

The First Annual Disability and Employment Conference

Brooklyn Center, Minnesota, December 1-2, 2009

Results from Listening Session Questions

The “First Annual Disability and Employment Conference” was held December 1-2, 2009 in Brooklyn Center, Minnesota. The conference was presented by the Minnesota Employment Training and Technical Assistance Center and the Minnesota Employment Policy Initiative and was sponsored by Pathways to Employment. The goals of the conference were:

- To develop a conference focusing specifically on employment and individuals with a broad range of disabilities.
- To highlight two new initiatives funded by Pathways to Employment (Minnesota’s Medicare Infrastructure Grant) – the Minnesota Employment Training and Technical Assistance Center (MNTAT) and the Minnesota Employment Policy Initiative (MEPI) – while connecting a large number of individuals to their resources and to taking leadership in impacting employment of Minnesotans with disabilities.
- To “raise the bar” in expectations in employment of Minnesotans with disabilities by generating enthusiasm and momentum in developing innovative practices and policy implications toward the goal of doubling employment of Minnesotans with disabilities by 2015.

Day Two of the conference focused on the policy implications of disability and employment through facilitated table conversations and a call to action. Participants brainstormed questions which have been presented by the Minnesota Employment Policy Initiative to groups throughout Minnesota to identify policy recommendations to dramatically increase employment of Minnesotans with disabilities. The questions were:

- What’s working? What are we doing right in Minnesota? What facilitates employment of Minnesotans with disabilities?
- What will it take to double the employment of Minnesotans with disabilities by 2015?

The first question on “What’s working” was asked to identify the strengths and leadership of Minnesota in improving employment outcomes. The Minnesota Policy Initiative believes it is as important to identify the strengths of the system as it is to identify barriers and that identifying strengths is a beneficial first step in identifying policy needs. When groups focus on strengths, it helps them to see opportunities upon which to build in addition to creating a positive and energizing focus for the second and core question about doubling employment for Minnesotans with disabilities.

What's Working? What are We Doing Right In Minnesota? What Facilitates Employment of Minnesotans with Disabilities?

Conference participants identified the following examples of leadership and strengths that Minnesota can build on to improve employment outcomes:

Minnesota's Tradition of Collaboration

- History of working to provide services using a team approach
- Interagency groups that include education, community and agency partners
- Developing partnerships with business
- Willingness to share strategies rather than just compete with one another
- Efforts at the local level to build relationships and reduce fragmentation
- Coordination of services across housing, employment and health care
- Collaboration between the private and public sector

Raising Expectations

- Rising expectations across stakeholder groups
- Shifting the focus toward competitive wages rather than sub-minimum wages
- Greater awareness of the potential of people with disabilities to work

Disability Service Delivery System

- Variety of funding options – waived services, Extended Employment Program, etc.
- Flexible funding system and success in accessing federal funds and federal grants
- Choice of employment service providers
- Strong system of medical supports
- Strong social network system
- Minnesota tradition of progressive services and leadership
- “People First” orientation
- Movement toward integrated community services

Education

- History of transition services for students aged 18-21
- Work experience opportunities within school services
- Transition services start early
- Strong tradition of early intervention services which better prepare individuals for school
- Post-secondary training and education options
- Working with parents on the expectation of employment for their children
- Integration with regular education creates expectation of normalized adult life

Employers

- Efforts to educate employers about the abilities of people with disabilities
- Building partnerships with employers
- Educating employers about job accommodations
- Large corporations increasing opportunities for people with disabilities
- Changing attitudes from sub-contracting with an organization to direct hire of people with disabilities

Advocacy

- Parents advocating for work opportunities for their children
- Development of self-advocacy movement
- Strong private non-profit sector pushing government agencies on employment
- Celebrating and sharing success stories on employment

Training

- Internship opportunities
- “State as Model Employer” Initiative
- Fast-track training programs
- Job coaching
- Events like “First Annual Disability and Employment Conference”

Person-Centered Services

- Tradition of person-centered planning processes
- Focus on abilities rather than deficits
- Individualized services

Disability Benefits

- More work incentives like MA-EPD (Medical Assistance for Employed Persons with Disabilities)
- More resources to assist individuals, families and organizations in providing a reliable understanding of work incentives to promote employment, such as the Disability Linkage Line and the Minnesota Work Incentives Connection

Transportation

- Options in public transportation are improving
- Metro Mobility expanding service area
- Local communities collaborating across groups (disability, seniors, etc.) with transportation needs

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

Raising Expectations/Changing Perspectives

- Public view people with disabilities as contributors to the workforce and economy
- Employment is expectation
- Employment as civil rights issue
- Change expectations of employers and families
- Influence media and stereotypes portrayed – share success stories
- Public service announcements
- Buy-in of residential providers to create more flexibility in work hours
- Shift to strengths-based model
- Include disability in diversity efforts

Systems Change/Legislative Action

- Less red tape and paperwork
- Flexible funding that supports innovative practices
- Incentives for employment outcomes
- Increase Extended Employment funding to support ongoing supports
- Align policy, funding streams and licensing
- State as Model Employer Initiative
- Dollars follow person
- Develop uniform definition of employment and data management system – establish baseline
- Legislative study to analyze effectiveness of system and make recommendations for improvement
- Develop cost/benefit analyses on effects of employment
- Address disincentives to integrated employment, i.e., perception that it is more expensive
- Legislative action to force collaboration between state agencies and break down silos
- Look at what we are buying

Collaboration

- Better interagency cooperation
- Develop a 5-year plan with business and state and local government to promote employment
- Reduce fragmentation
- Increase collaboration among service providers

- Continue cross-agency conferences
- Broaden connections/communication beyond current homogeneous groups
- Work with unions

Education

- Provide more practical and paying job experiences in school
- Ensure youth have social security card, interviewing skills, work experience, resume to facilitate employment
- Students graduate into jobs
- Shift current emphasis on testing and academics to career planning and technical education
- Develop better services for students with mental health disabilities
- Create expectation of employment beginning in primary school
- Start transition services earlier
- Develop certificate programs for students with disabilities
- Develop incentives for continuing education
- More career counselors in schools

Employers

- Get employers on board and committed to hiring people with disabilities and promoting their employment with other businesses – employers talking to employers
- Employer incentives to train and hire – What’s in it for them?
- Approach employers from economic/workforce development perspective – meet the employer’s needs
- Focus on small businesses
- Provide analysis of how people with disabilities can contribute to bottom line – job carving
- Active business advisory panels
- Focus on benefits people with disabilities bring to workplace – address myths
- Speak the same language as business
- Utilize social networking to connect with employers
- Focus on impacting of future labor shortage

Training and Technical Assistance/Best Practices

- Use the Discovery process for job development
- Use social networking methods other jobseekers are utilizing
- Focus on retention, not just job placement
- Develop self-employment opportunities
- Focus on assisting people with disabilities to increase their skills

- Better understanding of unique issues of each disability group, i.e., diagnoses and medications for persons with mental health disabilities
- Ensure support services are available to maintain employment

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