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# Policy Brief on Employment of Minnesotans With Autism Spectrum Disorder

Minnesota Employment Policy Initiative

What Will It Take to Double Employment of  
Minnesotans with Disabilities by 2015?

**“We need  
everybody in the  
workforce for  
businesses to  
thrive and  
communities to  
prosper.”**

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## **POLICY BRIEF ON EMPLOYMENT OF MINNESOTANS WITH AUTISM SPECTRUM DISORDER**

The purpose of the Minnesota Employment Policy Initiative (MEPI) is to facilitate dialogue and develop leadership on disability and employment policy that will result in increased competitive employment of Minnesotans with disabilities. Partnership is key to the initiative's success. MEPI is enlisting strategic partners from disability advocacy groups, counties, state disability councils, human resources organizations, employment services providers and other service providers, Centers for Independent Living, the University of Minnesota, businesses and business organizations and state agencies.

Together, MEPI and its partners have undertaken wide-ranging activities to bring together stakeholders to shape and advance public policy. They convened "listening sessions" in 2009 and 2010 which became the basis for policy briefs identifying recommendations that will improve competitive employment outcomes for Minnesotans with disabilities around the core question, **"What will it take to double employment of Minnesotans with disabilities by 2015?"**

### **Executive Summary**

A listening session on employment and individuals with autism spectrum disorder (ASD) was hosted by the Autism Society of Minnesota and facilitated by the Minnesota Employment Policy Initiative on July 7, 2010. Twenty-one participants worked to identify strategies to increase employment rates for individuals with autism spectrum disorder. The following recommendations were identified from the themes generated by the listening session participants:

- **Ensure that public policies support employment as an outcome for individuals with ASD.**
- **Address concerns about jeopardizing the safety net of benefits through employment.**
- **Support job retention by developing employment services responsive to situations which occur on-the-job which could result in job loss.**
- **Increase champions within the business community who can develop and promote employment opportunities for individuals with ASD.**

- **Develop employment support resources outside the metropolitan area to provide employment services to individuals with ASD.**
- **Develop training opportunities to address career development for individuals with ASD.**
- **Expand the number of employment support specialists with expertise in job development and job retention for individuals with ASD.**
- **Ensure that young adults with ASD graduate into jobs upon completion of their education.**
- **Utilize a strengths-based approach to job development for individuals with ASD to ensure a job match which utilizes their abilities.**

Although these recommendations were developed to address increased employment of Minnesotans with ASD, many of them would also apply to individuals with other disabilities. The Minnesota Employment Policy Initiative has completed listening sessions with eight disability groups. The information gathered through the listening sessions is being analyzed to develop a summary of commonalities between the groups.<sup>1</sup> Representatives from the various listening session groups will then be reconvened to strategize on addressing the policy implications in improving employment outcomes and developing a more specific set of recommendations for action to move toward doubling the employment rate of Minnesotans with disabilities by 2015.

### **Background on Autism Spectrum Disorder**

Autism is a general term used to describe a group of complex developmental brain disorders. Many parents and professionals combine these different conditions into what is known as Autism Spectrum Disorders (ASD). In some cases ASD may have very visible symptoms, while in others the presence of a disability may not be apparent. Challenges in both social skills and communication skills, and repetitive or obsessive behaviors are the three characteristics common to individuals with ASD although the form and degree to which they are present has significant variability.<sup>2</sup> Autism Spectrum Disorder is defined by Minnesota Administrative Rule 3525.1325 as:

...a disability category characterized by an uneven developmental profile and a pattern of qualitative impairments in several areas of development, including

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<sup>1</sup> These common themes will be detailed in the MEPI final report.

<sup>2</sup> Minnesota Department of Health. (2009, February). *Autism and Autism Spectrum Disorders*. Retrieved June 30, 2010, from: <http://www.health.state.mn.us/ommh/projects/autism/factsheet.pdf>

social interaction, communication, or the presence of restricted, repetitive, and stereotyped patterns of behavior, interests, and activities. These core features may present themselves in a wide variety of combinations that range from mild to severe, and the number of behavioral indicators present may vary. ASD may include Autistic Disorder, Childhood Autism, Atypical Autism, Pervasive Developmental Disorder Not Otherwise Specified, Asperger's Disorder, or other related pervasive developmental disorders.

ASD is the second most common serious developmental disability after intellectual/developmental disabilities, and many individuals with ASD also have an intellectual disability. The recent Autism and Developmental Disabilities Monitoring Network Study, funded by the U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention and the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, found that on average 41% of children with ASD also had an intellectual disability.<sup>3</sup>

Whether or not an individual with ASD has an intellectual disability can determine what services, if any, they can access for employment and ongoing supports. Individuals without an intellectual disability are less likely to qualify for a Developmental Disabilities (DD) waiver through Medical Assistance and may or may not be eligible for services through the mental health system. In order to qualify for services through the mental health system, an individual with ASD would need to have a secondary mental health diagnosis that would meet the eligibility criteria for services. Without an ongoing funding source, individuals will have difficulty securing supported employment services which can provide ongoing supports to address issues that can arise on the job and jeopardize retention.

National reports indicate ASD affects approximately one out of every 110 children and males are more likely to have ASD than females.<sup>4</sup> According to recent Minnesota Department of Education reports, there are nearly 13,000 students with ASD in the state between the ages of birth and 21.<sup>5</sup> The prevalence of ASD appears to be on the rise nationally, as indicated by the 5.25-fold increase in ASD youth receiving special education services from 1992 to 2001.<sup>6</sup> It has

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<sup>3</sup> Autism and Developmental Disabilities Monitoring Network (ADDM). (2006). *Prevalence of the Autism Spectrum Disorders (ASDs) in Multiple Areas of the United States, 2004-2006*. Washington, DC: Centers for Disease Control and Prevention.

<sup>4</sup> Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. (2009, December 18). *Prevalence of Autism Spectrum Disorders - Autism and Developmental Disabilities Monitoring Network, United States, 2006*. Retrieved June 30, 2010, from Surveillance Summaries: <http://www.cdc.gov/mmwr/preview/mmwrhtml/ss5810a1.htm>  
Autism Speaks. (2009). *Autism Speaks*.

<sup>5</sup> Author. (2009). *Presentation for the MN Legislative Task Force for Autism Spectrum Disorders*. Retrieved June 30, 2010 from the MN Department of Education: [http://education.state.mn.us/MDE/Learning\\_Support/Special\\_Education/Categorical\\_Disability\\_Information/Autism\\_Spectrum\\_Disorders/index.html](http://education.state.mn.us/MDE/Learning_Support/Special_Education/Categorical_Disability_Information/Autism_Spectrum_Disorders/index.html)

<sup>6</sup> Barbaresi, W., Katusic, S., & Colligan, R. (2009). The Incidence of Clinically Diagnosed Versus Research-Identified Autism in Olmsted County, Minnesota, 1976–1997: Results from a Retrospective, Population-Based Study. *Journal of Autism & Developmental Disorders*, 464-470.

also been reported that the incidence of ASD in Minnesota is now increasing by 17% annually.<sup>7</sup> The number of individuals with ASD being served by vocational rehabilitation services nationally increased by more than 121% between 2002 and 2006.<sup>8</sup>

Adults and youth with ASD experience higher unemployment, underemployment, and work fewer hours when compared to other disability groups, and it is estimated that 50-75% of individuals with ASD are unemployed.<sup>9</sup> Individuals who do find employment frequently experience underemployment, change jobs frequently, find it difficult to adapt to new job settings, make less money and work fewer hours than nondisabled peers.<sup>10</sup> Even individuals without intellectual disabilities, such as Asperger's Syndrome (AS), are much less likely to be employed. Individuals with an IQ greater than 70 were only slightly more likely to be employed than individuals with lower IQ scores and most were in sheltered employment or volunteering.<sup>11</sup> Only 6% of individuals with ASD are employed full-time.<sup>12</sup>

Like other youth with disabilities, transition is an important predictor of future employment and transition-age individuals with ASD have a 70% chance of not being gainfully employed throughout their lifetime if they do not find employment after completing their education.<sup>13</sup> In a study of transition employment goals for youth with ASD, 22% indicated a goal of competitive employment, 39% of supported employment and 39% of sheltered employment.<sup>14</sup>

Challenges with communication and social skills are significant barriers to employment for individuals with ASD, and social skills and abilities are directly related to employment success.<sup>15</sup> A common and pervasive challenge for many people with ASD is their aptitude in navigating dynamic social environments, which can make job acquisition and retention difficult. Individuals with ASD can display concrete thought patterns which can result in misinterpreting

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<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*

Author. (2009). *Presentation for the MN Legislative Task Force for Autism Spectrum Disorders.*

<sup>8</sup> Hendricks, D. (2010). A Spectrum of Employment Options is Now Available. *Journal of Vocational Rehabilitation*, 125-134.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>10</sup> Cimera, R., & Cowan, R. (2009). The Costs of Services and Employment Outcomes Achieved by Adults with Autism in the US. *Autism: The International Journal of Research & Practice*, 285-302.

McDonough, J., & Revell, G. (2010). Accessing Employment Supports in the Adult System for Transitioning Youth with Autism Spectrum Disorders. *Journal of Vocational Rehabilitation*, 89-100.

Hendricks, D., & Wehman, P. (2009). Transition From School to Adulthood for Youth With Autism Spectrum Disorders : Review and Recommendations. *Focus on Autism & Other Developmental Disabilities*, 77-88.

<sup>11</sup> Hendricks, D., & Wehman, P. (2009). Transition From School to Adulthood for Youth With Autism Spectrum Disorders : Review and Recommendations.

<sup>12</sup> Chappela, S., & Somers, B. (2010). Employing Persons with Autism Spectrum Disorders: A Collaborative Effort. *Journal of Vocational Rehabilitation*, 117-124.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>14</sup> Hendricks, D., & Wehman, P. (2009). Transition From School to Adulthood for Youth With Autism Spectrum Disorders : Review and Recommendations.

<sup>15</sup> Hillier, A., Fish, T., Clopper, P., & Beversdorf, D. (2007). Outcomes of a Social and Vocational Skills Support Group for Adolescents and Young Adults on the Autism Spectrum. *Focus on Autism and Other Developmental Disabilities*, 107-115.

what is said to them. They also can have difficulty with the social signals of language and displaying emotions.<sup>16</sup> In the workplace these challenges can often lead to difficulties when interacting with coworkers, supervisors, or customers. Such social challenges are exacerbated in work environments that value and demand employees' ability to be flexible and to interact with others regularly. Despite employers placing the greatest importance on the functional aspects of a job, the inability to meet the often changing social expectations can make workplace success difficult even if a person with ASD can perform the functional tasks.<sup>17</sup>

Social and communication skills are not the only barriers to successful employment. Many individuals with ASD value a high level of routine.<sup>18</sup> Adjusting to the common changes in the workplace can be problematic, and changes in personnel or processes and procedures can be particularly difficult for individuals with ASD. Individuals with ASD report a high level of stress and anxiety which can impede on-the-job performance. Behavioral difficulties can arise and jeopardize retention. Increased sensitivity to workplace noise and other stimuli can also affect productivity.<sup>19</sup> In addition, individuals with ASD are prone to developing additional disabilities such as depression, bipolar disorder and epilepsy which can result in fewer successful employment outcomes.<sup>20</sup> Individuals with ASD also have a higher incidence of deafness and hearing loss.<sup>21</sup>

On the job, employment retention of people with ASD often requires flexibility from individuals who supervise and interact with the individual employee. This may include modifying job tasks or the work environment, adjusting communication exchanges, and regularly assisting with social interaction. Individuals with ASD may also need specialized training to learn job tasks, as well as appropriate communication strategies, interpersonal skills, and work behaviors. Short- and long-term vocational support services can play an important role in this process for people with ASD, including providing individualized on-the-job training for job tasks, acclimation to the job site, and social integration.<sup>22</sup> Employment support professionals often need specialized training to serve individuals with ASD with specific support strategies designed to increase

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<sup>16</sup> Standifer, S. (2009). *Adult Autism & Employment: A Guide for Vocational Rehabilitation Professionals*. Disability Policy and Studies, School of Health Professions, University of Missouri Health System. Retrieved from: <http://www.dps.missouri.edu/Autism/Adult%20Autism%20&%20Employment.pdf>

<sup>17</sup> Hillier, A., Fish, T., Clopper, P., & Beversdorf, D. (2007). Outcomes of a Social and Vocational Skills Support Group for Adolescents and Young Adults on the Autism Spectrum.

Cimera, R., & Cowan, R. (2009). The Costs of Services and Employment Outcomes Achieved by Adults with Autism in the US.

<sup>18</sup> Standifer, S. (2009). *Adult Autism & Employment: A Guide for Vocational Rehabilitation Professionals*.

<sup>19</sup> Hendricks, D. (2010). A Spectrum of Employment Options is Now Available.

Standifer, S. (2009). *Adult Autism & Employment: A Guide for Vocational Rehabilitation Professionals*.

<sup>20</sup> Hendricks, D. (2010). A Spectrum of Employment Options is Now Available.

<sup>21</sup> Standifer, S. (2009). *Adult Autism & Employment: A Guide for Vocational Rehabilitation Professionals*.

<sup>22</sup> Hendricks, D. (2010). A Spectrum of Employment Options is Now Available.

success on the job.<sup>23</sup> Many individuals with ASD are resistant to disclosing their disability to employers which can make it more difficult to negotiate supports.

Despite the challenges, individuals with ASD also bring valuable skills to the workplace. Employers report that the reliability, low absenteeism, and trustworthiness of individuals with ASD are significant strengths. Individuals with ASD also may have skills such as attention to detail, excellent rote and long-term memories, and an unusual level of focus while working which result in increased productivity.<sup>24</sup> Individuals with ASD bring a different perspective to the workplace and often think “out of the box” which can result in creative and innovative solutions to addressing business issues. They also can bring a high level of professional standards to their work.<sup>25</sup> The Autism Society of Minnesota has identified specific accommodations for individuals with ASD to increase successful employment outcomes.<sup>26</sup>

Many individuals and their families prefer community based employment over facility-based or segregated employment. Individuals with ASD often have difficulty adjusting to congregate services and many do not see those types of services as being appropriate for their level of ability. Community-based employment provides better outcomes than segregated employment, with better earnings, wider social integration, and greater worker satisfaction.<sup>27</sup> Employment in community-based jobs also provides people with ASD the opportunity to make social connections, develop better social skills, and be members of a broader community.<sup>28</sup>

There is also evidence that practices such as customized employment hold promise for better job outcomes, including self-employment for individuals with ASD.<sup>29</sup> Customized employment and self-employment can result in a better job match to suit the unique characteristics of an individual with ASD.

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<sup>23</sup> For examples of support strategies, see *Adult Autism & Employment: A Guide for Vocational Rehabilitation Professionals* at <http://www.dps.missouri.edu/Autism/Adult%20Autism%20&%20Employment.pdf>.

<sup>24</sup> Hendricks, D. (2010). A Spectrum of Employment Options is Now Available.

Bergman, A. I. Minnesota Department of Administration, Minnesota Governor's Council on Developmental Disabilities. (2010). *Expanding employment and career options for individuals on the autism spectrum in 21st century digital media and communications technology*. Unpublished manuscript.

<sup>25</sup> Bergman, A. I. Minnesota Department of Administration, Minnesota Governor's Council on Developmental Disabilities.

<sup>26</sup> *Supporting Minnesotans with ASD to Get Jobs in Technology Fields: Employment and Autism*. Retrieved December 30, 2010 from The Minnesota Governor's Council on Developmental Disabilities, Meet the Future Face of Employment: Individuals with Autism Spectrum Disorder in Technology Fields: <http://www.mnddc.org/asd-employment/5a-employment-autism.html>

Autism Society of Minnesota. *Working with People who have High Functioning Autism and Asperger's Syndrome: Tools and Strategies for Managers and Supervisors*.

<sup>27</sup> Hendricks, D. (2010). A Spectrum of Employment Options is Now Available.

Cimera, R. (2007). The Cost-Effectiveness of Supported Employment and Sheltered Workshops in Wisconsin (FY 2002–FY 2005). *Journal of Vocational Rehabilitation*, 153–158.

<sup>28</sup> Cimera, R., & Cowan, R. (2009). The Costs of Services and Employment Outcomes Achieved by Adults with Autism in the US.

<sup>29</sup> McDonough, J., & Revell, G. (2010). Accessing Employment Supports in the Adult System for Transitioning Youth with Autism Spectrum Disorders.

As noted earlier, recent data indicates that the number of individuals with ASD receiving services from vocational rehabilitation agencies across the United States continues to grow. However, individuals with ASD are also more likely than other disability groups to be denied services based on a determination that their disability was too severe to benefit from services. Individuals with ASD also can be expensive to serve vocationally and were among the most costly of nine disability groups, with only individuals with sensory disabilities costing more. Supported employment was identified as resulting in greater success for individuals with ASD, and vocational rehabilitation (VR) is reporting an increase in successful employment closures.<sup>30</sup>

In Minnesota, Vocational Rehabilitation Services (VRS) has provided funding to the Minnesota Governor's Council on Developmental Disabilities to develop employment resources for people with ASD whose interests and skills could lead to a career in information technology (IT). The Council has posted an information website<sup>31</sup> to assist jobseekers, family members, educators and other professionals to consider technology-based fields for potential employment. The site identifies core competencies for the IT industry and provides examples and resources to facilitate consideration of this type of employment. It also includes examples of individuals with ASD employed in the IT industry whose skills and abilities contributed to their success, and additional information on employment and individuals with ASD.

### **Background on Minnesota Employment Policy Initiative Listening Sessions**

The Minnesota Employment Policy Initiative is conducting listening sessions in the following areas:

Brain Injury	Mental Health
DeafBlindness	Deaf and Hard of Hearing
Blindness	Autism
Developmental Disabilities	Physical Disabilities
Transition	Families

Listening sessions are convened by a host organization which selects participants representing a variety of perspectives. The listening sessions are facilitated by MEPI using three questions as the framework for the sessions. The questions are designed to build upon one another, creating momentum toward strategies for the final question on doubling employment.

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<sup>30</sup> *Ibid.*

Hendricks, D. (2010). A Spectrum of Employment Options is Now Available.

<sup>31</sup> *Home*. Retrieved December 30, 2010 from The Minnesota Governor's Council on Developmental Disabilities, Meet the Future Face of Employment: Individuals with Autism Spectrum Disorder in Technology Fields: <http://www.mnddc.org/asd-employment/index.html>

The first question, “**Why is work important?**” helps a group to focus specifically on employment. It also reminds the group of the benefits work provides to individuals with disabilities and creates a positive orientation for the subsequent questions.

The second set of questions, “**What’s working? What are we doing right in Minnesota?**” builds on the first question, reminding participants of the many services, initiatives, and groups that are already in place or in the planning stages to improve employment outcomes. It identifies strengths on which to build and also opportunities to produce better collaboration between groups and initiatives. It also creates a shared frame of reference for the group and is usually a learning experience for group members as they share their knowledgebase about the strengths and leadership within Minnesota. The more common focus of identifying barriers often does not lead to creative strategies to address those barriers and the negative focus on barriers can make it more difficult to brainstorm on potential strategies toward better employment outcomes.

The third question, “**What will it take to double employment of Minnesotans with disabilities by 2015?**” is the core question for participants. It is a question originally posed by the Alliance for Full Participation and, with their permission, adopted by MEPI. It is intended to be provocative by challenging participants to think out of the box and move toward strategies that can have a more dramatic effect on employment outcomes.

### **Listening Session on Autism Spectrum Disorder**

A listening session on employment and individuals with autism spectrum disorder was hosted by the Autism Society of Minnesota and facilitated by the Minnesota Employment Policy Initiative on July 7, 2010. Twenty-one participants, including individuals with ASD, worked to identify strategies to increase employment rates for individuals with autism spectrum disorder. Their responses to the three questions follow.

#### **Why is work important?**

- Purpose
- Daily routine
- Self-esteem
- Sense of accomplishment
- Community and contact with other people
- It keeps your brain going. Use it or lose it
- Money so you can buy things you want
- Contributing to society
- Sense of identity and it helps you express your identity
- Sense of normalcy

- Gives you a chance/opportunity to engage in your passion and do something you're good at.
- People with autism tend to identify who they are with what they do so work is specifically helpful for people with autism spectrum disorder.
- It allows for other people in society to be educated about disability. It defeats "us versus them" thinking.

### **What's working? What are we doing right in Minnesota?**

- Flexible work schedules. When employers are willing to provide flexibility it can make a big difference.
- Vocational Rehabilitation Services (VRS) has a better understanding of Autism Spectrum Disorder. More and more people go to VRS with that diagnosis and they have been trying to find resources to educate themselves. They are expanding services to support ASD.
- An increase in Person-Centered Employment Planning, not just one-size-fits-all.
- Using existing services creatively. Using programs like TEFRA to support employment. Using PCAs to work in the community.
- Having outside evaluations done at places like Courage Center or Fraser for an assessment of skills.
- Our schools are better at helping kids with Autism Spectrum Disorder to focus on their strengths with more effective IEPs and we are identifying children on the spectrum sooner.
- Early intervention and early identification are crucial. Diagnosis when someone is an adult is a lost opportunity.
- Transition programs are promoting more community opportunities and experiences.
- Good transition programs in some school districts are focusing on the needs of autism and working to improve their services.
- Public transportation. It enables people to get to their job.
- Vocational Rehabilitation Services. My job coach led me to them and they were very helpful.
- Strategic mentorship within a job. It has to be strategic and take into consideration what the challenges are for someone on the spectrum. Having a mentor can help a person determine how to handle situations that come up, especially social situations.
- Programs like the Minnesota Life College which provides a home to learn independent living skills and teach job readiness as a post-secondary service.
- We are getting better at educating employers.
- Service providers are getting better at helping people on the spectrum, such as MRCI, Midwest Special Services, Opportunity Partners.

- There is an increased focus on community-based vs. sheltered employment.
- Minnesota uses Developmental Disability Diagnosis. Development Disabilities are defined in Minnesota as “Mental Retardation and related conditions,” so people with ASD can get benefits or help through the DD system instead of using the Mental Health system in which the services are not necessarily geared toward those on the spectrum.
- Using family and friends as a way to network.
- The Autism Society of Minnesota is a contact point for people with autism.
- There are Autism Society resources and supports available to those on the spectrum.

### **What will it take to double employment of Minnesotans with disabilities by 2015?**

The following recommendations are based on themes identified from the responses of listening session participants. The recommendations are not prioritized. The discussion that follows the nine recommendations provides further information on “next steps” in refining the recommendations and moving toward more specific policy implications.

#### **Ensure that public policies support employment as an outcome for individuals with ASD.**

Listening session participants identified the expectation of work for individuals with ASD as a critical issue in increasing employment outcomes. They also discussed the lack of public policies supporting employment despite discussion by public officials about the importance of employment within the service delivery system. They recommended that public policies be developed to support and further encourage consideration of employment for individuals with ASD.

**Address concerns about jeopardizing the safety net of benefits through employment.** Fears about jeopardizing the safety net of benefits continue to negatively impact the decision to go to work for many individuals. People receiving public benefits often do not even consider work as an option due to those fears. Others keep their earned income lower than necessary based on misconceptions about work incentives available to maximize their earning potential. In Minnesota there are a number of resources available to assist individuals and those who support them to clarify the impact of employment on the benefits received by an individual.<sup>32</sup> Despite these resources, the complexity of the various benefits programs and work incentives continues to be a major barrier to employment and to negatively impact the choice to pursue employment.

**Support job retention by developing employment services responsive to situations which occur on-the-job which could result in job loss.** For individuals with ASD, obtaining a job can be easier than retaining it and cycling through jobs has been identified as common for

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<sup>32</sup> For assistance in this area, contact the Disability Linkage Line (1-866-333-2466), Disability Benefits 101(a) service of DLL at [www.mn.db101.org](http://www.mn.db101.org), and /or the MN Work Incentives Connection ([www.mnworkincentives.com](http://www.mnworkincentives.com)).

individuals with ASD. Problematic situations occur in the workplace for all workers, but the need for adjustments to changes can be particularly challenging for individuals with ASD. For individuals who do not receive ongoing supports in employment, there are limited resources available to individuals and employers when problems arise on the job. A rapid response approach to those problematic situations could result in better job retention to avoid job loss and resuming the often lengthy cycle of job development. By incorporating a rapid response capacity within the range of services and supports delivered by existing supported employment providers in Minnesota, employers and their employees with ASD can access timely supports they need to stabilize employment retention or redirect the individual to a job better suited to their skills, needs, and changing circumstances. Listening session participants emphasized the need for periodic “fine tuning” of jobs for individuals with ASD as a critical service for better job retention.

**Increase champions within the business community who can develop and promote employment opportunities for individuals with ASD.** Individuals with ASD have a number of skills valued by employers. Listening session participants emphasized the importance of publicizing “success stories” about employees with ASD to better inform employers about the ways in which an individual with ASD can add to their bottom line. They also recommended that individuals with ASD secure leadership positions alongside employers in civic and other organizations to demonstrate their abilities in contributing to their community and raise expectations about the potential of individuals with ASD.

**Develop employment support resources outside the metropolitan area to provide employment services to individuals with ASD.** Minnesotans with ASD living outside the metropolitan area have even greater difficulty in finding employment support resources designed to meet their needs than those living in the metropolitan area. Expertise in ASD needs to be available statewide wherever individuals with ASD may live. Specialized training for employment support professionals is critical to ensuring individuals with ASD have the supports they need to be successfully employed. Technology could be utilized to connect experts in ASD with employment support organizations in locations lacking that expertise, similar to that used to connect medical specialists to communities outside metropolitan areas.

**Develop training opportunities to address career development for individuals with ASD.** Underemployment is a significant issue for individuals with ASD. Many individuals could benefit from training and post-secondary education to maximize their employment opportunities. Without post-secondary training, the career choices and earning potential for individuals with ASD are unnecessarily restricted.<sup>33</sup> Also, career change and the need for re-training is increasingly a fact of life for all workers, and most people will experience multiple career

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<sup>33</sup> The College Autism Spectrum provides assistance on finding post-secondary schools and colleges for individuals with ASD. To access their website visit <http://collegeautismspectrum.com>.

changes during their working years. A system in which training and retraining opportunities are more available will help to prevent both underemployment and the limited advancement opportunities so often experienced by individuals with ASD.

**Expand the number of employment support specialists with expertise in job development and job retention for individuals with ASD.** To adequately serve individuals with ASD, employment specialists need to have an understanding of the challenges that are associated with the disability. Having expertise in serving individuals with other disability groups, such as intellectual/developmental disabilities or mental health disabilities, often does not prepare employment specialists to adequately serve individuals with ASD. Employment outcomes for individuals with ASD will not improve without access to employment support professionals with specialized training in ASD.

**Ensure that young adults with ASD graduate into jobs upon completion of their education.** As discussed above, whether or not a young adult with ASD has a job when they leave school is a primary predictor of future employment. Young adults with ASD should graduate into a job or post-secondary education when they leave the public schools. Graduating into the adult service delivery system should not be acceptable if employment outcomes are to improve. Young adults with ASD who graduate into a service delivery system designed for other disability groups are not likely to be successful in that system or to secure employment in the future.

**Utilize a strengths-based approach to job development for individuals with ASD to ensure a job match which utilizes their abilities.** As discussed above, individuals with ASD have many challenges resulting from their disability. Job development focusing on a “deficits” approach, or the assumption that those “deficits” need to be remediated prior to consideration of employment, is not likely to be successful. A strength-based approach to job development identifies the gifts and talents an individual with ASD can bring to the workplace and develops supports and accommodations for challenges. Job development based on an individual’s skills is more likely to result in a job match which will lead to successful retention. A strength-based approach to employment will also be more successful in ensuring that individuals are not underemployed, an additional factor that can lead to poor retention.

### **Implications for Policy**

Although the recommendations above focus on Minnesotans with autism spectrum disorder, many of the recommendations would also apply to individuals with other disabilities.

The information gathered through the MEPI listening sessions will be analyzed to identify commonalities and compiled into a final report of recommendations to improve employment outcomes across disability groups. Representatives from the organizations which hosted listening sessions will then be reconvened to strategize on addressing the policy implications on

improving employment outcomes and developing a more specific set of recommendations for action to move toward doubling the employment rate of Minnesotans with disabilities by 2015.

### **About the Minnesota Employment Policy Initiative**

The purpose of the Minnesota Employment Policy Initiative (MEPI) is to facilitate dialogue and develop leadership on disability and employment policy that will result in increased competitive employment of Minnesotans with disabilities and promote the proposition, “We need everyone in the workforce for businesses to thrive and communities to prosper.” Central to this initiative is the belief that employment is fundamental to adulthood, quality of life and economic freedom and choice. MEPI is an initiative of Pathways to Employment (PTE), Minnesota’s Medicaid Infrastructure Grant.<sup>34</sup>

In January 2010, the Office of Disability Employment Policy (ODEP) reported that only 22% of individuals with disabilities were employed. The employment rate for individuals without disabilities was 70%. That translates into an employment rate in which individuals with disabilities are employed at a rate that is less than one third that of individuals without disabilities. The Minnesota Employment Policy Initiative is working across disability groups to close that gap by identifying strategies that will benefit all Minnesotans with disabilities in addition to strengthening and building new alliances to enlarge the circle of employment champions.

Leadership for MEPI comes from National APSE - The Network on Employment - in concert with its state chapter, Minnesota APSE.<sup>35</sup> The initiative works with numerous stakeholders to align policies, services and practices to ensure that integrated competitive employment is widely recognized and routinely promoted as the preferred option of all Minnesotans with disabilities. MEPI also works in close collaboration with the Minnesota Employment Training and Technical Assistance Center ([www.mntat.org](http://www.mntat.org)) to maximize the impact of employment policy and practice across Minnesota.

Additional policy briefs and reports will be available as they are developed at the MEPI website, [www.mn-epi.org](http://www.mn-epi.org).

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<sup>34</sup> To learn more about PTE visit [www.positivelyminnesota.com/pte](http://www.positivelyminnesota.com/pte).

<sup>35</sup> For the APSE website, visit [www.apse.org](http://www.apse.org). For the Minnesota APSE website, visit [www.mnapse.org](http://www.mnapse.org).

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