

2011

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

A Summary Report of the
Minnesota Employment Policy Initiative

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



WHAT WILL IT TAKE TO DOUBLE EMPLOYMENT OF MINNESOTANS WITH DISABILITIES BY 2015?

In January 2011, the Office of Disability Employment Policy (ODEP), within the U.S. Department of Labor, reported that the workforce participation rate for individuals with disabilities was only 20.1%, less than one-third the 69.5% rate of individuals without disabilities.¹ Individuals with disabilities are significantly under-represented in the workforce (despite surveys indicating that most want to work) and are significantly over-represented among citizens who experience long-term poverty. Sixty-five percent, almost two-thirds, of individuals who experience long-term poverty are individuals with disabilities. Employment is the most effective and empowering path out of poverty. Without an increase in competitive employment, individuals with disabilities will continue to have limited access to the opportunities, choices and quality of life available to other citizens.

The purpose of the Minnesota Employment Policy Initiative (MEPI) is to close the gap in workforce participation between people with and without disabilities, by facilitating dialogue and developing leadership on disability and employment policy. MEPI is a cross-disability initiative, building active, diverse partnerships which are critical to impacting measurable systems changes and success in achieving improvements in employment and economic opportunity goals. Since 2009, MEPI has engaged strategic partners from disability advocacy organizations, parent and family associations, local government agencies, state disability councils, human resources organizations, employment service providers, other disability and human services organizations, Centers for Independent Living, the University of Minnesota, secondary and postsecondary educational programs, and state agencies .

Together, MEPI and its partners have undertaken wide-ranging activities to bring together stakeholders to shape and advance public policy. Listening sessions were convened during 2009 and 2010 and were the basis for policy briefs identifying focused issues and recommendations to improve competitive employment outcomes for Minnesotans with disabilities. The broad body of MEPI's work and listening sessions was grounded fundamentally around the core question, **“What will it take to double employment of Minnesotans with disabilities by 2015?”**²

¹ Workforce participation rates include those individuals who are employed or actively looking for work.

² This question was originally posed by the Alliance for Full Participation and, with their permission, adopted by MEPI.

Executive Summary

During 2009 and 2010, over 200 individuals participated in listening sessions focused on doubling employment of Minnesotans with disabilities. They were selected by host organizations representing eight disability groups, in addition to groups focusing on transition from school to work and on the role of families. Listening session participants included individuals and self-advocates with disabilities, family members, educators, postsecondary institutions, disability advocacy organizations, state and local government, employment services organizations and others. Nine policy briefs with recommendations to improve employment outcomes were developed from the listening sessions. Analysis of those recommendations identified a consensus around themes toward aligning policies, services and practices to ensure that competitive employment is widely recognized and routinely promoted as the preferred outcome of all Minnesotans with disabilities.

There was surprising consistency across the listening session groups on recommendations for doubling employment. One recommendation, however, stood out among the others as the priority toward driving change:

- **To ensure that competitive employment is an expectation of Minnesotans with disabilities and those who support them.**

Competitive employment is an expectation of citizens without disabilities, but that expectation is absent or “conditional” among many individuals with disabilities, families, educators, the medical community, employment and disability professionals, and employers. The expectation of competitive employment is also not reflected in many public policies.

The recommendation to ensure the expectation of competitive employment is strategically connected to the other sixteen recommendations identified across listening session groups.³ Without assurances that employment will not jeopardize public benefits and other necessary basic supports, Minnesotans will be unemployed or overly limited in their earnings potential. Without jobs designed to utilize the strengths of an individual and to prevent underemployment, individuals with disabilities will be over-represented in low wage, high turnover jobs and less likely to be employed long-term. Without accommodations (most of which are inexpensive and easy to provide) to make the workplace accessible, Minnesotans with disabilities will be less likely to successfully contribute to the workplace. Without supports to facilitate job acquisition and retention, Minnesotans with disabilities will continue to experience long periods of unemployment and cycle through jobs that are not a good match for their skills.

About 30% of adults without disabilities do not participate in the workforce, and not all citizens with disabilities will work either. If competitive employment is an expected outcome of Minnesotans with disabilities, individuals (and their families where appropriate) could still

³ See Appendix A for summary of all the recommendations.

choose to “opt out” of competitive or other employment, but the expectation of employment would shift the dynamic embedded in the current system which requires individuals and families to “opt into” competitive employment in the face of significant pressure to choose a system of segregated, low paying employment or not to work at all.⁴

The Minnesota Employment Policy Initiative will continue to facilitate dialogue and develop leadership with organizations that hosted the listening sessions and others to build an alliance to develop an action plan to champion the expectation that Minnesotans with disabilities will have the opportunity to work competitively. That expectation will be supported by also building coalitions toward achieving the other recommendations identified across listening session groups. The consensus around the recommendations for doubling employment of Minnesotans with disabilities provides a strong foundation for collaborative actions towards ending the silos between disability groups. MEPI and its partners will address the role of public policy in improving employment outcomes and also build grassroots support among individuals with disabilities and those who support them to make competitive employment an outcome that can be achieved by any Minnesotan with a disability who chooses work.

Why is Work Important?

There was a strong consensus by participants from all listening sessions that employment is indeed fundamental to quality of life and that Minnesotans with disabilities are highly underrepresented in the state’s workforce and economy. Responses to this question were fairly uniform across all disability groups. Groups identified that employment improves the following factors:

- Self-esteem and self-worth
- Identity
- Sense of purpose
- Structure and routine
- Economic stability
- Opportunities to use talents
- Contributions to society
- Physical health
- Mental health & recovery
- Social network
- Impacts society’s view about the abilities of individuals with disabilities

⁴ Approximately 80 cents out of every dollar of state and federal funding goes to segregated options as reported by Inge, K., Wehman, P., Revell, G., Erickson, D., Butterworth, J., & Gilmore, D. (2009). Survey results from a national survey of community rehabilitation providers holding special wage certificates. *Journal of Vocational Rehabilitation*, 67-85.

Groups identified that work provides a sense of purpose, identity, and the opportunity to make a contribution. Work is also important because it has a positive impact on mental health, physical health, social connections, economic stability and self-sufficiency, and personal growth. Clearly having a job can make a significant difference in many dimensions of a person's quality of life.

Interestingly, increased income was not one of the first reasons offered as to why work is important, although it did come up in many of the groups. In fact, many disability advocates do not emphasize the connection between disability and poverty. Increased income is fundamental, however, to eradicating poverty and increasing the ability of individuals to make important choices impacting their quality of life. As discussed above, employment is the most effective path out of poverty, and individuals with disabilities account for almost two-thirds of individuals in long-term poverty.

Much of the research on poverty in this country does not focus on the connection between poverty and disability. Research which does study this connection, has some startling statistics to contribute.⁵

- 25% of individuals with disabilities are poor compared to only 10% of the general population.
- Of all working-age adults living in poverty, 47% - nearly half - have a disability.
- For individuals reporting long-term poverty, 65% have a disability.

In order to address poverty in this country, it will be necessary to address the connection between disability and poverty. To take a significant bite out of the number of Americans who are poor, people with disabilities need to be employed and earn livable wages.

Individuals living in poverty have less choice in controlling the circumstances of their lives. Reliance on public benefits significantly limits many fundamental choices including where and with whom to live. Competitive employment increases choices with respect to a wide array of personal, occupational, and economic goals available to any citizen. It opens up the different types of work to be considered. It also provides higher earnings than facility-based or group community-based employment building economic power. Economic power expands opportunities not otherwise available to many individuals with disabilities and those opportunities are directly related to measures increasing quality of life. Through increasing expectations and opportunities with respect to work, Minnesota can multiply the number and diversity of choices available to its citizens with disabilities by expanding participation in both the community and the labor force.

⁵ Fremstad, S., Livermore, G., & Loprest, P. *Disability and Poverty: What Is the Connection and What Should We Do About It?* [PowerPoint slides]. Retrieved from <http://www.disabilitypolicyresearch.org/forums/>

Work as a Return on Investment

Increasing or maintaining employment is not only important to people with disabilities, it is important to all Minnesotans. Minnesota, like other states, is facing an unprecedented budget crisis, and Minnesotans who access public benefits and programs are at risk of dramatic cuts in those benefits and services. The workforce participation rate for individuals with disabilities in the U.S. is far too low. As reported earlier, the Office of Disability Employment Policy (ODEP) reported that the workforce participation rate for individuals with disabilities was only 20.1%, despite surveys indicating that most individuals want to work.

In Minnesota and throughout the country, state revenues are increasing at a much slower rate than expenses for public benefits programs. Employment of Minnesotans with disabilities can help close that gap. When Minnesotans with disabilities find or maintain jobs, they **increase revenues and decrease the cost of public benefits programs.**

In looking at the impact of employment specifically on individuals with mental health issues, Stay Well, Stay Working (SWSW), a statewide demonstration project funded by the Centers for Medicare and Medicaid Services (CMS), identified the positive results of providing supports to assist Minnesotans with serious mental illness (SMI). Participants were more likely to maintain gainful employment as an alternative to receiving SSI or SSDI and therefore, minimizing their reliance on public benefits programs.⁶

In order to access public assistance, individuals with SMI and other disabilities often need to exhaust their own resources and spiral downward into poverty, thus experiencing a period of increasing instability in housing, difficulty in meeting basic needs and the resulting effects on quality of life, health, and employment.

SWSW outcome results indicated positive trends in physical and mental health, use of preventive care, accessing health services, applications for Social Security benefits, job stability and earnings. Only 4% of the intervention group applied for SSDI benefits compared to 15% of the control group. Initiatives such as Stay Well, Stay Working demonstrate the cost savings of providing supports to maintain employment, not only for Minnesotans with SMI but for all Minnesotans with disabilities.

The Minnesota Work Incentives Connection, the Work Incentives Planning and Assistance (WIPA) office for Minnesota, has calculated some of the financial impact when Minnesotans with disabilities work. Specifically, the Connection's most recent data found **statistically significant decreases** in the following government benefit amounts received at 12-month follow up, as compared to intake:

- **Supplemental Security Income (SSI) -13.0%**

⁶ *Stay Well, Stay Working: Policy Brief*. Rep. Stay Well, Stay Working, Mar. 2009. Retrieved from: http://www.dhs.state.mn.us/main/groups/agencywide/documents/pub/dhs16_145238.pdf.

- **MN Supplemental Aid (MSA):** -14.7%
- **Food Support:** -31.9%
- **MN Family Investment Program (MFIP):** -30.9%
- **Housing Subsidy:** -10.8%

The Connection studied outcomes for 1,559 participants in its intensive benefits analysis program from January 2000 through 2009. At 12-month follow up, statistically significant increases in workforce participation have been found in each of the past 10 years.

As people with disabilities increase their level of employment, government benefits are reduced. Collectively, benefits received by the 1,559 individuals studied were \$83,131 per month lower at 12-month follow up than at intake. Potential savings in government benefits equal \$1 million for each year these participants remain employed, or almost \$10 million over 10 years.

The group studied by the Connection represents a fraction of Minnesotans with disabilities, and thus only a fraction of benefits program savings that could be realized if more people with disabilities were working. Those who work also pay federal, state and local taxes, and contribute through FICA taxes to the Medicare and Social Security retirement systems, increasing revenues at all levels. They are also better able to support their families and contribute to their communities.

Background on Minnesota Employment Policy Initiative Listening Sessions

The Minnesota Employment Policy Initiative conducted listening sessions during 2009 and 2010 in the following areas:

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|---|--------------------------|
| Brain Injury | Mental Health |
| DeafBlindness | Deaf and Hard of Hearing |
| Blindness | Autism Spectrum Disorder |
| Intellectual/Developmental Disabilities | Physical Disabilities |
| Transition & Families | |

More than 200 individuals participated in listening session groups focused on employment and disability issues. They represented individuals and self-advocates with disabilities, family members, educators, postsecondary institutions, disability advocacy organizations, state and local government, employment services, organizations and others.

Listening sessions were convened by host organizations which selected participants representing a variety of perspectives. The sessions were facilitated by MEPI. The host organizations were:

- Brain Injury Association of Minnesota
- National Alliance on Mental Illness - NAMI Minnesota
- Mental Health Consumer/Survivor Network of Minnesota
- Mental Health Association of Minnesota

- Advisory Committee on DeafBlindness - State Services for the Blind
- American Council of the Blind of Minnesota
- National Federation of the Blind of Minnesota
- National Multiple Sclerosis Society, Minnesota Chapter
- Metropolitan Center for Independent Living
- Autism Society of Minnesota
- Advocating Change Together (ACT)
- Governor's Council on Developmental Disabilities
- Commission of Deaf, DeafBlind, and Hard of Hearing Minnesotans
- Minnesota Employment First Coalition

The listening sessions were facilitated by MEPI, and lasted from two to four hours, using three questions as the framework for the sessions. The questions were designed to build upon one another, creating momentum toward strategies for the final question on doubling the workforce participation rate of Minnesotans with disabilities.

The first question, “**Why is work important?**” was included to assist each group in focusing specifically on the fundamental value of employment in the lives of all working age adults. Also, it reminded the groups of the benefits that work provides to individuals with disabilities. This question created a positive orientation and introduction for subsequent questions.

The second set of questions, “**What’s working? What are we doing right in Minnesota?**” builds on the first question, and reminds participants of the many services, initiatives, and groups in Minnesota already in place and working to improve employment opportunities and outcomes. These questions identify strengths on which to build as well as opportunities to produce more focused and efficient collaboration between groups and initiatives. Also, they create a shared frame of reference for the group and learning experience for group members as they share their knowledge base about strengths and leadership within Minnesota. The more commonly used focus of identifying problems and barriers oftentimes does not lead to creative strategies in addressing identified challenges. Further, when a group focuses on already known barriers, it creates a negative tone making it difficult for group members to brainstorm on potential strategies toward better employment policies, practices, and outcomes.

The third question, “**What will it take to double the employment of Minnesotans with disabilities by 2015?**” was the most important question for participants. It was intended to be provocative by challenging participants to think out of the box and move toward strategies that can have a more dramatic, measurable impact on employment outcomes.

During listening sessions, participants worked in groups to identify responses to the questions presented. Within two weeks of the listening session, participants were provided with raw results based on individual contributions and consensus outcomes from each listening session.

As MEPI developed policy briefs and recommendations based on the listening sessions, host organizations and others were asked to review draft policy briefs to ensure that points of view and recommendations were consistent with the listening session results. Policy briefs were then revised based on comments, feedback, and corrections from reviewers. No reviewer asked for a revision of any recommendation. Most comments were focused on the background section of the policy brief and updating factual information offered in the narrative.

Common Themes in Recommendations of Listening Session Groups

The Minnesota Employment Policy Initiative found much more consistency between disability groups in the recommendations to double employment than was expected. These consistencies indicate a consensus of recommendations across disability groups and a common foundation for building an alliance across groups to develop an action plan to champion the expectation that Minnesotans with disabilities will have the opportunity to work competitively.⁷ The common themes are presented in the recommendations below. The recommendations are divided into three groups – those specific to transition from school to adult life, those that apply to all Minnesotans with disabilities, and additional recommendations that support an infrastructure to increase employment outcomes.

Recommendations on Transition-Aged Adults and Families

Two listening sessions on transition from secondary education to adulthood were facilitated by the Minnesota Employment Policy Initiative with Community Transition Interagency Committees (CTICs), one in the metropolitan area and one in Greater Minnesota. MEPI also participated in a family summit hosted by the Minnesota Employment First Coalition, and although transition was not the focus of the summit, many participants discussed transition services from the perspective of families. MEPI also participated in a presentation and discussion on the VECTOR/Minnesota Employment Center for Persons who are Deaf or Hard of Hearing (MEC) transition program. Transition was also a topic discussed by listening session participants in the eight disability groups identified earlier, even though it was not presented as a topic by MEPI in those listening sessions. Listening session groups provided more recommendations on transition than on any other topic. The recommendations developed by MEPI on transition and its impact on families are:

Ensure families have expectations of competitive employment for their children with disabilities. The expectation of future employment for children without disabilities is nearly universal for families. This expectation starts at birth and extends into adulthood. Families participating in the Minnesota Employment First Family Summit reported they started out with the expectation their child with a disability would work but this goal eroded over time as

⁷ The summary of the recommendations from each of the nine policy briefs are provided in Appendix B.

professionals discouraged them from seeking competitive employment for their children. However, not all parents have that expectation for their children with disabilities. As MEPI has learned from each listening session, expectations of employment are the key to achieving better employment outcomes for individuals with disabilities. Everything starts or stops with the expectation that a working-age adult has something to contribute to the workforce, community, and his or her self-support through competitive employment. If employment is an expectation for young adults without disabilities, it should also be an expectation for young adults with disabilities.

Utilize social connections, or social capital, during job development to achieve better employment outcomes and to empower families during transition. Families have a number of social connections and use those connections to find employment for themselves and for their children without disabilities. Social connections and active networking are important for anyone to find employment, regardless of whether or not they have a disability. By refocusing the family's natural role to employment referrals, contacts, and linkages, the job development process will be better designed to empower families, in addition to improving employment outcomes in support of their family member.

Ensure students with disabilities have real jobs for real pay while they are still attending school. There is no substitute for having a real job. Research on transition has documented that a positive correlation exists between the number of paid jobs held by youth with disabilities and their future competitive employment outcomes. A job is a powerful learning experience for a young person. It is the best way to learn about work and to start building a resume for future jobs. Students with more significant disabilities often have "work experiences" which are often unpaid, artificially created experiences that take place within the school setting or in groups in the community, rather than having real jobs while they are in school like other teenagers. While there is value in work experiences, they provide a limited opportunity for learning. There is usually no interview or selection process. Expectations are not the same as working directly for an employer for wages. In many work experiences, students are isolated from the paid workforce at the place of business, preventing them from fully experiencing the social aspects of a job. As a result, they do not learn some of the "soft" skills vital to successful employment or the direct connection and rewards of paid employment and work.

Ensure young adults with disabilities graduate directly and seamlessly into competitive jobs or postsecondary education. Students who do not have a job and/or are not enrolled in a postsecondary education program are less likely ever to find competitive employment. The goal of transition planning should be for individuals to leave school when they secure employment or enroll in postsecondary education. No evidence suggests that those outcomes are better achieved after graduation. In fact, there is considerable research indicating that graduating without achieving those outcomes correlates highly with a future of unemployment.

When students graduate, they lose their connection to the schools and to some of the people who know them best. Transition teams supporting students and their families are more complete and have a better structure for interagency collaboration while students are still in school. Graduating into jobs or postsecondary education would be a valid measure of how well transition services are working, not just for the schools, but also for the adult service delivery system. Also, teams which have already worked together to secure jobs while students are still attending school, as discussed in the previous recommendation, will be better positioned to meet this goal.

Redesign transition services for young adults aged 18-21 to produce better employment and postsecondary education outcomes through interagency collaboration. Considerable resources have been invested in extending educational services for some young adults with disabilities until they are age 21. Questions remain about the effectiveness of those services and whether those years are optimally productive. It is time to address the questions and encourage a dialogue to improve transition services and seamless employment results in support of extended time students. Does access to extended time, effort, and educational resources truly result in outcomes of increased competitive employment, adult community living, and economic self-reliance? Would a system of new policies and evidence-based practices increase opportunities for transition-aged youth to obtain their first adult jobs following graduation? How can Minnesota move toward more individualized, targeted outcomes for students in which services for students ages 18-21 are not merely a continuation of secondary educational services with eventual placement into existing options within the adult delivery system? Would access to postsecondary options, with additional supports during extended education years to “try out” postsecondary education, provide a bridge to more successful postsecondary education outcomes?

Accountability for results is critical. A system in which there are shared responsibilities for achieving employment or postsecondary education upon graduation may be more effective than a system in which the schools are viewed as having responsibility for transition outcomes until individuals graduate into the adult service delivery system. Listening session attendees made one thing abundantly clear – when young adults graduate into jobs or postsecondary education directly and seamlessly, everyone benefits.

Consensus Recommendations to Double Employment of All Minnesotans with Disabilities

There was surprising consistency across the eight disability groups on recommendations for doubling employment for working-age Minnesotans with disabilities. The twelve recommendations below identify those common themes. Underemployment and the lack of opportunities for career advancement were identified by many groups as important issues, and ways to address those issues are embedded in a number of the recommendations. The consensus recommendations to double the employment rate of Minnesotans with disabilities are:

Ensure that competitive employment is an expectation of Minnesotans with disabilities and those who support them. Individuals with disabilities are often viewed as “unable to work.” Significant barriers exist in the attitudes of individuals, their families, employers, educators, society at large and professionals in the service delivery system who underestimate the capabilities of individuals with disabilities to work competitively. Increasingly, examples of individuals with significant disabilities who do work competitively, in addition to a growing knowledge base of the expanding support strategies that make competitive employment a reality, are making inroads on changing those attitudes. As individuals with significant disabilities obtain competitive jobs, they demonstrate their abilities as quality employees in the workforce, thereby raising expectations about competitive employment outcomes. These working individuals are pioneers, documenting what is possible with new ways of thinking about the employability of jobseekers with disabilities. Through their accomplishments, they are blazing a trail and opening up Minnesota’s workforce to other individuals by challenging misconceptions and showcasing how jobseekers with disabilities can contribute their skills when they have the opportunity to work competitively.

Without clear expectations that a person can work, competitive employment will not be pursued and employment outcomes will remain low for individuals with disabilities. Everything starts or stops with strong and clear expectations. At times, seemingly artificial criteria of “readiness”, such as achieving a specific level of productivity or remediating behaviors labeled problematic within a facility-based setting, can become barriers to employment for individuals with disabilities and those who support them. Arbitrary readiness criteria are often advanced without understanding how person-centered planning and supports can change perspectives by identifying and developing the ideal conditions of employment one person at a time.

Many individuals acquire a disability while working. If the expectation that an individual would return to work was part of the medical, therapeutic, and rehabilitation process from the beginning, services could be redesigned in ways that support a return to work or finding a suitable job at the earliest time. The medical profession is particularly critical in shaping expectations about employment since they have such a strong connection to many individuals with disabilities and help to shape expectations about what is and is not possible regarding employment.

Medical professionals need better information about best practices in employment and the positive effects work can have on physical and mental health recovery. Competitive employment increases social inclusion and participation, earned wages and economic self-dependency. It promotes using one’s talents, making a regular contribution to the community, and enhancing overall well-being. When medical, therapeutic and rehabilitation professionals support individuals in considering and planning for employment, and work together to make employment successful, support strategies are more likely to be successful.

Given the fragmentation of the service delivery system for individuals with disabilities, it is especially important to bring together professionals from an array of services to emphasize a focus on employment and to share promising practices across systems. A collaborative, integrated model of employment, similar to Evidence-based Practices of Supported Employment using the Individual Placement and Support model,⁸ provides direction on assembling a team of professionals working together to support successful employment outcomes. Although this model was developed for individuals with serious mental illnesses, it has implications for other individuals with disabilities. Other disability groups would benefit from access to an array of professionals to comprehensively address the unique challenges of the individual's disabling condition who would work as a team toward developing supports and strategies to make competitive employment successful.

Listening session participants emphasized the need to align public policies to support expectations about employment. If employment is an expected outcome for publically funded services, individuals with disabilities and their families could still choose to “opt out” of competitive employment or other employment, but clear changes in policy emphasis would shift the dynamic embedded in the current system which requires individuals and families to “opt into” employment, in the face of significant pressure to choose a system of segregated services or not to work at all.

Policy changes supporting expectations about employment can facilitate change. The Extended Employment (EE) Program administered by Vocational Rehabilitation Services (VRS) provides an example of public funding that was shifted to support community-based employment outcomes. The EE Program provides ongoing employment supports to community rehabilitation programs (CRPs) serving Minnesotans with disabilities. In 1986, about 88% of EE funding was directed toward facility-based employment with only about 12% going to community-based employment. Through rule changes (in 1987) and refocusing of strategies, the EE Program shifted over time to primarily support community-based employment. By 2009, about 80% of EE funding was directed toward community-based employment and 20% to facility-based employment.

Conduct statewide public education about the economic benefits of competitive employment to Minnesotans with disabilities and the resources available to provide individualized guidance about maximizing earnings without jeopardizing the safety net of sustainable health care and independent living assistance. Any statewide goal to increase the competitive employment participation of Minnesotans with disabilities will not be successful without first addressing and removing the widespread fear of losing disability cash assistance and health care benefits. Listening session participants emphasized how fear of losing public benefits impacts the expectation of work. Many Minnesotans with disabilities do not enter the

⁸ For more information see <http://mentalhealth.samhsa.gov/cmhs/CommunitySupport/toolkits/employment/default.aspx> .

workforce at all due to these fears. Many others choose to work but work fewer hours and earn less than they could to avoid jeopardizing their benefits. Minnesotans with disabilities can benefit from a number of work incentive programs at the state and federal level to maximize their earnings; however, the complexity of the various benefits and work incentives makes it important to access sound advice about options available to a specific individual.⁹

Given the many resources available to encourage Minnesotans with disabilities to work, Minnesota needs to launch a statewide effort to offer education and technical support to consumers and family members and to correct stubbornly held misconceptions and misunderstandings associated with receiving disability benefits. Also, it is critical to re-educate a wide range of professionals who support them about the economic and other benefits of going to work.

Incorporate customized employment strategies¹⁰ as an alternative to traditional job development approaches to address the many obstacles encountered by jobseekers with disabilities. Listening session participants emphasized the limitations of traditional approaches of job development to secure jobs for many individuals with disabilities. The workforce participation rate of 20.1% for individuals with disabilities compared to 69.5% for individuals without disabilities reported by ODEP is an additional indicator that widely accepted approaches are successful for only a small percentage of individuals with disabilities. Listening session participants identified a number of obstacles experienced by jobseekers with disabilities when using traditional job development approaches including:

- Online application procedures that are often difficult to complete and tend to screen out jobseekers with disabilities.
- Competing within a large pool of other applicants who may have more work experience to offer.
- Limitations of a job application or resume to adequately inform an employer about strengths and abilities of a job candidate and potential concerns the company may have about accommodations and increased business costs (often related to misconceptions about disabilities).
- Requirements such as a driver's license for jobs which do not appear to have driving as an essential requirement, effectively screening out applicants who may be able to address minimal transportation requirements through accommodations.
- Low expectations about the abilities of a jobseeker with a disability resulting in underemployment with placement in entry-level jobs with limited advancement potential

⁹ 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).

¹⁰ For more information on CE visit

www.dol.gov/odep/categories/workforce/CustomizedEmployment/what/index.htm.

which can negatively impact long-term retention by placing the individual in a job that does not match their interests or abilities.

Practices utilized in supported employment and further refined in customized employment can result in better employment outcomes **even for individuals who do not require ongoing supports**.

Supported employment revolutionized expectations about the abilities of even individuals with very significant disabilities to work in the community, and opened up employment opportunities for people who had previously been considered “unemployable.” One of the key practices of supported employment was careful planning to develop a job that would match the unique interests, strengths and skills of an individual and maximize long-term success on the job. Prior to the introduction of supported employment, expectations about the potential for competitive employment was often based on a “deficits” focus, or the assumption that “deficits” need to be remediated prior to consideration of competitive employment. These attitudes and assumptions continue to block many individuals with disabilities from consideration of competitive employment.

A strengths-based approach to employment is a far more effective strategy for setting individual job goals and marketing the known skills and talents of a jobseeker. Challenges, rather than being remediated, can be minimized through finding or negotiating employment positions which capitalize on strengths and tailor employment to a unique individual. Supports and accommodations can then be developed to address any remaining challenges. Job development based on an individual’s strengths is also more likely to result in successful retention than a job in which the individual is underemployed.

Customized employment places even greater emphasis than supported employment on planning through the development of a vocational profile to identify the unique interests, strengths, and skills of the individual jobseeker and to address the complex issues that can impede successful employment. In customized employment, the vocational profile is further developed through informational interviews with employers to explore career interests at greater depth and to uncover potential non-traditional jobs that may not otherwise be considered. Although many organizations use person-centered planning, that planning process often lacks the depth of customized employment. Without an intensive process that goes beyond the superficial identification of potential job categories and placing an individual into easily identified jobs in the labor market, a competitive job is unlikely to be successful over time. Customized employment practices can identify potential jobs beyond those advertised, to jobs available through negotiation with an employer to ensure a strong relationship between the needs of the business and the strengths of the employee. Customized employment can also include jobs developed through job carving and self-employment strategies.

Customized employment emphasizes the use of social networks or social capital to develop a relationship with employers and often targets small businesses that may have more flexibility in creating a customized job.

In summary, customized employment addresses many of the challenges described above by listening session participants and can be more successful than traditional approaches in securing and retaining employment through its practices of:

- A strengths-based, non-comparative approach to job development, thereby preventing underemployment.
- Greater depth in identifying interests, skills and the ideal conditions of employment.
- Going beyond advertised jobs in which a jobseeker is competing with many other candidates in a process designed to “screen out” applicants.
- Utilizing social capital to gain direct access to employers through personal connections.
- Direct contact with employers which provides the opportunity for an employer to better understand the jobseeker’s interests and skills and contribute business ideas to address concerns related to the individual’s disability.
- Targeting small businesses that create more jobs than big business and often offer more flexibility in hiring and customizing jobs or restructuring tasks to suit the needs of a worker.

Customized employment helps individuals, family members, service providers and employers to “think outside the box” and raise expectations in developing a job for a unique individual. Since “the box” has yielded poor employment outcomes, an “out of the box” approach bypassing many of the challenges encountered by jobseekers with disabilities can be a better approach for job development and job retention. In other words, customized and strengths-based employment changes what it means to be “qualified” to work in the competitive labor force.¹¹

Ensure jobseekers with disabilities have access to professionals with expertise about addressing the challenges of their particular disability and ensure that expertise is accessible throughout Minnesota. Although each individual jobseeker is unique, listening session participants from the eight disability groups emphasized that there are conditions and challenges related to a specific disability that need to be taken into consideration when serving jobseekers. Some groups emphasized the need to understand the dynamics of acquiring a disability and working through the adjustments that are commonly encountered. Others emphasized unique social and learning characteristics that can lead to incorrect assumptions about what may be construed as personality characteristics rather than as part of the disability. Some groups discussed the need for training of coworkers and employers to understand the importance of simple-to-provide accommodations an individual might need in the workplace.

¹¹ The Minnesota Employment Training and Technical Assistance Center (MNTAT) provides training on customized employment. Visit its website at www.mntat.org.

Others shared the impact a disability affecting communication could have on an array of skills and life experiences that can impact soft skills and advancement opportunities in particular.

Many listening session groups articulated the scarcity of expertise in particular disabling conditions even in the metropolitan area and the need for training and technical assistance to increase the pool of disability experts. It is even more unlikely, however, to find experts in the local communities of the many individuals with disabilities who reside in Greater Minnesota. In many areas of the state, content knowledge and expertise in specific disabilities or service practices may be completely lacking. Technology is increasingly being utilized to make specialists available in Greater Minnesota in areas such as telemedicine. Specialists in specific disabilities can also utilize technology to consult with teams remotely to lend their expertise to developing individualized job development and job retention strategies to improve employment outcomes for individuals throughout the state.

Ensure transition-aged youth and adults with disabilities have access to postsecondary education, vocational training, and other career development opportunities to support their current and future job goals. Postsecondary training and education is critical to obtaining the kinds of jobs that are increasingly in high demand in a dynamic, every changing workforce. Without postsecondary education or other vocational technical training, the career choices and earning potential for individuals with disabilities can be significantly restricted. 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. Postsecondary education and training is critical to ensure individuals with disabilities are not underemployed and have advancement opportunities throughout their careers.

Many individuals with disabilities are not likely to be successful in postsecondary education without support services and accommodations. Inclusive postsecondary education requires making improvements and adaptations so unique learners can participate. Practices such as contextualized learning on the job, mentoring, internships, apprenticeships, customized training opportunities and other “hands-on” job training models can make postsecondary education more accessible to individuals with disabilities and provide opportunities to develop and practice the skills and competencies needed to obtain competitive employment. Postsecondary education and training are also important to individuals who acquire a disability and may not be able to return to their previous career or who may need to change careers as the effects of their disabling condition improve or worsen.

Minnesotans with disabilities, like all Minnesotans, will benefit from accessible postsecondary education and career development training. This might include employment initiatives within specific industries as well as customized employment in emerging economies. Postsecondary education should be responsive to the needs of business leaders and engage employers in partnerships to promote promising strategies and ensure jobseekers with disabilities have the necessary skills for high demand occupations. Models need to be developed that allow the

necessary support to be in place in postsecondary education and career training for individuals with even the most significant disabilities. Such models may include fundamentally re-thinking the role of disability support services.

Provide access to employment supports targeting job retention through a “rapid response service” for individuals who are not receiving ongoing supports or supported employment services. For some individuals with disabilities, obtaining a job can be easier than retaining it. Cycling through jobs, with significant periods of unemployment in between, is an all too common experience. Unfortunately, for many individuals the gateway to eligibility and access to critical employment services is job loss. This is an impractical and costly way to assist individuals who are marginally employed and struggling to maintain their goals of independence and self-support. Job loss often exacerbates a downward spiral from independence to greater levels of dependence, requiring additional supports and services before returning to job development. Listening session participants stressed the importance of supporting and maintaining existing relationships with employers who are amenable to accessing job supports or accommodations to retain an employee rather than starting over and building relationships with new employers who have no investment in the individual.

Concerns and problematic situations can occur in the workplace for all workers, but the need to address workforce and personnel changes can be particularly challenging for employees with disabilities. 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. Currently there is no systematic crisis intervention support system available to employers and employees who are not actively receiving supported employment services. A “rapid response system” could be effective in maintaining employment, and in many instances, jobs could be retained through 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 disabilities would be able to access the timely supports they need to stabilize employment or, when necessary, to quickly redirect individuals to jobs better suited to their skills, needs, and changing circumstances. In addition, “post-employment services” from Vocational Rehabilitation Services (VRS) could offer a “crisis intervention” mechanism for employed individuals who have received VRS services previously, if re-designed with new capacities to respond quickly to employer or employee requests.

A rapid response system could result in significant cost savings to employers by reducing employee turnover, avoiding costs associated with recruiting and training new employees, and lowering associated expenses for unemployment insurance. Also, the public will realize cost-savings by supporting employed individuals to stay in the workforce and reducing the need to return to more expensive, long-term disability and public assistance programs or to more intensive job development services.

Develop a consolidated accommodations fund accessible to individuals with disabilities and employers to promote employment, retention and career advancement. Assistive devices and other accommodations can be critical to improving employment outcomes for many individuals with disabilities. By placing responsibility for “reasonable accommodations” on employers, the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) may inadvertently serve as deterrent to job acquisition for individuals needing accommodations. Most accommodations are inexpensive and simple to provide. Nevertheless, employers may be reluctant to hire an individual who needs accommodations due to fear about initial and future costs to the business. Placing responsibility for “reasonable” accommodations on employers may also result in only minimal accommodations being provided to employees, adversely affecting their job performance.

Listening session participants described awkward negotiations about paying for accommodations between employers and state vocational rehabilitation programs in which the individual felt “caught in the middle” as the parties negotiated around them. The availability of a consolidated fund for job accommodations accessible by individuals and employers would ensure access to funding resources for the accommodations needed to achieve job success. A consolidated fund that could be accessed by individuals, in addition to employers, for technology, interpreters or other accommodations would empower individuals by providing them with the means to secure accommodations as an investment in their employment success. Consolidated funding for accommodations would also support retention as technology and other needs may change over time due to changes in the workplace or in a disabling condition. Consolidated funding for accommodations could also support career advancement opportunities which may require different or additional accommodations. In Minnesota, the Governor’s Workforce Development Committee (GWDC) recently recommended a centralized accommodations fund for state agencies to promote the hiring of individuals with disabilities within state government.¹² President Obama also recently signed an Executive Order creating a centralized fund for accommodations to promote hiring more individuals with disabilities within the federal government.¹³

Support Minnesotans with disabilities in developing self-advocacy and self-determination skills to ensure the greatest possible control over their services and supports. Self-advocacy and self-determination are recognized as essential to improving quality of life outcomes and ensuring individuals with disabilities exercise choice and control in their lives. Minnesota has a tradition of strong disability advocacy organizations which support individuals and their families in developing self-advocacy and self-determination skills. Peer-to-peer advocacy is important to developing a culture in which individuals with disabilities choose employment.

¹² The report can be accessed at http://www.gwdc.org/policy_advisory/All_Hands_on_Deck_2011.pdf

¹³ Newell, Elizabeth. (July 27, 2010). Obama Orders Agencies to Increase Employment of Disabled Workers. *Government Executive*. Retrieved from: <http://www.govexec.com/dailyfed/0710/072710e1.htm>

Individuals with disabilities should not be merely passive “recipients” of services. Individuals (and where appropriate, their families) should play a greater role in directing their own supports and services. The complexity and fragmentation of current service delivery systems make it difficult for individuals and families to assume that role. Funding streams are primarily controlled by professionals rather than individuals and families, and tend to support system-centered goals rather than person-centered results. The Consumer Directed Community Supports Program (CDCS) is an option for individuals receiving waived services to have greater control over their supports and services. However, a change in the budget methodology used by the Department of Human Services has resulted in many consumers leaving CDCS due to insufficient resources.¹⁴

Employment is sometimes overlooked as a viable pathway to increasing the range of choices and opportunities available to individuals with disabilities. When individuals with disabilities control and direct their economic resources, they are no longer limited to publicly funded options such as having to live in a particular location due to the need to secure Section 8 housing.

Many individuals with disabilities struggle with whether or not to disclose their disability and as a result, at times, may not have the supports and accommodations they need to be successfully employed. Disclosure of a disability and discussions with an employer about the need for accommodations can be a part of self-advocacy. Those discussions would be considerably easier if a consolidated accommodations fund were available to individuals and employers as recommended above.

Ensure self-employment services are an employment option for Minnesotans with disabilities. Self-employment is an option that has only recently been recognized as an employment option for individuals with disabilities. Self-employment as a career path is growing by 20% annually within the general population.¹⁵ Nationally, vocational rehabilitation programs have reported a small number of successful closures in self-employment – only 1.7% in 2007.¹⁶ States with more rural populations have taken the lead in supporting self-employment outcomes, and supported entrepreneurship can be an important option in areas with few jobs and limited transportation. In Minnesota, Vocational Rehabilitation Services is currently investing increased resources in policies and training to encourage self-employment outcomes.

One distinction of self-employment is that it is the only option under Social Security, Medicaid and Medicare for individuals with disabilities to accumulate wealth through the Property

¹⁴ For more information about CDCS visit: http://www.dhs.state.mn.us/main/idcplg?IdcService=GET_DYNAMIC_CONVERSION&dDocName=id_017635&RevisionSelectionMethod=LatestReleased, and Minnesota Consortium for Citizens with Disabilities. (2010). *Fact Sheet: Self-Directed Supports for Individual with Disabilities*. St. Paul: Minnesota Consortium for Citizens with Disabilities

¹⁵ Griffin, Cary, and David Hammis. *Making Self-employment Work for People with Disabilities*. Baltimore: Paul H. Brookes, 2003. Print.

¹⁶ Revell, Grant. *Self-Employment Q and A: An Analysis of Self-Employment Outcomes within the Vocational Rehabilitation System*. Publication. Richmond: Virginia Commonwealth University, 2009. Print.

Essential to Self-Employment (PESS), a work incentive which allows business-related resources to be excluded from personal resource limits.¹⁷ Plans to Achieve Self-Support (PASS), another work incentive available under Social Security, can provide a mechanism by which income can be set aside and used for self-employment. However, numerous attitudinal barriers to self-employment remain. Misconceptions about the feasibility of small business ownership for entrepreneurs with disabilities, and the feasibility of self-employment in support of individuals with complex disabilities and support needs, limit consideration of these options for many individuals.

Self-employment is not a suitable option for everyone. However, this opportunity can open up choices that might not be available through wage employment. Also, self-employment may provide excellent opportunities for individuals who have completed postsecondary education, but may not be a good fit for the demands of managerial or supervisory jobs. Self employment could provide a level of satisfaction that wage employment might not fulfill. Self employment needs to be more fully developed and explored to become an accessible and viable opportunity for individuals with disabilities, including those who have significant support needs.

Engage champions within the business community (and public sector) to create more employment opportunities for Minnesotans with disabilities. Listening session participants identified educating employers as important to doubling employment of Minnesotans with disabilities. Some groups emphasized using more public education campaigns and tax incentives as a means to influence employers to hire more individuals with disabilities. However, these strategies have had a limited impact on permanent change and improving the employment rate of jobseekers with disabilities.

Most companies employing workers with disabilities value their employees as contributing members of their labor force. Individuals with disabilities are indeed the best ambassadors to opening the marketplace to other jobseekers with disabilities. The Governor's Council on Developmental Disabilities and other state agencies conducted research that found that employers who employed individuals with disabilities were more open to hiring others than employers who did not have direct experience with workers with disabilities.¹⁸ Employers of individuals with disabilities are potential champions within the business community to influence other businesses through their network of business associates, customers and suppliers. Many listening session participants emphasized working directly with employers to engage their support through referrals and sharing their positive experiences in hiring and employing workers with disabilities with other businesses.

¹⁷ Griffin, Cary, and David Hammis. *Making Self-employment Work for People with Disabilities*. Baltimore: Paul H. Brookes, 2003. Print.

¹⁸ Market Response International. (2005) *Employer Focus Research*. The report can be accessed at http://www.mnddc.org/extra/customer-research/employer_survey_rpt.pdf

Clearly, building relationships with employers is critical to improving employment outcomes of individuals with disabilities. Employers may have concerns and misconceptions about increased costs for accommodations, worker's compensation, safety and other issues for individuals with disabilities that research has shown to be without basis. Employers, like the general public, often underestimate the abilities of jobseekers with disabilities or incorrectly assume that they cannot perform specific jobs due to their disability.

Employers need information about the wide range of skills of individuals with disabilities and the supports, accommodations, and technology available to ensure these job candidates are productive in the workplace. Individuals with disabilities, and professionals who support them, need to understand and meet the needs of employers by showing business leaders how they can contribute to their bottom line. It is important that employers are knowledgeable about the abilities of individuals with disabilities and also, as needed, how to access the technical support a company needs to recruit, hire, train, supervise, and support their employees. Customized employment emphasizes the importance of a relationship with an employer and negotiating a job which benefits both the worker and the company. Understanding and meeting the needs of employers is the means to building the support of the business community and engaging business leaders in a dialogue with other employers to promote and widen the employment of individuals with disabilities.

The public sector is also an important part of the labor force and, unfortunately, one in which few individuals with disabilities are employed. The Governor's Workforce Development Council recently recommended steps that the state government should take toward establishing the state as a model employer of individuals with disabilities. These recommendations included 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.¹⁹

Ensure that Minnesota's WorkForce Centers and the services they provide are accessible and usable by people with disabilities.²⁰ Listening session participants stressed the importance of accessible WorkForce Centers to Minnesotans with disabilities. For some individuals with disabilities, WorkForce Centers may be the only resource available to them because they are not eligible for Vocational Rehabilitation Services (VRS), especially as VRS is required to use an "order of selection" procedure further restricting the individuals they can serve. Other individuals with disabilities may choose not to work with VRS or other agencies, making WorkForce Centers one of the only public resources they rely on.

¹⁹ The report can be accessed at http://www.gwdc.org/policy_advisory/All_Hands_on_Deck_2011.pdf

²⁰ 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

The Governor's Workforce Development Council (GWDC) recently recommended making WorkForce Centers more accessible to improve employment outcomes for Minnesotans with disabilities.²¹ Included in the GWDC recommendation was the need to strengthen the WorkForce Center certification process, to utilize customer feedback to address problems, and to train Center staff to address the needs of its customers with disabilities. To address the accessibility needs of its users with disabilities, WorkForce Centers must be physically accessible, have modern technologies and service flexibility to ensure all customers, including users with sensory disabilities, can access all available services and information, and have interpreters available on a timely basis.

Increase funding for public transportation, including Metro Mobility and other specialized transportation options, to expand the areas served and the times transportation is available. For many individuals with disabilities, public transportation and specialized transportation are their only options for getting to a competitive job. As a result, the locations they can consider for employment are limited to those that are accessible through existing transportation systems. Geographic and schedule restrictions in the public system and Metro Mobility significantly limit the range of options. Reliance on Metro Mobility can also make timely arrivals and departures difficult due to the policy which allows Metro Mobility drivers a 30 minute "pick-up window" to arrive up to 30 minutes after the scheduled time. 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 citizens who rely on public transportation. Route expansion and travel training has been shown to reduce reliance on paratransit systems such as Metro Mobility, which is very costly on a per-trip basis, as compared to fixed route public transit. Consideration should be given to how to reduce reliance on paratransit in a way that will actually expand the transportation resources available to people with disabilities.

In Greater Minnesota transportation is even more limited. The Minnesota State Council on Disability and other organizations have sponsored community forums in Greater Minnesota bringing together stakeholders from the disability community and other groups reliant on public transportation to develop community solutions to transportation issues. The state has also recently completed the "Greater Minnesota Transit Investment Plan, January 2011" to report progress on improving public transportation in Greater Minnesota to the legislature.²²

Public transportation options need to improve, but other transportation solutions also are important. Individualized solutions, such as arranging transportation with co-workers, need to be

²¹ Governor's Workforce Development Council. (2010). *All Hands on Deck: Sixteen Ideas for Strengthening Minnesota's Workforce*. The report can be accessed at http://www.gwdc.org/policy_advisory/All_Hands_on_Deck_2011.pdf

²² To access the report, visit: <http://www.dot.state.mn.us/transit/reports/investmentplan/>

maximized to provide individuals with disabilities greater access to jobs in locations and at times not available through public transportation.

Additional Recommendations

The Minnesota Employment Policy Initiative has four additional recommendations to support improved employment outcomes based on issues raised by listening session participants. These recommendations were not selected by directly participants because they will not increase employment for Minnesotans with disabilities; however, the relevant issues were raised in the discussions of most groups. These recommendations are:

Develop comparable data across state agencies to determine the competitive employment rate of its citizens with disabilities. Groups discussed the difficulty of assessing employment for Minnesotans with disabilities. There is a significant amount of data available but it is not comparable. Each state agency collects data based on its own reporting requirements and definitions. A common data pool across agencies would make it possible to evaluate whether employment outcomes are improving. While each state agency has a responsibility to evaluate its own services, it also has a responsibility to contribute information on workforce participation of Minnesotans with disabilities as a whole. Needless to say, “doubling the employment rate of Minnesotans with disabilities” is not a measurable goal without universal policies and practices in defining employment, data collection procedures, and employment performance reporting practices.

Provide ongoing training and technical assistance to a variety of stakeholders to increase employment outcomes. Listening session participants identified an ongoing need for training and technical assistance, particularly to raise expectations of competitive employment outcomes for Minnesotans with disabilities. Individuals, families, educators, case managers, employment providers, state agencies and others often underestimate the abilities of individuals with disabilities. Greater access to examples of individuals, even with significant support needs, who work competitively, in addition to the individualized strategies that make their employment possible, raise expectations and provide the knowledge base for increasing employment outcomes. Listening session participants also emphasized the need for information to better understand specific disabling conditions and to make that expertise available statewide.

Develop measures that indicate the return on investment of employment of Minnesotans with disabilities. As discussed earlier, employment of Minnesotans with disabilities increases state revenues and can provide significant cost savings in many public benefit programs. During times of budget deficits and increased accountability, it is important to demonstrate the broader impact of employment on state resources and to make the case for investing in employment.

Maintain and publicize a centralized resource like the Disability Linkage Line (DLL) to assist Minnesotans in navigating available resources across disability groups. The disability

service delivery system supporting employment outcomes is fragmented and contains significant gaps. The resources available to an individual vary greatly based on the disabling condition(s) and other eligibility criteria. A resource like the DLL could be better utilized as a first step for individuals trying to identify the resources available to them. Specialists with links across systems could assess and then refer individuals with disabilities and those who support them to contacts that would be beneficial in improving employment outcomes. A system in which resource agencies were contacted directly by a DLL specialist and, in turn, contacted the individual(s) directly would be perceived as even more responsive.

Call to Action/Next Steps

The work of the Minnesota Employment Policy Initiative will continue under the sponsorship of Minnesota APSE and the Minnesota Employment First Coalition. MEPI will work with organizations which hosted listening sessions and others to refine and implement recommendations specific to the nine policy briefs, especially the recommendation to increase expectations about employment. However, the consensus recommendations across disability groups also indicate a common foundation for an alliance across groups. Such an alliance can develop an action plan to champion the expectation that Minnesotans with disabilities will have the opportunity to work competitively. This consensus provides a strong foundation for collaborative action towards eroding the silos between disability groups.

Representatives from the organizations which hosted listening sessions will reconvene during September of 2011. They will strategize on addressing the policy implications of 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. MEPI and its partners will address the role of public policy in improving employment outcomes and also build grassroots support among individuals with disabilities and those who support them to make competitive employment an outcome that can be achieved by any Minnesotan with a disability who chooses to work.

MEPI, in partnership with the Minnesota Employment Training and Technical Assistance Center (MNTAT), will also collaborate on sponsoring the Third Annual Disability and Employment Conference in October of 2011. MEPI and MNTAT sponsored Disability and Employment Conferences in 2009 and 2010. The conferences were attended by over 300 participants and included individuals with disabilities, family members, disability advocacy organizations, educators, local and state government agencies, employment services providers and others. The conferences utilize an interactive format to maximize active participation toward action steps to improve employment outcomes.²³

²³ The proceedings from the 2009 conference can be accessed at <http://www.mn-epi.org/docs/Final2009ConferenceProceedings.pdf>

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 was funded in 2009 and 2010 as an initiative of Pathways to Employment (PTE), Minnesota’s Medicaid Infrastructure Grant.²⁴

The Minnesota Employment Policy Initiative is working across disability groups to close the gap in workforce participation between Minnesotans with and without disabilities 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.²⁵ The initiative works with numerous stakeholders to align policies, services and practices to ensure that 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.

MEPI policy briefs on specific disability groups and topics and other reports are available at the MEPI website, www.mn-epi.org.

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²⁴ To learn more about PTE visit www.positivelyminnesota.com/pte.

²⁵ For the APSE website, visit www.apse.org. For the Minnesota APSE website, visit www.mnapse.org.

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Appendix A

Summary of Consensus Recommendations Across Listening Session Groups

Recommendations on Transition-Aged Adults and Families

- **Ensure families have expectations of employment for their children with disabilities.**
- **Utilize social connections, or social capital, during job development to achieve better employment outcomes and to empower families during transition.**
- **Ensure students with disabilities have real jobs for real pay while they are still attending school.**
- **Ensure young adults with disabilities graduate directly and seamlessly into competitive jobs or postsecondary education.**
- **Redesign transition services for young adults aged 18-21 to produce better employment and postsecondary education outcomes through interagency collaboration.**

Recommendations to Double Employment

- **Ensure that competitive employment is an expectation of Minnesotans with disabilities and those who support them.**
- **Conduct statewide public education about the economic benefits of competitive employment to Minnesotans with disabilities and the resources available to provide individualized guidance about maximizing earnings without jeopardizing the safety net of sustainable health care and independent living assistance.**
- **Incorporate customized employment strategies as an alternative to traditional job development approaches to address the many obstacles encountered by jobseekers with disabilities.**
- **Ensure jobseekers with disabilities have access to professionals with expertise about addressing the challenges of their particular disability and ensure that expertise is accessible throughout Minnesota.**

- **Ensure transition-aged youth and adults with disabilities have access to postsecondary education, vocational training, and other career development opportunities to support their current and future job goals.**
- **Provide access to employment supports targeting job retention through a “rapid response service” for individuals who are not receiving ongoing supports or supported employment services.**
- **Develop a consolidated accommodations fund accessible to individuals with disabilities and employers to promote employment, retention and career advancement.**
- **Support Minnesotans with disabilities in developing self-advocacy and self-determination skills to ensure the greatest possible control over their services and supports.**
- **Ensure self-employment services are an employment option for Minnesotans with disabilities.**
- **Engage champions within the business community (and public sector) to create more employment opportunities for Minnesotans with disabilities.**
- **Ensure that Minnesota’s WorkForce Centers and the services they provide are accessible and usable by people with disabilities.**
- **Increase funding for public transportation, including Metro Mobility and other specialized transportation options, to expand the areas served and the times transportation is available.**

Additional Recommendations

- **Develop comparable data across state agencies to determine the competitive employment rate of its citizens with disabilities.**
- **Provide ongoing training and technical assistance to a variety of stakeholders to increase employment outcomes.**
- **Develop measures that indicate the return on investment of employment of Minnesotans with disabilities.**
- **Maintain and publicize a centralized resource like the Disability Linkage Line (DLL) to assist Minnesotans in navigating available resources across disability groups.**

Appendix B

Listening Session Recommendations from Eight Disability Groups²⁶

Recommendations from the Listening Session on Brain Injury

- Ensure that work is an expectation of Minnesotans with brain injury and those who support them.
- Develop measures illustrating the “big picture” by identifying cost savings and the return on investment of Minnesotans with brain injury who work.
- Provide individualized employment services and supports specific to individuals with brain injury.
- Develop self-employment services as an employment option for Minnesotans with brain injury.
- Develop a broader range of ongoing supports available to Minnesotans with brain injury responsive to the changing patterns of their needs over time.
- Assist Minnesotans with brain injury in developing self-management skills to ensure the greatest possible control over their services and supports.
- Secure a broadening range of champions within the business community to create more employment opportunities for Minnesotans with brain injury.
- Target small businesses in Minnesota to increase employment of Minnesotans with brain injury.
- Address concerns about the safety net of benefits available to Minnesotans with brain injury and the perception that employment could negatively impact that safety net.
- Explore the Evidenced-Based Practice of Supported Employment - Individualized Placement and Support model (EBP-SE) for individuals with brain injury.

Recommendations from the Listening Session on Mental Illnesses

- Conduct statewide public education about the economic benefits of competitive employment to Minnesotans with a mental illness and the resources available to provide individualized guidance about maximizing earnings without jeopardizing the safety net of sustainable health care and independent living assistance.
- Identify competitive employment as a preferred outcome of community mental health treatment in public policy.
- Implement statewide public education promoting the value of competitive employment to recovery from a mental illness.
- Increase accessibility to workforce development and supported employment for unserved and underserved populations through assertive outreach and education.
- Invest in creative workforce, business, and comprehensive health care strategies to insure employees with a mental illness and their employers have timely access to crisis intervention and technical assistance to maintain healthy work environments and maximize employment retention.
- Address and minimize known barriers affecting youth and young adults with a mental illness during their transition from school to careers.
- Invest in Evidence-Based Practices of Supported Employment using the Individual Placement and Support model.

²⁶ To access each complete policy brief visit www.mn-epi.org

- **Develop self-employment services as an employment option for Minnesotans with a mental illness.**
- **Support Minnesotans with a mental illness in developing self-management skills to ensure the greatest possible control over their services and supports.**

Recommendations from Listening Session on DeafBlindness

- **Improve transportation services available during the job seeking process and when a job is secured.**
- **Expand the pool of employment service providers who have expertise in DeafBlindness.**
- **Eliminate having a driver’s license as a job requirement when driving is not an essential requirement of the job and accommodations could be provided.**
- **Empower individuals who are DeafBlind with access to funds to purchase the assistive technology they need to obtain and retain employment through a consolidated accommodations fund.**
- **Explore customized employment as an alternative to traditional job placement approaches to address the many obstacles encountered by jobseekers who are DeafBlind.**

Recommendations from the Listening Session on Blindness

- **Increase the rate of blind people receiving “Adjustment to Blindness” training to maximize independence and self-determination with a heavy emphasis on skills needed for success in a job.**
- **Provide universal access to all job-related websites and software by requiring non-visual access to Minnesotans who are blind.**
- **Ensure workforce centers are as accessible to blind Minnesotans as they are to other users.**
- **Ensure Minnesotans who are blind have access to the technology they need to obtain and retain employment.**
- **Ensure transition-aged students with disabilities develop a work history through part-time employment and internships during high school and college.**
- **Ensure State Services for the Blind (SSB) counselors and service providers have high expectations about the capabilities of blind people and have the knowledge base to explore the wide array of available jobs during the job development process.**
- **Launch a public education plan targeted toward the unprecedented education of employers about the capabilities of blind people.**
- **Expand self-employment services for blind Minnesotans beyond food and vending services.**
- **Eliminate having a driver’s license as a job requirement when driving is not an essential requirement of the job and accommodations could be provided.**
- **Increase funding for public transportation.**

Recommendations from the Listening Session on Physical Disabilities

- **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.
- 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.

Recommendations from the Listening Session on Autism Spectrum Disorder

- Ensure that public policies support employment as an outcome for individuals with ASD.
- Address concerns about jeopardizing the safety net of benefits through employment.
- Support job retention by developing employment services responsive to situations which occur on-the-job which could result in job loss.
- Increase champions within the business community who can develop and promote employment opportunities for individuals with ASD.
- Develop employment support resources outside the metropolitan area to provide employment services to individuals with ASD.
- Develop training opportunities to address career development for individuals with ASD.
- Expand the number of employment support specialists with expertise in job development and job retention for individuals with ASD.
- Ensure that young adults with ASD graduate into jobs upon completion of their education.
- Utilize a strengths-based approach to job development for individuals with ASD to ensure a job match which utilizes their abilities.

Recommendations from the Listening Session on Intellectual and Development Disabilities

- Promote the expectation that individuals with ID/DD will work competitively.
- Address concerns about the safety net of benefits available to Minnesotans with ID/DD and the perception that employment will negatively impact that safety net.
- Develop services and supports which are tailored to the individual.
- Empower individuals with ID/DD and their families to assume the greatest possible control over their services and supports.
- Ensure young adults with ID/DD graduate directly into competitive jobs or postsecondary education.
- Increase postsecondary educational opportunities for individuals with ID/DD.
- Develop self-employment services as an employment option for Minnesotans with ID/DD.

- **Build better partnerships with residential providers to expand competitive employment opportunities.**
- **Increase champions within the business community to create more employment opportunities for Minnesotans with ID/DD.**

Recommendations from the Listening Session on Deaf and Hard of Hearing

- **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.**
- **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 and their 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.²⁷**

²⁷ The report can be accessed at http://www.gwdc.org/policy_advisory/All_Hands_on_Deck_2011.pdf

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