launched Colorado Neurodiversity Chamber of Commerce believe it is the first of its kind specifically serving the neurodiverse community — and they're just getting started.

Danny Combs, Amanda Kelly and Tiffany Feingold all work with neurodivergent individuals — folks who have been diagnosed with autism, dyslexia, attention-deficit/hyperactivity disorder and other

differences in brain function — during their day jobs.

Combs is CEO of TACT (Teaching the Autism Community Trades), a Denver nonprofit that trains students with autism in carpentry, welding and other skilled trades.

Kelly is executive director and CEO of Firefly Autism, a nonprofit with locations in Lakewood and Colorado Springs that provides services and support to those with autism.

And Feingold is co-founder and director of opportunities for Guiding Bright Minds, an organization that connects parents of neurodivergent children to tools, resources and one another.

All three are well aware that, while statistics vary, virtually all show that members of the neurodiverse community are less likely to be employed than the general population.

For example, a 2020 survey of those 18 years or older with intellectual and developmental disabilities (also known as IDD, this class of disabilities is generally considered to be under the neurodivergent umbrella) who received at least one paid disability service from the state of Colorado showed that just 23% held a paid job.



COLORADO NEURODIVERSITY CHAMBER
OF COMMERCE

Tiffany Feingold, Danny Combs and
Amanda Kelly founded the
Colorado Neurodiversity Chamber
of Commerce, which officially
launched on August 16, 2022.

“There's a massive group of people that are super talented, that aren't getting employed,” Combs said.

Considering these gaps, Combs, Kelly and Feingold were surprised that, while discussing ideas for job fairs and other ways to improve neurodiversity within Colorado businesses, they were unable to find any chambers of commerce specifically serving the neurodiverse community. After all, there are other identity-focused chambers, such as the Colorado LGBTQ Chamber of Commerce and the Colorado Black Chamber of Commerce.

“We started researching and were like, ‘oh my gosh, no one else has done this yet. How can it be that no one else has thought of this?’” Combs said. “And so we've jumped on it and put all the paperwork together and got it off the ground.”

The Colorado Neurodiversity Chamber of Commerce officially launched on Aug. 16 with the mission of using all the tools a chamber has to offer, such as networking and information events, to “shift the perspective” when it comes to employing neurodivergent individuals, Kelly said. While it is focused on the Denver metro to start, CNDCC’s leaders hope to eventually serve all of Colorado.

Part of changing business leaders’ understanding of the neurodiverse community is to correct certain misconceptions, such as the incorrect belief that accommodations are always outrageously complex and expensive.

Along with countering such beliefs, Combs, Kelly and Feingold plan to use regular events to teach members about hiring processes that might work better for neurodiverse applicants, as well as how

to train, provide accommodations and ultimately support employees who are neurodivergent.

Some of those lessons will be covered in the chamber's seminar "Neurodiversity 101" on Oct. 27. The goal is to begin developing familiarity. "Familiarity breeds comfortability, so if you're more comfortable with concepts, then you're more comfortable thinking about hiring individuals who might self-disclose that they're neurodivergent," Kelly said.

Other events, such as a holiday happy hour scheduled for Dec. 12, represent an opportunity for business leaders who are prioritizing a neurodiverse workplace to network with one another.

Because the CNDCC is so new, Feingold said, it also plans to host roundtables so that members can tell chamber leaders about the kinds of support they are looking for from the group.

The CNDCC offers three different membership levels. The first, a "Creation Member," costs \$250 per year and includes connections to other businesses and individuals in the CNDCC network, access to monthly peer group meetings and a monthly newsletter, the ability to volunteer at career networking events, member pricing for trainings and one-on-one members support.

The second level, an "Enterprise Member," costs \$750 and is designed for entrepreneurs. It includes all the benefits of the Creation tier and also means the enterprise is included on CNDCC's business listings. Enterprise members receive a CNDCC logo to put on their own website and get a social media shoutout from the chamber on a quarterly basis, too.

The third level, an “Innovation Member,” costs \$1,500 per year and is designed for larger, more established businesses. These members receive all the benefits of the prior two tiers and are also eligible to sponsor CNDCC events and sit on the chamber’s board. Businesses who join at the Innovation level get two ads in the CNDCC newsletter per year, as well.

In its first month of existence, the CNDCC already had several local companies join, including HealthOne, University of Colorado Denver, Sonoma Pharmaceuticals, CoBank, PASCO (Personal Assistance Services of Colorado) and Compass. Several individuals from local businesses have signed on, too, Kelly said.

Each business will soon have CNDCC’s logo to display on its website, which the co-founders believe will help members of the Denver metro’s neurodiverse community feel comfortable applying for jobs there. “What [the logo] tells the community at large is that this is a neurodiversity-friendly employer,” Kelly said. “This business or this entity is really making efforts to forward their own education in this space.”

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