

2011

Policy Brief on Employment of Minnesotans Who Are Deaf or Hard of Hearing

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



POLICY BRIEF ON EMPLOYMENT OF MINNESOTANS WHO ARE DEAF OR HARD OF HEARING

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 the 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

A listening session on employment and individuals who are deaf or hard of hearing was hosted by the Commission of Deaf, DeafBlind, and Hard of Hearing Minnesotans and facilitated by the Minnesota Employment Policy Initiative on August 25, 2010.¹ Eighteen participants worked to identify strategies to increase employment rates for individuals who are deaf or hard of hearing. The following recommendations were identified from the themes generated by the listening session participants:

- **Clarify and develop interagency responsibilities, partnerships, and agreements at the state and local levels to create a seamless transition process for students who are deaf or hard of hearing and their families.**
- **Ensure students who are deaf or hard of hearing have competitive paid work experiences to prepare them for successful post-school employment.**

¹ A separate policy brief has been developed on DeafBlindness. This policy brief focuses only on individuals who are deaf and hard of hearing.

- **Increase postsecondary training/educational opportunities for individuals who are deaf or hard of hearing.**
- **Ensure families begin thinking about transition at the time of their child's first Individualized Education Program (IEP) and that parents have access to web-based and other resources to support their active involvement in their child's education and to empower students who are deaf or hard of hearing their and parents as active participants in transition.**
- **Ensure students and adults who are deaf or hard of hearing throughout Minnesota have access to transition and employment services like VECTOR and MEC.**
- **Ensure that high schools prepare students who are hard of hearing to be successful in postsecondary education and jobs which utilize their skills.**
- **Engage business leaders in providing employment opportunities for individuals who are deaf or hard of hearing.**
- **Address underemployment and ensure employers/supervisors do not underestimate the abilities of individuals who are deaf or hard of hearing and limit opportunities for advancement.**
- **Develop a consolidated accommodations fund available to individuals and employers to promote employment of individuals who are deaf or hard of hearing.**
- **Work with the Federal Communications Commission (FCC) or Congress to make rule changes so that video remote interpreting and remote CART (real time captioning) services are available in the workplace.**
- **Implement the recommendations of the Governor's Workforce Development Council (GWDC) to improve employment outcomes for Minnesotans with disabilities.²**

The Commission of Deaf, DeafBlind, and Hard of Hearing Minnesotans has formed a task force on employment to refine and take action upon these recommendations. The Minnesota Employment Policy Initiative has completed listening sessions with seven other disability groups and is analyzing recommendations between the groups to identify common themes. 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

² The report can be accessed at http://www.gwdc.org/policy_advisory/All_Hands_on_Deck_2011.pdf

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

Background on Individuals Who are Deaf or Hard of Hearing

Both communication skills and access to communication are critical to success in education and employment, and individuals who are deaf or hard of hearing face significant challenges in these areas. Deafness and hearing loss refer to similar conditions that can affect one or both ears. Individuals who are deaf experience a profound to total loss of hearing that ranges from preventing any useful understanding of speech or speech discrimination to total deafness; individuals who are hard of hearing can experience a range of loss from partial to complete.³ Because of the similarities and definitional overlap, it can be difficult to know when a person is hard of hearing as opposed to deaf.⁴ Hearing loss is increasing in the general population with the greatest increases in individuals under the age of 17 and in the 45-64 age group.⁵

It is challenging to identify the extent of both deafness and hearing loss in the population since the demographic statistics are not obtained in the current U.S. Census process.⁶ The Gallaudet Research Institute at Gallaudet University estimates that nine to ten percent of the United States' general population experiences hearing loss at some level.⁷ A recent publication of the Minnesota Department of Human Services⁸ uses this 10% figure to estimate the prevalence of people who are deaf or hard of hearing in the state. It estimates there are 497,229 Minnesotans with hearing loss of whom 67,623 are deaf, and 429,606 are hard of hearing. The employment rate of individuals with a hearing disability nationally was reported to be 48.2% in June of 2010.⁹ In 2005, 14,920 Minnesotans with hearing disabilities were estimated to be seeking employment.¹⁰

³ World Health Organization. (2010, April). *Media Centere fact sheets: Deafness and hearing impairments*. Retrieved June 10, 2010 from: <http://www.who.int/mediacentre/factsheets/fs300/en/>.

⁴ Harrinton, T. (1994). *Gallaudet University: Deaf statistics*. Retrieved June 10, 2010 from: http://library.gallaudet.edu/Library/Deaf_Research_Help/Frequently_Asked_Questions_FAQs/Statistics_on_Deafness/Introduction_to_Deaf_Statistics.html.

⁵ Watson, D, Jennings, T, Tomlinson, P, Boone, S, & Anderson, G. (2008). *Model state plan for rehabilitation of person who are deaf, deaf-blind, hard of hearing or late deafened*. Rehabilitation Research and Training Center for Persons who are Deaf or Hard of Hearing, The University of Arkansas, Little Rock, AR.

⁶ Harrinton, T. (1994). *Gallaudet University: Deaf statistics*.

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ Minnesota Department of Human Services. (2010). *Hearing loss*. Retrieved June 22, 2010 from: http://www.dhs.state.mn.us/main/idcplg?IdcService=GET_DYNAMIC_CONVERSION&RevisionSelectionMethod=LatestReleased&dDocName=dhs16_139264#.

⁹ Kaye, H.S. (2010). *The Impact of the 2007-09 Recession on Workers with Disabilities*. Monthly Labor Review, October 2010.

¹⁰ Minnesota State Rehabilitation Council. *2005 Annual Report*.

Hearing disabilities include a number of subgroups including deaf, culturally deaf, DeafBlind, hard of hearing and late deafened. Individuals who are culturally deaf do not always view themselves as “disabled,” but identify themselves as part of a cultural minority group. Also, an individual’s self-chosen label does not necessarily reflect their level of hearing loss.

A number of factors affect the employment needs of individuals who are deaf or hard of hearing, such as age of onset of the disability, severity of hearing loss, psychosocial ramifications of hearing loss, etiology, racial, ethnic and cultural differences and the presence or absence of other disabilities.¹¹ Researchers have reported that 25% to 33% of individuals who are deaf or hard of hearing have additional disabilities such as intellectual/developmental disabilities, emotional or behavioral disorders, learning disabilities and visual disabilities.¹² Individuals who are deaf or hard of hearing also can utilize a number of different forms of communication such as American Sign Language, English-based signing systems, sign-supported speech, speechreading and others.¹³

Individuals who are deaf or hard of hearing can be affected by a number of environmental issues such as background noise, visual obstructions and distractions, acoustics, lighting, seating arrangements, and others. Some individuals cope with their disability in ways which can be misinterpreted by others as personality rather than disability issues. Reactions such as avoidance and withdrawal, fatigue, difficulty focusing attention, and other coping mechanisms may affect job performance. A better understanding of hearing disabilities, in addition to providing accommodations, can alleviate many of the challenges impacting the workplace performance of employees with hearing disabilities.¹⁴

Education is an important predictor of future employment.^{15 16} Youth with hearing disabilities often do not develop the language skills of their non-disabled peers, due to factors such as communication barriers within families and in educational programs. Reading skills often “level off” at a third or fourth grade level and writing skills can also be affected.¹⁷ These language

¹¹ Watson, D, Jennings, T, Tomlinson, P, Boone, S, & Anderson, G. (2008). *Model state plan for rehabilitation of person who are deaf, deaf-blind, hard of hearing or late deafened.*

¹² Luft, P. (2000). Communication barriers for deaf employees: Needs assessment and problem-solving strategies. *Work: A Journal of Prevention, Assessment and Rehabilitation*, pp. 51-59.

¹³ Watson, D, Jennings, T, Tomlinson, P, Boone, S, & Anderson, G. (2008). *Model state plan for rehabilitation of persons who are deaf, deaf-blind, hard of hearing or late deafened.*

¹⁴ Ibid.

Scherich, D.L. (1996). Job accommodations in the workplace for persons who are deaf or hard of hearing: Current practices and recommendations, *Journal of Rehabilitation*, pp. 27–35.

¹⁵ Scherich, D.L. (1996). Job accommodations in the workplace for persons who are deaf or hard of hearing: Current practices and recommendations.

¹⁶ Family supports and early intervention services also impact future employment.

¹⁷ Watson, D, Jennings, T, Tomlinson, P, Boone, S, & Anderson, G. (2008). *Model state plan for rehabilitation of persons who are deaf, deaf-blind, hard of hearing or late deafened.*

Parnes, A. and Richardson, D.C. Deafness, Communication and Isolation in the Workplace. Unpublished Manuscript.

skills are critical for academic success and only about 50% of students who are deaf graduate from high school.¹⁸ Competitive employment rates for students leaving the schools were found to be 44% for students who were hard of hearing and 25% for students who were deaf.¹⁹ For those students enrolled in postsecondary education, the drop-out rate is 70%.²⁰ This is a disturbing statistic since postsecondary education has been found to be a primary indicator of employment success and can be crucial to avoiding underemployment and attaining career advancement opportunities.²¹

For the working age population, being deaf or hard of hearing presents unique challenges in obtaining, performing, and keeping jobs.²² As a result, people who are deaf or hard of hearing experience higher rates of unemployment and underemployment over a lifetime.²³ For individuals transitioning from the secondary education system, it was found that only a quarter of deaf individuals tended to be employed full-time and only a third attended postsecondary training two years after high school.²⁴ Individuals who are deaf or hard of hearing are estimated to earn \$356,000 to \$609,000 less over a lifetime than the non-disabled population and often experience career stagnation, unlike citizens without disabilities whose careers are more likely to advance over time.²⁵

Communication access plays a major role for many, both in securing employment and in the day-to-day workplace experience of those who are employed. Hearing disabilities have been identified as a barrier to becoming aware of job opportunities in the community.²⁶ For individuals who do find employment, communication and social interactions with coworkers were found to be an important factor in workplace success.²⁷ The acquisition of soft skills, which are a major factor in job satisfaction and performance, are often reliant on hearing abilities and communication skills.²⁸ Most workplaces are environments in which there are continual

Houston, K., Lammers, B., & Svorny, S. (2010). Perceptions of the effect of public policy on employment opportunities for individuals who are deaf or hard of hearing. *Journal of Disability Policy Studies*, pp. 9-21.

¹⁸ Luft, P. (2000). Communication barriers for deaf employees: Needs assessment and problem-solving strategies.

¹⁹ Ibid.

²⁰ Ibid.

²¹ Scherich, D.L. (1996). Job accommodations in the workplace for persons who are deaf or hard of hearing: Current practices and recommendations.

²² World Health Organization. (2010, April). *Media Centere fact sheets: Deafness and hearing impairments*.

²³ Luft, P. (2000). Communication barriers for deaf employees: Needs assessment and problem-solving strategies.

²⁴ Wagner, M. (1989), *National longitudinal study progress report: Annual transition project directors meeting*, Champaign, IL: University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign, The Transition Institute at Illinois.

²⁵ Luft, P. (2000). Communication barriers for deaf employees: Needs assessment and problem-solving strategies.

²⁶ Myers, P.D. and Danek, M.M. (1990), Deaf employment assistance network: A model for employment service delivery, *Journal of the American Deafness and Rehabilitation Association* 24, pp. 59-67.

²⁷ Hurwitz, T.A. (1991), Quality of communication services for deaf and hard of hearing clients: Current issues and future directions. *Journal of the American Deafness and Rehabilitation Association*, 25, pp. 1-7.

²⁸ Parnes, A. and Richardson, D.C. Deafness, Communication and Isolation in the Workplace.

changes in personnel and processes. Individuals who are deaf or hard of hearing may find it more difficult to adapt to those changes given their communication challenges.²⁹

Workplace accommodations often play an essential and equalizing role in the ongoing workplace success of people who are deaf or hard of hearing. Without accommodations, many people with hearing disabilities can be excluded from nuanced, sound-based work environments.

Researchers have identified six specific areas in which employees who are deaf or hard of hearing may require accommodations to perform necessary job functions. They include: training, interacting and socializing with coworkers, participating in staff meetings and work-related social functions, workplace instructions and supervision, and performance evaluations.³⁰

There are many accommodations available today for individuals who are deaf or hard of hearing, including technological accommodations such as Internet-based relay phone services, videophone (VP) technology and telephones, voice carry-over (VCO) technology and telephones, captioned (CapTel) technology and telephones, telecommunication devices for the deaf (TTY/TDD) and visual or physical alarm and alerting systems (e.g., a strobe fire alarm or a vibrating pager). Written communication can also be provided as an accommodation; however, limited language skills may make this accommodation inappropriate for some individuals.³¹

For people who are deaf or hard of hearing and use sign language, an interpreter may be needed to communicate in specific situations.³² Technological advancements have made interpreting more accessible through the increased use and acceptance of remote interpreting services. These services stream live audio and video offsite to a remote interpreter who can communicate the message in spoken form and in sign language.³³ This approach does not require the presence of an interpreter on-site; the interpreter would be displayed in real-time over a television, computer screen, or videophone. A recent White Paper developed by the Council of State Administrators of Vocational Rehabilitation³⁴ outlines the differences between video relay services and video remote interpreting:

²⁹ Houston, K., Lammers, B., & Svorny, S. (2010). Perceptions of the effect of public policy on employment opportunities for individuals who are deaf or hard of hearing.

³⁰ Scherich, D.L. (1996). Job accommodations in the workplace for persons who are deaf or hard of hearing: Current practices and recommendations.

³¹ Parnes, A. and Richardson, D.C. Deafness, Communication and Isolation in the Workplace.

³² U.S. Equal Employment Opportunity Commission. (2006). *Questions and answers about deafness and hearing impairments in the workplace and the Americans with Disabilities Act*. Retrieved September, 2010 from: <http://www.eeoc.gov/facts/deafness.html>.

³³ Federal Communications Commission. (2005). *FCC public notice: Reminder that video relay service provides access to the telephone system only and cannot be used as a substitute for "in-person" interpreting services or video remote interpreting (VRI)*. Retrieved September 5, 2010 from: http://hraunfoss.fcc.gov/edocs_public/attachmatch/DA-05-2417A1.pdf.

³⁴ Council of State Administrators of Vocational Rehabilitation. (n.d.). *Video-interpreting white paper*. Retrieved September 5, 2010 from: http://www.rehabnetwork.org/position_papers/whitepaper/white_paper.htm.

- **Video Relay Services:** An Internet-based service where the person who is deaf or hard of hearing communicates with an interpreter via live streaming audio and video and the interpreter communicates with the hearing person via telephone. The hearing person does not access the audio or video feed. The Federal Communications Commission deems this a free telephone service for users.
- **Video Remote Interpreting:** An Internet-based service in which communication occurs using live streaming audio and video like Video Relay Services; however, one person (either the interpreter, the person who is deaf or hearing participant) is always remote. This service is typically charged at a per-minute or hourly fee.

The White Paper also details some of the advantages and disadvantages of the two services. Listening session participants discussed the need for a rule change by the Federal Communications Commission to make video remote interpreting free of charge and therefore more available in the workplace.

The Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) is over 20 years old and while it has significantly impacted many important areas for individuals with disabilities, it has had a limited impact on employment. A number of researchers and others have questioned whether the ADA has negatively impacted employment opportunities for many individuals who are deaf or hard of hearing.³⁵ People who are deaf or hard of hearing and have completed postsecondary education programs have reported an increase in work opportunities and accommodations since the passage of the ADA; however, individuals without those educational achievements are reporting fewer employment gains since the ADA was passed.³⁶ Because the ADA identifies employers as having responsibilities for “reasonable accommodations,” employers may be reluctant to hire individuals who are deaf or hard of hearing due to fears about the potential costs of technological accommodations or interpreting services. To address this barrier, recommendations for government funding and a consolidated accommodations fund have been proposed in response to the need for ongoing accommodations for individuals who are deaf or hard of hearing.³⁷

³⁵ Parnes, A. and Richardson, D.C. Deafness, Communication and Isolation in the Workplace. Scherich, D.L. (1996). Job accommodations in the workplace for persons who are deaf or hard of hearing: Current practices and recommendations.

Houston, K., Lammers, B., & Svorny, S. (2010). Perceptions of the effect of public policy on employment opportunities for individuals who are deaf or hard of hearing.

³⁶ Houston, K., Lammers, B., & Svorny, S. (2010). Perceptions of the effect of public policy on employment opportunities for individuals who are deaf or hard of hearing.

³⁷ Parnes, A. and Richardson, D.C. Deafness, Communication and Isolation in the Workplace.

Houston, K., Lammers, B., & Svorny, S. (2010). Perceptions of the effect of public policy on employment opportunities for individuals who are deaf or hard of hearing.

Maryns, N. (2011). All hands on deck: Sixteen ideas to strengthen Minnesota's workforce. *Governor's Workforce Development Council*. Retrieved from: http://www.gwdc.org/policy_advisory/All_Hands_on_Deck_2011.pdf.

Pathways to Employment (PTE)³⁸ and the Department of Human Services, Deaf and Hard of Hearing Services (DHHS) have collaborated on a project to fund the loan of communications equipment for employment settings since 2008. The project is intended to increase employment outcomes by addressing the need for accommodations. Employers often choose to purchase the equipment when the loan period expires. DHHS also provides training to employers about the project loan equipment and interpreting services. Since July 2009, 172 pieces of equipment have been loaned to employers on a short term basis, and 42 employers have purchased the equipment.

Between August of 2007 and June of 2008, Vocational Rehabilitation Services (VRS) held a series of stakeholder meetings to develop a planning process to address unemployment and underemployment of Minnesotans who are deaf or hard of hearing, including transition-aged youth, and to improve VRS outcomes. One result of that process was the development of “Rapid Response Interventions Services: Hearing Loss & Workplace Solutions,” a collaborative effort between VRS and DHHS. This service includes the assignment of a Rapid Response Consultant who can assist in resolving immediate workplace crises related to communication throughout the state. The consultant can also provide individualized workplace assessments, coworker training on deafness and hearing disabilities, and a variety of other workplace supports including access to the equipment loan program described above.³⁹

Leadership from VRS and DHHS continued their collaborative efforts culminating in a cross agency meeting in June of 2009 to define the scope and vision for an interagency effort to increase the quality and quantity of employment and independent living outcomes for Minnesotans who are deaf or hard of hearing. In July of 2010, VRS contracted with the Management Analysis and Development within the Minnesota Department of Management and Budget to create a collaborative service delivery model to capture programmatic efficiencies, create synergies and result in better employment outcomes for Minnesotans who are deaf or hard of hearing. Specific action steps from that process are under development.

The Minnesota Employment Center for People Who Are Deaf or Hard of Hearing (MEC) was formed 16 years ago and remains one of the only programs of its kind nationally.⁴⁰ It acts as the only specialized program that supports the population in finding and maintaining employment, as well as developing professional and technical work skills. In 2009, using their specialized

³⁸ PTE is a federal Medicaid Infrastructure Grant authorized by the Ticket to Work and Work Incentives Improvement Act of 1999. More information on the DHHS equipment loan program can be found in quarterly progress reports, online at: www.positivelyminnesota.com/All_Programs_Services/Pathways_to_Employment_For_PTE_Stakeholders/Quarterly_Progress_Reports.aspx.

³⁹ Latz, R. (April 2010). Minnesota Vocational Rehabilitation Services news. *Minnesota - the deaf advocate: A Minnesota Association of Deaf Citizens publication*. Stewartville, MN: Minnesota Association of Deaf Citizens.

⁴⁰ MEC is a free-standing program co-managed by Rise, Incorporated and Lifetrack Resources, Inc. in partnership with Minnesota Vocational Rehabilitation Services (VRS).

knowledge and expertise, MEC partnered in a pilot project with the Independent School District 287 VECTOR Transition Service Program for students who are deaf or hard of hearing with funding provided by VRS. This project is providing seamless postsecondary education and also employment supports to young adults in identifying, developing, creating, and keeping competitive employment, including supported and customized employment.

There has been considerable growth in understanding the critical knowledge, skills, and abilities of direct service practitioners who are supporting jobseekers who are deaf or hard of hearing. The emergence of the Occupational Communication Specialist (OCS) profession has been pioneered in Minnesota by MEC. An OCS is a trained employment consultant who is skilled in the delivery of competitive and supported employment services, knowledgeable about deaf culture and hearing loss issues, familiar with assistive technologies bridging functional skills as well as safety in the workplace, and skilled (fluent) in American Sign Language (ASL) communications to facilitate direct communications with deaf or hard of hearing jobseekers and their employers. By integrating core communication skills with employment and workforce development competencies, an OCS is able to deliver many core services directly to the jobseeker and his or her employer without third-party intermediaries.

An OCS is not an interpreter but rather an employment consultant who can communicate directly and proficiently with jobseekers. Although the use of interpreters is essential to the employment process, OCS professionals are able to work efficiently and effectively with jobseekers and employers because their expertise and role are focused on securing successful employment outcomes. The use of a trained OCS has been linked with the development of successful employment outcomes. However, there is a critical shortage of trained and experienced professionals with the necessary knowledge, skills and abilities, especially in Greater Minnesota.

The Commission of Deaf, DeafBlind, and Hard of Hearing Minnesotans (MCDHH) is a governor-appointed commission that advocates for equal opportunity for Minnesotans who are deaf, DeafBlind, and hard of hearing. Employment has been one of the major focus issues for MCDHH, which advocates across both state vocational rehabilitation agencies (VRS and State Services for the Blind) and with other stakeholders to work toward advancing employment for its constituency. MCDHH has been an active partner with VRS and DHHS in the planning process for the services described above, in addition to participating in the Governor's Workforce Development Council and working on the development of the Council's recommendations. MCDHH helped to secure state funding for MEC's competitive and supported employment services and for interpreters for VECTOR. MCDHH also helped secure grant funding for an onsite specialist working with VECTOR/MEC to provide employment support, education and post-school follow-up to students and recent graduates up to 25 years old.

MCDHH formed an employment task force in November 2010 to address concerns in transition, jobseeking skills and placement services, employment retention services, advancement, and

discrimination. The task force plans to utilize the recommendations from the MEPI listening session participants for its work.

Background on Minnesota Employment Policy Initiative Listening Sessions

The Minnesota Employment Policy Initiative has conducted 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.

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. This question was not used for the listening session hosted by the Commission on Deaf, DeafBlind and Hard of Hearing Minnesotans since so much prior work had been completed on employment.

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 knowledge base 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. This question was used in a limited way for the session hosted by the Commission.

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 Minnesotans who are Deaf or Hard of Hearing

A listening session on employment and individuals who are deaf or hard of hearing was hosted by the Commission for Deaf, DeafBlind, and Hard of Hearing Minnesotans and facilitated by the Minnesota Employment Policy Initiative on August 25, 2010.⁴¹ Eighteen participants worked to identify strategies to increase employment rates for individuals who are deaf or hard of hearing. The group included individuals who are deaf or hard of hearing, family members, secondary and postsecondary educators, VRS, DHHS, employment services providers and MCDHH.

As discussed earlier, a significant amount of activity on employment for individuals who are deaf or hard of hearing had already been completed, and a different process was utilized for this listening session than for sessions with other groups. MCDHH and MEPI developed a document summarizing the work of previous stakeholder groups which was sent to participants prior to the listening session and then utilized as a framework for the listening session. The primary focus of the listening session was on the core MEPI question: **“What will it take to double employment for Minnesotans with disabilities by 2015?”** There was also limited discussion on the MEPI questions of “What’s working?” and “What are we doing right in Minnesota?” as they are related to transition and job development. The results follow:

What’s Working? What Are We Doing Right in MN?

For transition, listening session participants identified:

- PTE Technology Loan Program
- Employment services designed for students who are deaf and hard of hearing
 - MEC
 - VECTOR
 - Employment Endeavors
- Grant from VRS
 - Enabled MEC and VECTOR to house job developer at school
 - Increased the age limit of individuals VECTOR could serve to 25 so that students could re-connect with familiar services
 - Developed better collaboration between VRS and MEC and increased flexibility of services
 - Provided a sense of momentum from grant activities and accomplishments. People are invested and able to build a better, more integrated service delivery system rather than just piecing services together.

⁴¹ A separate policy brief has been developed on Deaf-Blindness. This policy brief focuses only on individuals who are deaf and hard of hearing.

- Development of Occupational Communications Specialists trained in employment and able to communicate directly with individuals needing services
- Secured ongoing funding from legislature for interpreters at VECTOR
- Provided students with the opportunity to “try out” college while still in transition services

For job development, listening session participants identified:

- MEC has exceeded goals
- Walgreen’s project – VRS Business Services Specialists have developed recruiting relationship which opens up job opportunities. Opportunities with other employers are also being developed.
- MEC has highly skilled staff
- MEC keeps list of employer success stories and provides recognition of employers. Has capacity to encourage others to patronize businesses that support employment of jobseekers who are deaf and hard of hearing.

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

Summary information from previous stakeholder groups was used to explore this question. Listening session participants began by adding to the summary information and then voting to prioritize the topics of most importance to the group. MCDHH has subsequently formed a task force on employment to refine and take action upon these priorities.

Five areas were identified by listening session participants as the top priorities:

- A pilot project to be funded by Pathways to Employment (PTE) to address accommodations funding to promote the hiring of individuals who are deaf or hard of hearing⁴²
- Transition services
- Systems change
- Advancement opportunities for individuals who are employed
- Engaging employers

⁴² MCDHH submitted a proposal for a consolidated accommodations fund to PTE based on the listening session results. PTE is a federal Medicaid Infrastructure Grant authorized by the Ticket to Work and Work Incentives Improvement Act of 1999. PTE was not funding new requests for projects for 2011 due to the expiration of federal funds at the end of the calendar year. One-time funding for any pilot program was not deemed prudent when funding levels are guaranteed to be eliminated in 2012 and outcomes of the pilot cannot be tracked over time. PTE will continue to fund the DHHS equipment loan and interpreter program through the end of 2011, as it has done since 2008. More information on the DHHS equipment loan program can be found in quarterly progress reports, online at: www.positivelyminnesota.com/All_Programs_Services/Pathways_to_Employment/For_PTE_Stakeholders/Quarterly_Progress_Reports.aspx.

The eleven recommendations below are based on the listening session results:

Clarify and develop interagency responsibilities, partnerships, and agreements at the state and local levels to create a seamless transition process for students who are deaf or hard of hearing and their families. Transition is an important time in the life of a young adult. Too often young adults with disabilities graduate into the adult service delivery system rather than into jobs or postsecondary education. During transition, the education and adult service delivery systems have overlapping areas of service provision which, with a coordinated focus, have the potential to provide a better system of supports for an individual. Instead, the adult service delivery system tends to see transition as primarily the responsibility of education until the individual is in their last year of school or upon graduation. To improve transition and employment outcomes, all the systems need to see employment or postsecondary education as the goal for individuals leaving the educational system and develop more individualized and targeted transition goals during the “transition” years to meet that goal. Furthermore, high schools, postsecondary schools, and adult employment providers need to pool and engage expertise, resources, and services in ways that make postsecondary and competitive employment outcomes seamless for each transition student and his or her family.

Ensure students who are deaf or hard of hearing have competitive paid work experiences to prepare them for successful post-school employment. Current research documents that paid work during high school is a major factor contributing to the future competitive employment success of youth and young adults leaving secondary education programs in the United States. Young adults with disabilities need to have paid employment in a job of their own prior to graduation, as do their nondisabled peers. Paid employment provides a richer learning experience for young adults than school-arranged “work experiences.” Transition teams need to support typical, paid jobs for students in addition to internships, summer employment opportunities, and work experiences. A student who has had the experience of competitive, paid employment prior to graduation will have a better foundation to pursue employment or postsecondary education upon leaving the school system.

Increase postsecondary training/educational opportunities for individuals who are deaf or hard of hearing. As discussed earlier, postsecondary education is critical to obtaining the kinds of jobs that are increasingly available in the workforce. Students who are deaf or hard of hearing need to obtain the skills necessary to pursue postsecondary education, with an emphasis on developing language skills such as reading and writing. Students who are deaf or hard of hearing are not likely to be successful in postsecondary education without support services and accommodations. They also need access to financial aid and to customized training opportunities in growing industries. Use of Accuplacer, an adaptive test developed by the College Board to assess academic skills, has been identified as a barrier to accessing postsecondary education. Accuplacer can unintentionally screen out qualified candidates for postsecondary education because it may underestimate the skills of students who are deaf or hard

of hearing. Also, it may underestimate the capacities of some youth to benefit from customized training and education programs that are adapted to the styles of unique learners.

Ensure families begin thinking about transition at the time of their child's first Individualized Education Program (IEP) and that parents have access to web-based and other resources to support their active involvement in their child's education and to empower students who are deaf or hard of hearing their and parents as active participants in transition. Listening session participants emphasized that transition begins long before age 14. The expectations about post-school adult living can guide educational services throughout a student's years in school. Research on transition has identified that numerous factors are built into the service delivery system that discourage active participation by individuals and families.⁴³ Without tools and resources geared toward families and students and an active intention to empower students and families, transition will continue to be primarily a process driven by professionals, and planning will consist of fitting individuals into existing options.

Ensure students and adults who are deaf or hard of hearing throughout Minnesota have access to transition and employment services like VECTOR and MEC. Listening session participants emphasized the importance of specialized transition and employment services to individuals who are deaf and hard of hearing and the lack of availability of those services outside the metropolitan area. Specialized services for individuals who are deaf or hard of hearing are particularly difficult to access in Greater Minnesota. VECTOR and MEC can serve only a limited number of young adults who are deaf or hard of hearing; however, some additional students could access VECTOR/MEC services if housing and funding were available to them. For young adults who remain in their home communities, technology or the development of new collaborative services modeled after VECTOR and MEC could provide better transition services leading to employment and/or postsecondary education.

Listening session participants also stressed the importance of services like MEC for adults who are deaf or hard of hearing outside the metropolitan area. Emerging technologies, such as video-phones, could make it possible for individuals throughout the state to have access to culturally competent employment services (including supported employment services) delivered by Occupational Communication Specialists (OCS) who are skilled in ASL communication standards, job accommodations, and employment practices fundamental to the job success and advancement of employees who are deaf or hard of hearing.⁴⁴

⁴³ Furney, K. S., & Salembier, G. Rhetoric and Reality: A Review of the Literature on Parent and Student Participation in the IEP and Transition Planning Process. *University of Vermont*, pp. 111-125.

⁴⁴ Occupational Communication Specialists are trained to work with individuals who are deaf, DeafBlind and hard of hearing. They are usually interpreters who have acquired specialized training in employment. For more information, you can go to <http://www.dhs.state.mn.us>.

Adapting and expanding the use of videophones and other technologies to create or increase access to a pool of trained OCS professionals could provide new opportunities to bridge services and engage professional expertise currently lacking in many regions of the state. A pilot program could be initiated to demonstrate how access to trained OCS professionals can lead to better employment planning and outcomes of jobseekers living in areas where qualified services are unavailable. The pilot could be designed to:

- Engage collaboration with schools and adult service providers who do not have OCS expertise in their respective organizations.
- Study the efficacy of delivering distance job support as well as collaborating with individuals and organizations in Greater Minnesota via new technologies.

As VRS and DHHS work toward improving services to individuals who are deaf or hard of hearing throughout the state, making transition services and employment services available statewide is an important goal.

Ensure that high schools prepare students who are hard of hearing to be successful in postsecondary education and jobs which utilize their skills. Listening session participants emphasized the need to focus directly on students who are hard of hearing, whose needs are often not addressed by educators, to ensure that transition services specific to improving outcomes in employment and postsecondary education were developed and addressed. The goal is to incorporate strengths-based education, job training, and employment strategies so the job interests, abilities, and potential of these students are recognized and further developed.

Engage business leaders in providing employment opportunities for individuals who are deaf or hard of hearing. Building relationships with employers is critical to improving employment outcomes of individuals who are deaf or hard of hearing. Employers often have concerns about increased costs for accommodations, worker's compensation, safety⁴⁵ and other issues. Employers may need the support of employment service providers to address those concerns and to ensure they do not underestimate the abilities of individuals who are deaf or hard of hearing or inappropriately assume they cannot perform specific jobs due to their disability. The expanded use of the OCS profession is instrumental to educating business leaders, addressing their concerns, and building internal and external capacities, so the employment candidacy, recruitment, development, support, and advancement of deaf and hard of hearing individuals can be fully realized.

It is also important to engage business leaders in promising strategies that prepare jobseekers with disabilities with skills in high demand occupations. Some of this job preparation means making improvements and adaptations within postsecondary education programs, so unique

⁴⁵ Safety concerns may include the need to work with OSHA, the Occupational Safety and Health Administration.

learners can participate. However, it also means engaging contextualized learning on the job through internships, apprenticeships, and other “hands-on” job training models so individuals who are deaf or hard of hearing can develop and practice the skills and competencies they need to obtain good paying jobs.

Address underemployment and ensure employers/supervisors do not underestimate the abilities of individuals who are deaf or hard of hearing and limit opportunities for advancement.

Listening session participants identified underemployment and the lack of advancement opportunities as a major issue for individuals who are deaf or hard of hearing. They recommended developing a variety of strategies to ensure individuals who are deaf or hard of hearing have the same opportunities for career advancement available to individuals without disabilities. Mentoring, customized training opportunities, completion of advanced degrees, specialized job development and the provision of interpreting or CART (real time captioning) services are important supports for individuals as they advance their careers.

Develop a consolidated accommodations fund available to individuals and employers to promote employment of individuals who are deaf or hard of hearing.

The availability of a consolidated fund that individuals and employers could access for accommodations would ensure that individuals who are deaf or hard of hearing have funding for the accommodations they need for success. Placing responsibility for “reasonable” accommodations on employers may result in very limited accommodations being available to employees in addition to discouraging employers from hiring individuals who they fear may increase business costs. A consolidated fund that could be accessed by individuals, in addition to employers, for technology and/or interpreting services would empower individuals by providing them the means to obtain their own accommodations and bring those accommodations as an asset to their employment situation.

Work with the Federal Communications Commission (FCC) or Congress to make rule changes so that video remote interpreting and remote CART services are available in the workplace.

Technologies such as video remote interpreting (VRI) and remote CART (real time captioning) services can provide a highly important accommodation to the workplace. Currently, many employers are reluctant or unwilling to hire sign language interpreting services or purchase CART services because of the high cost factor. This results in a “cost-disincentive” which needs to be addressed in order to increase employment, job retention and promotion opportunities for individuals who are deaf or hard of hearing (and also for individuals who are DeafBlind).

Listening session participants stressed the importance of this federal change to make this valuable service available to individuals and employers.

The FCC currently prohibits use of national video relay services for VRI purposes or situations. The FCC contends that video relay services are exclusively available for telephone calls

involving three locations - the deaf caller, the relay services and the hearing person receiving the call.

In the case of VRI, the intent of the service is to provide remote interpreting services at a location other than where the interpreter is located. In this scenario, there are two locations, the deaf person(s) with a hearing non-signing person(s) at one location (such as a workplace) and the interpreter at a VRI service center.

Both of the above scenarios involve use of the same Internet-based telephone equipment and staff interpreters. However, video relay services are free and VRI requires fees. VRI also currently requires some advance planning/scheduling.

Either the FCC or Congress would need to make a rule change in order to make VRI or Remote-CART available free of charge. It might be necessary that VRI be funded from a separate funding pool, but also be based on a similar model of collecting a small fee from a very large number of the general population. Making this rule change would greatly reduce serious employment barriers faced by individuals who are deaf and hard of hearing (and also individuals who are Deaf Blind).

The FCC currently allows the federal government to use the phone tax to cover the cost of Remote-CART for webinars for employees within the federal government. Listening session participants recommended that these services should be available to all employers and that interpreting services should also be available.

Implement the recommendations of the Governor’s Workforce Development Council (GWDC) to improve employment outcomes for Minnesotans with disabilities.⁴⁶ The GWDC recently made two recommendations to improve the employment of Minnesotans with disabilities within state government:

- **Establish the State of Minnesota as a model employer of people with disabilities.** Included in this recommendation are: addressing accessibility issues to the state’s online job application system, setting hiring goals and increasing accountability for those goals, creating a centralized accommodations fund, training managers on the benefits of hiring individuals with disabilities and developing internships and work experience programs for individuals with disabilities within state government.
- **Ensure that Minnesota’s WorkForce Centers and the services they provide are accessible and usable by people with disabilities.** Included in this recommendation are strengthening the WorkForce Center certification process, utilizing customer feedback to address problems, and training Center staff to address the needs of users with disabilities.

⁴⁶ The report can be accessed at http://www.gwdc.org/policy_advisory/All_Hands_on_Deck_2011.pdf

To address the accessibility needs by users who are deaf or hard of hearing, listening session participants recommended using videophones and other technology and providing interpreters in a timely fashion.

Implications for Policy

Although the recommendations above focus on Minnesotans who are deaf or hard of hearing, some of the recommendations would also apply to individuals with other disabilities.

The employment task force created by the Commission of Deaf, DeafBlind, and Hard of Hearing Minnesotans is unique among listening session participants and is a model for future action on implementing the recommendations from MEPI policy briefs.

The information gathered through all the MEPI listening sessions has been analyzed to identify commonalities compiled into a final report of recommendations across disability groups. Representatives from the organizations which hosted MEPI listening sessions will be reconvened in the Fall of 2011 to strategize on addressing the policy implications for improving employment outcomes. From these strategies, a more specific set of recommendations for action will be developed 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, funded from 2009 and 2010.⁴⁷

In January 2011, the Office of Disability Employment Policy (ODEP) reported that only 20.1% of individuals with disabilities were employed. The employment rate for individuals without disabilities was 69.5%. That translates into an employment rate in which individuals with disabilities are employed at a rate that is less than one-third of the employment rate 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.

⁴⁷ To learn more about PTE visit www.positivelyminnesota.com/pte.

Leadership for MEPI comes from National APSE - The Network on Employment - in concert with its state chapter, Minnesota APSE.⁴⁸ 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 outcome 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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⁴⁸ For the APSE website, visit www.apse.org. For the Minnesota APSE website, visit www.mnapse.org.

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