

2011

Policy Brief on Employment of Minnesotans With Physical Disabilities

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.”**

Minnesota Employment Policy Initiative
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POLICY BRIEF ON EMPLOYMENT OF MINNESOTANS WITH PHYSICAL DISABILITIES

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 have convened "listening sessions" to be used as 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

Two listening sessions on employment and individuals with physical disabilities were facilitated by the Minnesota Employment Policy Initiative. One session was hosted by the National Multiple Sclerosis Society, Minnesota Chapter on April 8, 2010 and the other was hosted by the Metropolitan Center for Independent Living on July 15, 2010. A total of thirteen participants worked to identify strategies to increase employment rates for individuals with physical disabilities. The following recommendations were developed from their responses and are not prioritized:

- **Increase the expectation of employment of Minnesotans with physical disabilities.**
- **Address fears about the loss of public government benefits.**
- **Utilize a strengths-based approach to career development.**
- **Provide supports to increase self-management skills to enable individuals with physical disabilities to better direct their supports and services.**
- **Address the need to secure accommodations.**

- **Provide a rapid response for situations in which an individual’s job is in jeopardy to maximize job retention.**
- **Ensure the availability of training for new careers.**
- **Ensure WorkForce Centers are a valuable resource in job development for individuals with physical disabilities.¹**
- **Increase funding for public transportation to expand the areas served and the times transportation is available.**
- **Mandate affirmative action employment goals for individuals with disabilities, similar to those for women and minorities, to increase participation in economic development initiatives supported by public funding.**
- **Ensure supported employment is available to individuals with physical disabilities who require that level of support.**

Although these recommendations were developed to address increased employment of Minnesotans with physical disabilities, 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.² 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 Physical Disabilities³

Physical disabilities, as the term is used here, refer to a broad range of orthopedic and neuromuscular disorders and conditions that result in functional limitations affecting mobility. Limitations and challenges caused by a physical disability can range from very mild (and not visible to others) to severe. Physical disabilities can have a biological or genetic basis, be acquired, or result from illness or injury. See Table 1 for more information. Physical disabilities

¹ WorkForce Centers are Minnesota’s OneStops, a Department of Labor initiative for jobseekers and businesses. For more information, visit http://www.positivelyminnesota.com/JobSeekers/WorkForce_Centers/index.aspx

² These common themes will be detailed in the MEPI final report.

³ Physical disabilities can include many different types of disabilities including those that result from medical conditions and sensory disabilities. MEPI chose to limit the scope of “physical disabilities” to those affecting mobility, given limitations in time and resources. Separate policy briefs on DeafBlindness, blindness and hearing disabilities are being developed.

may also co-occur with other disabilities including cognitive disabilities, traumatic brain injuries, mental illnesses, or the aging process.

**Table 1: Various Forms of Physical Disabilities and Associated Diagnoses
University of California – Northridge, 1995⁴**

Type of Physical Disability	Common Diagnosis and Causes
Orthopedic	Scoliosis, osteoarthritis, rheumatoid arthritis, amputation, gait disorders, and ligament conditions.
Neurologic and Neuromuscular	Multiple sclerosis, muscular dystrophy, spinal cord injury, spina bifida, polio and post-polio syndrome, stroke, cerebral palsy, Parkinson’s Disease, amyotrophic lateral sclerosis (ALS), fibromyalgia, broken limbs or appendages
Other	Mobility limitations due to aging, injury, temporary mobility impairment, and physical disabilities co-occurring with other disabilities.

Workplace injuries also result in an increase in physical disabilities. Most recent data show there are nearly 3.3 million non-fatal workplace injuries in private industry in the United States annually,⁵ some of which lead to physical disabilities. According to the Department of Labor,⁶ workplace injuries cost American companies millions of dollars each year and can lead to a temporary or permanent disability for individual workers. If a physical disability is acquired through a workplace injury, the worker’s compensation system provides assistance and support with a goal to restore the injured employee to gainful competitive employment and self-support at the earliest time possible.

Due to variability in causes and coexisting conditions, it is challenging to accurately report the number of individuals with physical disabilities. According to 2008 American Community Survey estimates, there are over 36 million people with disabilities in non-institutional settings nationally. Of those, approximately 12.8 million reported having challenges with ambulation,

⁴ University of California-Northridge. (1995). *Succeeding Together: People with Disabilities in the Workplace*. Retrieved April 30, 2010, from University of California-Northridge: <http://www.csun.edu/~sp20558/dis/em.html>

⁵ Bureau of Labor Statistics. (2010). *Economic News Release*. Retrieved October 21, 2010, from Occupational Illness and Injuries: <http://www.bls.gov/news.release/osh.nr0.htm>

⁶ U.S. Department of Labor. (2010). *Workplace Safety & Health*. Retrieved August 12, 2010 from <http://www.dol.gov/dol/topic/safety-health/index.htm>

and 12.5 million reported having challenges with self care.⁷ These numbers do not include individuals who live in institutional settings, and as a result, it is likely that a large number of individuals with physical disabilities in the United States are not included in these numbers. According to the 2000 United States Census, a total of 288,196 non-institutionalized people with physical disabilities lived in Minnesota. Of these Minnesotans, nearly half (147,511) were between the ages of 16 and 64.

Vocational rehabilitation data on individuals living with physical disabilities most likely underreports those conditions due to the challenge of documenting primary and secondary disabilities. In many cases, physical disabilities are listed as a secondary condition.⁸ For 2010, Vocational Rehabilitation Services (VRS) reported a total of 2,631 service recipients with orthopedic or neurological impairments, arthritis or rheumatism, cerebral palsy, or a spinal cord injury in Minnesota. This group comprised approximately 10.5% of the total VRS caseload and 10% of total VRS placements.⁹ VRS does not report outcome data for all of these disability categories, but outcome data is available for the orthopedic disability category. The available data indicates that VRS service recipients with orthopedic disabilities in Minnesota tended to average lower weekly earnings, average fewer work hours per week, and be less likely to receive employer-paid health care coverage compared to individuals with orthopedic disabilities in the vocational rehabilitation system nationally. VRS service recipients' wages averaged \$387.09 per week compared to \$422.19 nationally and averaged 28.99 hours of work per week compared to 33.09 nationally.¹⁰

The Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA), passed 20 years ago, has dramatically increased physical accessibility of workplaces and public spaces. Unfortunately, the ADA has been less successful in improving access to employment outcomes, and individuals with physical disabilities continue to face significant obstacles to employment.

Since many physical disabilities are likely to be more visible than other forms of disability, jobseekers with physical disabilities may be more likely to experience discrimination in the workplace. Employers may also have concerns that hiring a worker with a physical disability will increase their costs by requiring expensive accommodations, intensive training and supervision, or by increasing health care costs.¹¹ Employers, in addition to, teachers, community

⁷ US Census Bureau. (n.d.). *B18101. Sex by Age by Disability Status - Universe: Civilian Noninstitutionalized Population*. Retrieved April 30, 2010, from American Fact Finder.

⁸ Mast, M., & West, M. (2001). Are Individuals with Severe Physical Impairments Underserved in Supported Employment? *Journal of Vocational Rehabilitation*, 16(1), p. 3

⁹ Minnesota State Rehabilitation Council. (2010). 2010 Annual report: October 1, 2009 to September 30, 2010. St. Paul, MN.

¹⁰ Institute for Community Inclusion. (n.d.). *StateData.info*. Retrieved July 1, 2010 from <http://www.statedata.info>.

¹¹ Cimera, R. (2009). The Monetary Benefits and Costs of Hiring Supported Employees: A Pilot Study. *Journal of Vocational Rehabilitation*, 30, pp. 111-119.

Mast, M. (2001, February). Employment and Physical Disability. *Journal of Vocational Rehabilitation*, 16(1), p.1.

Langton, A. (2001). Enhancing Employment Outcomes through Job Accommodation and Assistive Technology

rehabilitation providers, social workers, and vocational rehabilitation counselors often have low expectations regarding the abilities and potential of jobseekers with a physical disability resulting in poor employment outcomes. Transportation is another major obstacle for many individuals with physical disabilities who are reliant on public or specialized transportation and are affected by the geographic and schedule limitations on those forms of transportation. Personal care assistants (PCAs) can be crucial in providing assistance essential to daily living skills related to preparing for work each day. In Minnesota, eligibility for PCA services is becoming more limited and may impact employment capacities and workforce participation of individuals with physical disabilities.

In a national study to identify factors impacting employment outcomes for vocational rehabilitation (VR) participants with physical disabilities across the country, researchers found that the most significant positive predictor of competitive employment outcomes was whether individuals received job placement services.¹² Individuals who received job placement services were competitively employed at a rate of 75% compared to 51% for individuals who did not receive this service. Despite the importance of this factor, the study found that only 25% of VR service recipients nationally received job placement services. The second most significant predictor of competitive employment outcomes was whether the individual was receiving public benefits which the study identified as a work disincentive. The competitive employment rate for individuals receiving public benefits was 45% compared to 60% for individuals not receiving those benefits. The researchers identified benefits counseling as a critical service to address the negative impact of these work disincentives.

Assistive technology and accommodations can increase and widen workforce participation and productivity for some individuals with physical disabilities. Assistive devices can range from low tech modifications such as writing utensil grips and electric staplers to high tech devices such as seat chairlifts or computer software. A wide range of assistive devices are available to make employment more accessible for individuals with physical disabilities.¹³ Although assistive technology can make a significant difference in improving employment outcomes, acquiring customized technologies remains a problem for many individuals with physical and other disabilities. Identifying the appropriate assistive devices for a specific workplace and acquiring the funding for those devices remain major barriers to employment. Employers are often not knowledgeable about assistive devices and may have significant concerns about their responsibilities for providing what could be expensive accommodations. Those concerns can result in employers choosing not to hire a person with a physical disability.

Resources and Services. *Journal of Vocational Rehabilitation*, 16(1), p. 27.

¹² Chan, F., Chan JY., Rosenthal, DA, Chronister, J. (2006). Predicting Employment Outcomes of Rehabilitation Clients with Orthopedic Disabilities: A CHAID Analysis. *Disability and Rehabilitation*. 28(5), pp. 257-270.

¹³ Langton, A. (2001). Enhancing Employment Outcomes through Job Accommodation and Assistive Technology Resources and Services. *Journal of Vocational Rehabilitation*, 16(1), p. 27.

In practice, most accommodations are quite simple to arrange and of low cost. For example, listening session participants identified a flexible work and break schedule or being situated close to restrooms as accommodations they had requested to improve their success on the job. Job negotiation and restructuring of tasks or duties are additional accommodations that can open up opportunities for individuals with physical disabilities, thereby increasing workplace productivity.¹⁴ Job restructuring is a common workplace strategy (and universal practice) already used by employers to maximize the productivity of their general workforce.

Oftentimes, physical disabilities are conditions acquired through medical or life experiences. Unlike their peers with congenital disabilities, individuals who acquire physical and chronic disabilities may experience an intense emotional reaction at the onset of their disability including shock, anxiety, and an acute sense of loss and grief.¹⁵ Adjusting and adapting to a changing life condition is a highly individualized process that may affect many areas of a person's life, including finding and maintaining suitable competitive employment. A person who acquires or is diagnosed with a chronic disability may need to adjust to his or her disability, working through such personal issues as resentment, reduced self-esteem, guilt, loneliness, and feeling that they are a burden.¹⁶ Some individuals need to adapt to the need for significant assistance with personal care and other supports to maintain independent living and employment. This type of life transition can place pressure not only on the individual, but also on their family, community, and employers.

A "recovery" model of service delivery has been advocated for individuals who acquire a physical disability similar to the recovery model for individuals with mental illnesses¹⁷. The purpose of the recovery model is to assist individuals in learning to cope with and manage a chronic condition and the effects of exacerbated periods of symptoms, remissions and progressive conditions. Important goals in the recovery model are increased self-esteem, self-determination and developing formal and informal support services to assist an individual in coping with personal issues related to disability and the accompanying societal issues of stigma, low expectations by others and discrimination. The goal is for individuals to take increased responsibility and assume an active role in self-management of their services and supports. Essential to achieving this goal is that the individuals and those supporting them have high

¹⁴ Eaton, B., Condon, E., & Mast, M. (2001). Making Employment a Reality. *Journal of Vocational Rehabilitation*, 16(1), p. 9.

Mast, M., & West, M. (2001). Are Individuals with Severe Physical Impairments Underserved in Supported Employment?

Mast, M. (2001, February). Employment and Physical Disability.

¹⁵ Bishop, M. (2001). The Recovery Process and Chronic Illness and Disability: Applications and Implications. *Journal of Vocational Rehabilitation*, 16(1), p. 47.

Livneh & Antonak (1997). *Psychosocial Adaptation to Chronic Illness and Disability*. Aspen, Gaithersburg, MD.

Sidell (1997). Adult Adjustment to Chronic Illness: A Review of the Literature. *Health and Social Work*, 22, pp. 5-11.

¹⁶ Wright (1983). *Physical Disability: A Psychosocial Approach*. Harper and Row, New York: NY.

¹⁷ Bishop, M. (2001). The Recovery Process and Chronic Illness and Disability: Applications and Implications.

expectations about increasing quality of life measures including their potential for employment and workforce participation. The medical community is critical to raising expectations about what individuals with physical disabilities can achieve because of their strong and ongoing connection to individuals. Unfortunately the medical profession is often uninformed about best practices in employment and the critical role employment plays in promoting recovery and improving physical and mental health.

Supported employment is a documented and effective service for individuals with significant disabilities, including individuals with physical disabilities. In a review of data from the National Supported Employment Survey and the UCP (United Cerebral Palsy) National Survey researchers concluded that a small percentage of individuals with physical disabilities are served through supported employment in contrast to individuals with developmental disabilities or mental illnesses.¹⁸ They report individuals with physical disabilities represent only 5.9% of supported employment placements. The UCP survey also found that large numbers of individuals with physical disabilities are employed through facility-based services. Other research supports that conclusion reporting that funding for programs which are facility-based continues to outpace funding for supported employment.¹⁹

In Minnesota, individuals at risk for skilled nursing home placement may be eligible for Community Alternatives for Disabled Individuals (CADI) waivers which can be used for supported employment. The availability of CADI waivers is currently limited and there may be a waiting list for individuals eligible for that waiver in certain counties.²⁰

Background on Minnesota Employment Policy Initiative Listening Sessions

The Minnesota Employment Policy Initiative has conducted listening sessions in the following areas:

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

¹⁸ Mast, M., & West, M. (2001). Are Individuals with Severe Physical Impairments Underserved in Supported Employment?

¹⁹ Cimer, R. (2009). The Monetary Benefits and Costs of Hiring Supported Employees: A Pilot Study.

²⁰ For more information, visit <https://edocs.dhs.state.mn.us/lfserver/Public/DHS-6297-ENG> on page 31.

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.

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 Minnesota’s Strengths Related to Employment?**” 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 Sessions on Physical Disabilities

Two listening sessions on employment and individuals with physical disabilities were facilitated by the Minnesota Employment Policy Initiative. One was hosted by the National Multiple Sclerosis Society, Minnesota Chapter on April 8, 2010 and the other was hosted by the Metropolitan Center for Independent Living on July 15, 2010. A total of thirteen participants worked to identify strategies to increase employment rates for individuals with physical disabilities. Their responses to the three questions follow.

Why is work important?

- Self-worth and self-esteem. You have a reason to get up in the morning.
- Economic Independence. Social Security will keep you poor, and being dependent on government assistance is depressing and inhuman. It creates an exhausting feeling of dependence.

- Independence. If the program that you are dependent on changes or gets cut, you're out of luck. The cuts to personal assistance care are affecting many people.
- Work provides a sense of purpose and allows you to contribute to society. It is valued and creates a sense of identity. It keeps people from being a burden.
- Work usually provides a healthy social environment with coworkers and/or customers.
- Work helps close the gap between those with disabilities and those without disabilities.
- There are intellectual benefits that come with employment, such as creative thinking, gaining knowledge, exercising your brain, etc.
- When you are dependent on a system, it keeps you in survival mode. Work provides the opportunity to be future-oriented and set goals.
- It defines who you are and gives you a role in life.
- It helps people feel healthier instead of dwelling on their situation.
- Access to health care.
- Work is a place where you can develop and use your passion.
- There is so much personal satisfaction that comes from a job well done.

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

- Minnesota has a strong voice for people with disabilities. We have a strong presence and actively create good policies. We have a lot of organizational structure, legal support, and coalitions around advocacy. The Minnesota Disability Law Center is strong compared to other states.
- The ADA. Accessibility improved when the ADA was passed in 1990. People have an understanding of the laws and their rights and the services that are available to them. As a state, we always want to move forward and work toward quality improvement.
- Minnesota is better at maintaining simple accessibility and being up-to-code than many other places. We have access to interpreters and transportation (Metro Mobility). Many of these services are not available in other states.
- Strong education system in Minnesota. Early intervention services and transition services are available and teach life skills. They create a natural way for people to get a job when they graduate.
- Good health care in Minnesota, such as Medical Assistance and Medicaid.
- Minnesota's strong work ethic. We value work in our state and work is seen as an important issue. As a highly educated state, we view work as very valuable.

- Vocational Rehabilitation Services. Millions of dollars of Vocational Rehabilitation Services produce thousands of employment outcomes every year. We have a system that is working in many ways and can always improve.
- MA-EPD. People argue that it has been *too* successful.
- There is transportation in most counties. There are only six counties in Minnesota that do not have accessible transportation. We are doing well compared to other states. Transportation will give you access to good health care, housing and employment. It's not the *best* but it's good.
- SSDI is available to help people stabilize their income.
- A lot of collaboration and support from disability organizations and non-profits; also, WorkForce Centers and Vocational Rehabilitation Services. There are a lot of organizations that help people with employment in Minnesota.
- The Centers for Independent Living. They are available all over the state.
- Dress for Success and Goodwill give away free work clothes for interviews and jobs.
- The Twin Cities have many Personal Care Assistance services.

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 eleven recommendations provides further information on “next steps” in refining the recommendations and moving toward more specific policy implications.

Increase the expectation of employment of Minnesotans with physical disabilities. Without the expectation that a person can work, employment will not be pursued and employment outcomes will remain low for individuals with physical disabilities. Although there is an expectation of work in the general population, individuals with physical disabilities are oftentimes considered “unable to work.” Low expectations about employment on the part of individuals and professionals who support them are a major barrier to employment. As noted earlier, the medical profession is particularly critical in shaping this expectation since they have such a strong connection to individuals with physical and other disabilities and help to shape expectations about what is and is not possible regarding employment. Medical professionals need better information about best practices and the positive effects work can have on physical and mental health so that medical, therapeutic and rehabilitation professionals support individuals in considering and planning for employment.

Address fears about the loss of public government benefits. Many individuals with physical disabilities fear jeopardizing their safety net of government benefits by going to work. Although

work incentives are increasingly available, individuals with physical disabilities and those who support them often do not consider work as an option, or limit hours or income from employment more than is necessary. A number of financial literacy resources are available to Minnesotans with disabilities to address these concerns.²¹ 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.

Listening session participants also identified the financial gap an individual can experience between when benefits are reduced and receiving their first paycheck. Since individuals are generally paid only after several weeks of employment, they may experience an unexpected period without income, depending on when their benefits are reduced. Listening session participants recommended this unintended disincentive be addressed so that individuals do not find themselves without the funds they need to maintain their living situation just as they are beginning to work, adding an additional stressor that can negatively impact success on the job.

Utilize a strengths-based approach to career development. Underemployment and limited opportunities for advancement are common concerns of individuals with physical disabilities. Support professionals (and employers) can become overly focused on what an individual cannot do and overlook skills and abilities that the person has which could be advantageous to a workplace. Individuals themselves can also take on that perspective and find it difficult to identify skills and strengths that would be valued by employers. A strengths-based approach to employment is a far more effective strategy for setting individual job goals, marketing the known skills and talents of a jobseeker, and finding or negotiating employment positions based on the ideal conditions of employment for each individual. This customized approach leads to better employment outcomes for all involved and promotes job retention since jobs are built on the specific interests and strengths of the individual jobseeker.

Provide supports to increase self-management skills to enable individuals with physical disabilities to better direct their supports and services. Self-advocacy is increasingly recognized as important to improving quality of life and empowering individuals to exercise choice and self-determination. Moving from a passive recipient of services to directing supports and services is consistent with the recovery model noted earlier. Engaging the medical community in moving toward this goal should increase expectations and consideration of employment as a means of improving the workforce participation rates of individuals with physical disabilities and positively impacting both physical and mental health.

Address the need to secure accommodations. The Americans with Disabilities Act has made workplaces more physically accessible, but additional accommodations may be necessary for

²¹ 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, and /or the MN Work Incentives Connection (www.mnworkincentives.com).

individuals with physical disabilities. Often physical disabilities are visible and disclosure of a disability may not be an issue, but individuals may be reluctant to request accommodations anyway. Listening session participants viewed requesting accommodations to be an important factor in self-advocacy and fundamental to obtaining successful employment and job retention. As noted above, they emphasized that most accommodations are inexpensive and simple to provide, but that employers might be reluctant to hire an individual requesting any accommodations for fear about future costs to the business. A consolidated accommodations fund which employers and individuals could utilize for needed accommodations could address this barrier.²²

Provide a rapid response for situations in which an individual's job is in jeopardy to maximize job retention. For individuals who do not qualify for ongoing supports such as supported employment services, job loss and unemployment can result when problems arise in the workplace. In some instances, jobs could be retained with additional short-term supports. 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 physical disabilities would be able to 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.

Ensure the availability of training for new careers. Individuals who acquire a disability may not be able to return to their previous career or may need to change careers as the effects of their disabling condition improve or worsen. Career change and the need for re-training is increasingly a fact of life for all workers and most people will experience multiple career changes during their working years. A system in which retraining and career development opportunities are more available will help prevent underemployment and promote advancement opportunities so often experienced by individuals with physical disabilities.

Ensure WorkForce Centers are a valuable resource in job development for individuals with physical disabilities.²³ For some individuals with physical disabilities, WorkForce Centers may be their primary resource for assistance in finding a job. Clearly, WorkForce Centers need to be physically accessible, but they also must be able to provide an array of services for individuals with physical disabilities just as they do for other Minnesotans needing job assistance.

Increase funding for public transportation to expand the areas served and the times transportation is available. For many individuals with physical disabilities, public transportation is their only option for getting to work. As a result, the locations they can

²² The Governor's Workforce Development Committee recently recommended a centralized accommodations fund for state agencies to promote the hiring of individuals with disabilities. The report can be accessed at http://www.gwdc.org/policy_advisory/All_Hands_on_Deck_2011.pdf.

President Obama has also signed an Executive Order for a centralized fund to promote hiring at the federal level.

²³ WorkForce Centers are Minnesota's OneStops, a Department of Labor initiative for jobseekers and businesses.

consider for employment are limited to those that are accessible through the public transportation system. Geographic and schedule limitations of the public system limit the range of options for employment. Expanded funding and creative collaborations and integration of resources designed to increase routes and expand service hours will benefit many individuals with disabilities in addition to other groups who rely on public transportation.

Mandate affirmative action employment goals for individuals with disabilities, similar to those for women and minorities, to increase participation in economic development initiatives supported by public funding. Listening session participants recommended that all levels of government require employment goals for individuals with disabilities for their own workforce and for government contractors in areas in which those goals are mandated for women and minorities. If affirmative action goals are appropriate to correct past instances of discrimination based on sex and race, discrimination based on disability should also be addressed through similar employment goals for individuals with disabilities. Advocates for such affirmative action goals have faced stiff resistance from government agencies in the absence of the legal requirement to set those goals.

Ensure supported employment is available to individuals with physical disabilities who require higher levels of ongoing support. Supported employment and customized employment have expanded the opportunities for individuals with significant support needs to work in the community.²⁴ However, to implement these options, an ongoing funding source must be identified. As noted earlier, supported employment outcomes for individuals with physical disabilities may be limited by having few sources of funding for ongoing support based on eligibility or waiting lists. Since the availability of CADI waivers is currently limited, there may be a waiting list for individuals eligible for that waiver in certain counties impacting access to supported employment services for some individuals with physical disabilities.²⁵ To maximize the competitive employment and workforce participation rate of Minnesotans with physical disabilities, the provision of supported employment, including availability and access to rapid response services, needs to be widely addressed, promoted, and engaged.

Implications for Policy

Although the recommendations above focus on Minnesotans with physical disabilities, many of the recommendations would also apply to individuals with other disabilities. The information

²⁴ Customized employment (CE) as defined by the Office of Disability and Employment Policy (ODEP) means “individualizing the employment relationship between employees and employers in ways that meet the needs of both. It is based on an individualized determination of the strengths, needs and interests of the person with a disability, and is also designed to meet the specific needs of the employer.” For more information on CE visit www.dol.gov/odep/categories/workforce/CustomizedEmployment/what/index.htm.

²⁵ For more information, visit <https://edocs.dhs.state.mn.us/lfserver/Public/DHS-6297-ENG> on page 31.

gathered through the MEPI listening sessions will be analyzed to identify commonalities between groups and compiled into a final report of recommendations for increasing 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.²⁶

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.²⁷ 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) 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.

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²⁶ To learn more about PTE visit www.positivelyminnesota.com/pte.

²⁷ For the APSE website, visit www.apse.org. For the Minnesota APSE website, visit www.mnapse.org.

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