

2010

Policy Brief on Employment of Minnesotans Who Are DeafBlind

Minnesota Employment Policy Initiative

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

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

Minnesota Employment Policy Initiative
2010



POLICY BRIEF ON EMPLOYMENT OF MINNESOTANS WHO ARE DEAFBLIND

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

Together, MEPI and its partners undertake wide-ranging activities to bring together stakeholders to shape and advance public policy. They are convening "listening sessions" to be used as the basis for policy briefs identifying recommendations that will improve competitive employment outcomes for Minnesotans with disabilities around the core question, "**What will it take to double employment of Minnesotans with disabilities by 2015?**"

Executive Summary

The listening session on employment and individuals who are DeafBlind was conducted on February 3, 2010 and hosted by State Services for the Blind (SSB). Participants were recommended by the advisory committee on DeafBlindness. Seven individuals who are DeafBlind identified strategies to increase employment rates for individuals who are DeafBlind. To get the perspective of vocational rehabilitation counselors and employment services providers who were not part of the listening session group, MEPI scheduled two additional meetings. One was with three SSB counselors who serve individuals who are DeafBlind and the other with the leadership team of Employment Endeavors, the organization identified by listening session participants as specializing in employment services to individuals who are DeafBlind. The following recommendations were developed from the themes generated by the listening session participants, the SSB counselors and individuals from Employment Endeavors:

- **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 job seekers who are DeafBlind.**

Although these recommendations were developed to address increased employment of Minnesotans who are DeafBlind, many of them would also apply to individuals with other disabilities. Throughout 2010, the Minnesota Employment Policy Initiative will be conducting additional listening sessions with other groups similar to the one on DeafBlindness. MEPI is also working with community action teams (CATs) to identify specific policy issues which support or impede these CATs as they develop employment for individuals throughout the state experiencing a range of disabilities.

The information gathered through the listening sessions and the employment development efforts of the CATs will be analyzed to develop a summary of common themes. Representatives from the various listening session groups will then be reconvened to strategize on addressing the policy implications in improving employment outcomes and developing a more specific set of recommendations for action to move toward doubling the employment rate of Minnesotans with disabilities by 2015.

Background on DeafBlindness

DeafBlindness is a highly variable condition marked by a combination of partial to total vision and hearing loss.¹ Each individual is unique based on the degree to which their vision and hearing are affected. Some individuals may have stronger visual skills, others stronger hearing skills. In addition, people who are DeafBlind may experience worsening deficits in their vision and hearing over time. As summarized in Table 1, the onset of DeafBlindness can occur for a variety of reasons.

Often, people are born with dual sensory disabilities; however, DeafBlindness can also be acquired later in life. Nearly half of all cases of DeafBlindness are a result of Usher Syndrome, a genetic condition that results in hearing loss at birth and progressive vision loss during youth and adulthood. Because vision loss can occur in adulthood, individuals with Usher Syndrome may have more difficulty adjusting to their vision loss than young people who learn to develop adaptive skills at an earlier age. Learning Braille, for example, is more challenging for adults than for children. DeafBlindness can also result from an accident, illness, or can be caused by a combination of conditions such as cataracts and auditory nerve damage.² It is also frequently associated with additional disabilities, such as Down Syndrome, CHARGE Syndrome, and head injury.³

¹ American Association of the Deaf-Blind. (2009, February 11). *Frequently Asked Questions about Deaf-Blindness*. Retrieved April 14, 2010, from American Association of the Deaf-Blind:

http://aadb.org/FAQ/faq_DeafBlindness.html#cause.

² Ingraham, C. (2007). *Transition planning for students who are deafblind*. Knoxville, TN: PEPNet-South. American Association of the Deaf-Blind. (2009, February 11).

³ American Association of the Deaf-Blind. (2009, February 11).

The CHARGE Syndrome Foundation. (2010). *About CHARGE*. Retrieved April 14, 2010, from The CHARGE Syndrome Foundation: <http://www.chargesyndrome.org/about-charge.asp>.

National Consortium on Deaf-Blindness. (2010). *Overview on Deaf-Blindness*. Retrieved April 14, 2010, from National Consortium on Deaf-Blindness: <http://www.nationaldb.org/NCDBProducts.php?prodID=38>.

Table 1: Types of DeafBlindness and Etiology

Type of DeafBlindness	Common Etiology
Congenital DeafBlindness	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> · Premature birth · CHARGE Syndrome · Congenital Rubella Syndrome · CMV
Congenital deafness and acquired blindness	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> · Usher Syndrome · Heredity · Alstrom Syndrome · Alport Syndrome · Trauma, accident, and illness · Advanced age
Congenital blindness and acquired deafness	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> · Trauma, accident, and illness · Heredity · Medical complications · Advanced age
Acquired deafness and blindness	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> · Trauma, accident, and illness · Heredity · Medical complications · Advanced age · Optic nerve atrophy

Adapted from Ingraham, 2007

It is widely recognized that DeafBlindness is an underreported disability and often those with additional disabilities or other primary disabilities are not identified as being DeafBlind, making reliable estimates challenging. In addition, there are different and sometimes conflicting definitions of DeafBlindness depending on the service system from which a person is receiving supports.⁴ Despite these definitional and data collection challenges, the most recent self-reported National Health Interview Survey suggests that between 1.3 and 3.7% of the working age adult population (18 to 64 years) in the United States is DeafBlind, a prevalence significantly smaller than that of vision loss (between 4.5 and 7.6%) and hearing loss (between 6.8 and 15.6%) alone.⁵

Deaf and Hard of Hearing Services (DHHS) within the Department of Human Services estimated in its 2002 DeafBlind Services Study that there are 718 children and adults who are DeafBlind in Minnesota. Within this group, 498 were estimated to be 21 years or older.⁶ In 2009, the MN

⁴ Mueller, E. (2006). *Deaf-blind child counts: Issues and challenges*. Alexandria, VA: Project Forum at NASDSE. Ingraham, C. (2007).

Gallaudet University. (2009, May). *FAQ: Deaf-Blind in the U.S.* Retrieved April 14, 2010, from Gallaudet University: [http://library.gallaudet.edu/Library/Deaf_Research_Help/Frequently_Asked_Questions_\(FAQs\)/Statistics_on_Deafness/Deaf-Blind_in_the_US.html](http://library.gallaudet.edu/Library/Deaf_Research_Help/Frequently_Asked_Questions_(FAQs)/Statistics_on_Deafness/Deaf-Blind_in_the_US.html).

⁵ Caban, Lee, Gomez-Marin, Lam, & Zheng. (2005). Prevalence of concurrent hearing and visual impairment in US adults: The National Health Interview Survey, 1997-2002. *American Journal of Public Health*, 1940-1942.

⁶ MN Department of Human Services. (February 2002). *DeafBlind services study: effective and efficient use of state appropriations and providing seamless service delivery*. St. Paul, MN: Deaf and Hard of Hearing Services Division.

Deafblind Technical Assistance Project using census data on DeafBlind youth (aged birth to 21) identified the following information about Minnesota's DeafBlind community:

- 25% of those who are DeafBlind are minorities.
- Over half (54%) of DeafBlind citizens live outside the Twin Cities metro area in Greater Minnesota.
- 30% of the group had a primary diagnosis of DeafBlindness, with 25% diagnosed with severe multiple disabilities and 18% with developmental cognitive disabilities or delays.⁷

Though it is widely accepted that people who are DeafBlind face high unemployment and underemployment, there is limited research data to verify that assumption.⁸ One study, *The National Transition Follow-up Study of Youth Identified as Deafblind*, does provide employment information about the group. The study targeted young adults who had exited high school 18 months prior to surveying transition outcomes and found:

- 82% were unemployed.
- 14% were employed part-time and 2% were employed full-time.
- 32% did not receive vocational programming to prepare them for work in the community.
- Only 8% received vocational programming in competitive or supported employment.⁹

DeafBlindness is not the only disabling condition most individuals experience. Many individuals also have mobility and orientation challenges with nearly half unable to walk independently due to related sensory disabilities and co-occurring disabilities.¹⁰ Thus, many individuals require mobility support and orientation assistance in identifying appropriate and safe routes of travel and require specialized transportation for employment and other activities.¹¹ Individuals who are DeafBlind also sometimes utilize service animals which would need to be accommodated in the workplace.

Due to the nature of dual sensory disability, communication becomes a significant challenge for people who are DeafBlind with many individuals having unique patterns of communication. Communication with an individual who is DeafBlind can require knowledge of visual and tactile American Sign Language, in addition to alternative communication methods such as print-on-

⁷ Author. (2009). *MN deafblind census facts as of December 1, 2008*. St. Anthony, MN: MN DeafBlind Technical Assistance Project.

⁸ Faulkner, Harmon, Johnson, Knopf, Latz, Parnes, et al. (2004). *Strategies for community rehabilitation programs to serve consumers who are deaf, hard of hearing, late deafened or deafblind*. Saint Paul, MN: Midwest Center for Postsecondary Outreach.

Petroff, J. (2001). *National transition follow-up study of youth identified as deafblind: Parent perspective*. Manmouth, OR: The National Technical Assistance Consortium for Children and Young Adults Who are Deaf-Blind.

⁹ Petroff, J. (2001).

¹⁰ Ingraham, C. (2007).

Petroff, J. (2001).

¹¹ Faulkner, Harmon, Johnson, Knopf, Latz, Parnes, et al. (2004).

palm.¹² Communication is further complicated by the fact that many individuals who are DeafBlind do not communicate using those formalized methods. Instead, for some individuals the primary mode of communication can be informal communication systems, such as using gestures, vocalizations, facial expressions, and behaviors to communicate.¹³

Assistive technology is continually improving to facilitate better communication, community access, and workplace independence; however accessing that technology remains a major challenge.¹⁴ A recent report of the Federal Communications Commission (FCC) indicated that only 42% of people with disabilities have internet access.¹⁵ That percentage mostly likely is much lower for individuals who are DeafBlind. Legislation and advocacy efforts are underway to promote better access to technology. Congress recently passed the “Equal Access to the 21st Century Communications and Video Accessibility Act” described as a technological addendum to the Americans with Disabilities Act. Also, the Coalition of Organizations for Accessible Technology (COAT) is advocating use of the Universal Service Fund for purchases of specialized telecommunications equipment for individuals who are DeafBlind. To date, the fund has not been used to allow individuals to purchase their own equipment to meet their unique telecommunications needs. Proposed legislation may improve some forms of access but it is unclear how much it will impact employment outcomes of individuals who are DeafBlind and other disability groups.

There are numerous assistive devices from which individuals can benefit including closed circuit television, refreshable Braille displays, screen Braille communicators, Braille note takers, computers, global positioning systems, and others.¹⁶ However, many people who are DeafBlind do not utilize assistive technology because they do not have access to the funds necessary to purchase it and because they are not trained to use it. Instead, they often rely on interpreter services and, due to the unique nature of a dual sensory disability, are often dependent on a highly specialized interpreter familiar with their unique needs. As a result, the employment outcomes experienced by people who are DeafBlind greatly depend on the quality and availability of these services.¹⁷

Community Rehabilitation Providers often lack the expertise necessary to achieve quality employment outcomes for individuals who are DeafBlind. Occupational Communication Specialists are trained to work with individuals who are deaf, DeafBlind and hard of hearing. They are usually interpreters who have acquired specialized training in employment.¹⁸ During the MEPI listening session, DeafBlind participants indicated their dissatisfaction with the

¹² Bourquin, Mascia, & Rusenski. (2002). Community-based services for deaf-blind consumers: A successful rehabilitation and vocational model. *Journal of Visual Impairment & Blindness*, 668-671.

¹³ Petroff, J. (2001).

¹⁴ Ingraham, C. (2007).

Faulkner, Harmon, Johnson, Knopf, Latz, Parnes, et al. (2004).

¹⁵ Romm, Tony. "Kerry to Chair Hearing on Improving Web Access for Deaf, Blind." *Hillicon Valley*. The Hill, 20 May 2010. Web. 15 June 2010.

¹⁶ Ingraham, C. (2007).

American Association of the Deaf-Blind. (2009, February 11).

Bourquin, Mascia, & Rusenski. (2002).

¹⁷ Faulkner, Harmon, Johnson, Knopf, Latz, Parnes, et al. (2004).

Ingraham, C. (2007).

¹⁸ For more information, you can go to <http://www.dhs.state.mn.us>.

employment services available to them through organizations specializing in either vision loss or hearing loss. They also indicated that one provider organization, formed recently by a group of interpreters with experience in DeafBlindness, has made a significant impact in the availability of employment services to meet their needs. Having a provider group with expertise in DeafBlindness is a significant positive change, but it also illustrates the scarcity of services available to individuals who are DeafBlind, especially given the number of DeafBlind individuals living in greater Minnesota and the difficulty of one provider group in serving the entire state.¹⁹

Rehabilitation and employment services for individuals who are DeafBlind have roots going back nearly a century, and in 1967, Congress authorized the National Center for Deaf-Blind Youths and Adults, later named the Helen Keller National Center for Deaf-Blind Youths and Adults (HKNC). The national center and its 10 regional offices continue “to provide individualized programming to people who are deaf-blind, to provide training and technical assistance to service providers and family members of people who are deaf-blind, and to develop new methodologies for working with people who are deaf-blind.”²⁰ However, many of these services require the individual to go to a training center to learn skills and provide more limited support within the individual’s home community.

Given the unique nature of DeafBlindness and the variability within the group, customized employment is emerging as a promising alternative to traditional and even supported employment services.²¹ In contrast to traditional supported employment, which responds to available jobs in the community and the labor market, customized employment identifies the strengths of the job seeker and then contacts employers directly through informational interviews and job development. In customized employment, the individual’s strengths, interests and skills are identified and employment is structured toward the design of an employment situation which utilizes those strengths building upon available natural and formal support systems. Given the many barriers to employment experienced by Minnesotans who are DeafBlind, customized employment appears to be a promising practice for individuals with their unique needs.

Minnesota has two vocational rehabilitation agencies serving individuals with disabilities - State Services for the Blind (SSB) for persons with visual disabilities and Vocational Rehabilitation Services (VRS) for persons with all other disabilities including those who are deaf or hard of hearing. Individuals who are DeafBlind could find themselves served initially by VRS and then, as their vision worsens, by SSB. The two agencies do have policies in place clarifying that

¹⁹ An additional provider group with experience in DeafBlindness may soon become available.

²⁰ Schroeder, F. (1995). Rehabilitation services for adults who are deaf-blind: Growth and commitment. *American Rehabilitation*, 21 (2).

²¹ Customized employment (CE) as defined by the Office of Disability and Employment Policy (ODEP) means “individualizing the employment relationship between employees and employers in ways that meet the needs of both. It is based on an individualized determination of the strengths, needs and interests of the person with a disability, and is also designed to meet the specific needs of the employer.” For more information on CE visit www.dol.gov/odep/categories/workforce/CustomizedEmployment/what/index.htm.

Greenfield, R. (2009). Customized employment: A strategy for developing inclusive employment opportunities. *Deaf-Blind Perspectives*.

Faulkner, Harmon, Johnson, Knopf, Latz, Parnes, et al. (2004). *Strategies for community rehabilitation programs to serve consumers who are deaf, hard of hearing, late deafened or deafblind*. Saint Paul, MN: Midwest Center for Postsecondary Outreach.

individuals with a condition likely to progress to legal blindness, such as Usher’s Syndrome, would be served by SSB from the beginning. However, some individuals without a clarifying diagnosis may find themselves needing to move from VRS to SSB.²²

The Commission on Deaf, DeafBlind and Hard of Hearing Minnesotans is a governor-appointed commission that advocates for equal opportunity for Minnesotans who are deaf, DeafBlind and hard of hearing. Employment has been a major focus of the commission which advocates across both vocational rehabilitation state agencies to work toward advancing employment for its constituency. The Commission recently submitted comments to SSB recommending that the agency specifically refer to Minnesotans who are DeafBlind, in addition to individuals who are blind in revisions to their rule. The Commission also advocates for greater collaboration between SSB and VRS to ensure that Minnesotans who are DeafBlind benefit from the expertise within both agencies to serve their dual diagnosis.²³

Background on Minnesota Employment Policy Initiative Listening Sessions

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

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

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

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

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

²² To learn more about SSB go to http://www.positivelyminnesota.com/JobSeekers/Blind_or_Visually_Impaired. To learn more about VRS go to <http://www.PositivelyMinnesota.com/VRS>.

²³ To learn more about the Commission go to <http://www.mncdhh.org>.

potential strategies toward better employment outcomes. DeafBlind participants had difficulty responding to this question possibly because of its more abstract nature and for that reason the final question was adapted.

The third question asked of most listening session participants, “**What will it take to double employment of Minnesotans with disabilities by 2015?**” is the core question of the listening sessions. It is a question originally posed by the Alliance for Full Participation and, with their permission, adopted by MEPI. It is intended to be provocative by challenging participants to think out of the box and move toward strategies that can have a more dramatic effect on employment outcomes. This question was modified, at the suggestion of the listening session interpreters, to be more specific to the DeafBlind individuals participating in the session. The question asked instead was, “**What would be helpful to you, or others you know who are DeafBlind, in finding a job?**”

Listening Session on DeafBlindness

The listening session on employment and individuals who are DeafBlind was conducted on February 3, 2010 and hosted by State Services for the Blind (SSB) in which invited participants were recommended by the advisory committee on DeafBlindness. Seven individuals who are DeafBlind participated in the listening session. Their responses to the three questions follow. The responses are not prioritized.

Question 1: Why Is Work Important?

- Nobody wants to sit on the couch and be bored all day. It’s important for us to have the opportunity to be social. Work offers that. Work also offers the chance for us to be contributing members of society like everyone else.
- I could save up for retirement like everyone else.
- We have things to offer a company or organization. I wish employers would realize that.
- It is important to keep busy instead of just collecting social security. It keeps our minds busy.
- We can support ourselves.
- Work wards off depression, boredom and loneliness.
- We want to have an income so we can take pride in having our own funds and to be able to purchase a house and gain assets.
- Work allows us to be part of a community.
- SSDI does not offer very much money. We can have more money when working than we can on SSDI alone.
- Work helps us feel connected.
- People are often frightened by DeafBlind individuals. Working with us helps them overcome that fear.
- Work allows us to feel successful and gain a sense of achievement.

Question 2: What’s working? What are we doing right in Minnesota to improve employment for people with disabilities

- State Services for the Blind (SSB) offers good technology services and technology evaluations.
- SSB sent me to Blind Inc. where I was able to learn Braille which was helpful for my job.
- SSB has helped me improve my computer skills.
- Things are much better now than they were fifteen years ago when SSB did not have staff that knew how to work with DeafBlind people. Now there is Employment Endeavors and they are very helpful because they have experience working with DeafBlind individuals.
- Education is the priority and is most important.
- Helping young people gain job experience is a good idea so that they know what they would like to do when they finish school.
- I was able to work in the Business Enterprises Program (BEP) for a while.²⁴
- Work opportunities give us the chance to learn about computers.
- The Commission for Deaf, DeafBlind and Hard of Hearing Minnesotans helps me.

Recommendations from Question 3:

“What would be helpful to you, or others you know who are DeafBlind, in finding a job?”

The following recommendations are based on the themes identified from the responses of listening session participants and were not prioritized. To get the perspective of vocational rehabilitation counselors and providers who were not part of the listening session group, MEPI scheduled two additional meetings. One was with three SSB counselors who serve individuals who are DeafBlind and the other was with the leadership team from Employment Endeavors, the organization identified by listening session participants as specializing in employment services to individuals who are DeafBlind. The discussion that follows the five recommendations provides further information on “next steps” in refining the recommendations and moving toward more specific policy implications.

Improve transportation services available during the job seeking process and when a job is secured. Many individuals who are DeafBlind are dependent on Metro Mobility for transportation. This dependence limits the times and locations that an individual can work. 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. Transportation services in greater Minnesota can be even more challenging. Listening session participants identified transportation as a major barrier to employment. The SSB counselors and leadership team from Employment Endeavors identified transportation as **the** major barrier to employment.

²⁴ The BEP provides training and support to blind Minnesotans so they can become self-employed in their own vending business. For more details, go to http://www.positivelyminnesota.com/JobSeekers/Blind_or_Visually_Impaired/Employment_Career_Services/Business_Enterprise_Program_Careers.aspx.

Expand the pool of employment service providers who have expertise in DeafBlindness.

DeafBlindness is a complex disability with considerable variability within the group. As discussed above, there is currently only one provider group with expertise in DeafBlindness. Although listening session participants indicated that employment services had improved significantly with the establishment of this provider group, they also expressed frustration that job development services could be terminated if the provider was not successful in finding a job. Additional provider groups with expertise in DeafBlindness would expand the pool of providers and give individuals and SSB more options for the specialized and intensive job development services needed by individuals who are DeafBlind. Expanding the number of employment service providers should also result in more jobs and more employers who can share success stories and modes of accommodating individuals who are DeafBlind.

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. Participants identified that employers sometimes indicate that a driver's license is a qualification for jobs in which driving does not appear to be an essential requirement. This requirement could "screen out" viable candidates who might be able to identify accommodations that would make them qualified for the job. The requirement of a driver's license could make it impossible for a qualified candidate to have the opportunity to discuss with an employer how an accommodation could be utilized as an alternative to having a driver's license. The Equal Employment Opportunity Commission was contacted to determine whether this is a topic they address with employers through their outreach and training. They informed MEPI that a driver's license requirement has come up with groups related to potential racial discrimination, but not as limiting employment of individuals with disabilities. They were encouraged to consider the impact on individuals with disabilities as part of their outreach and training.

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. Assistive devices are critical to improving employment outcomes for individuals who are DeafBlind. Listening session participants reported that they had found themselves caught in the middle of negotiations between SSB and employers on assuming responsibility for purchasing assistive devices. Having a consolidated fund for assistive devices that individuals could access themselves would empower individuals to secure the equipment they need to become successfully employed and to retain employment. That technology would be an asset the employee brings to the job and could also reduce employer concerns about being responsible for the costs of accommodations at some time in the future. Having access to funding would also empower individuals to be active participants in negotiating accommodations. Consolidated funding for specialized communication equipment would also support retention as technology needs may change over time due to changes in the workplace or changes in vision and/or hearing skills occur.²⁵

²⁵ The Governor's Workforce Development Committee recently recommended a centralized accommodation fund for state agencies to promote the hiring of individuals with disabilities. Also, President Obama recently signed an Executive Order creating a centralized fund for accommodations to promote hiring more individuals with disabilities within the federal government.

The following recommendation was not identified by listening session participants but is provided as an alternative approach to the traditional job development process which participants identified as being extremely problematic. The recommendation is based on a promising practice identified in the literature review as resulting in better employment outcomes for individuals who are DeafBlind and addresses barriers to employment identified in the listening session.

Explore customized employment as an alternative to traditional job placement approaches to address the many obstacles encountered by job seekers who are DeafBlind.²⁶

Robin Greenfield from the Idaho Deaf-Blind Project advocates for customized employment as preferable to traditional and supported employment approaches for job development.²⁷

Customized employment begins with a thorough and in depth understanding of the individual job seeker to address the complex issues that can impede successful employment using the “Discovery” process. The vocational profile developed as a result of discovery is then utilized to target specific employers who could benefit from the skills of the individual through informational interviews and other direct contacts with employers. A job is then negotiated with an employer to ensure a strong relationship between the needs of the employer and the strengths of the employee.

Listening session participants identified four areas of concern that could be addressed through customized employment. Each of these identifies a significant challenge for individuals who are DeafBlind in seeking employment when using traditional job seeking approaches. Rather than address those challenges by trying to improve a process that is problematic for individuals who are DeafBlind, a customized employment approach is being recommended as an alternative job development process because it is designed to lessen the impact of challenges inherent to those traditional approaches. The areas of concern identified by listening session participants which customized employment addresses are:

- **Ensure that individuals who are DeafBlind have access to a range of jobs that fit each jobseeker’s interests, skills and abilities.** The discovery process is designed to accomplish that and to look more broadly at possible jobs. Customized employment often results in non-traditional jobs that might never be considered through other approaches.
- **Ensure that online application processes do not “screen out” individuals who are DeafBlind from becoming candidates for jobs for which they are qualified.** By going directly to employers, job seekers who are DeafBlind are not using online application procedures and online tests with time limits nor are they competing with other job seekers for an advertised job. The sheer numbers of applicants responding to advertised jobs make it less likely that job seekers who are DeafBlind will have the opportunity to present their qualifications to an employer.
- **Educate businesses about the abilities of individuals who are DeafBlind to become valued employees and ensure that job seekers can present themselves in ways that**

²⁶ For more information on customized employment, see footnote 21.

²⁷ Greenfield, R. (2009).

enable employers to accurately assess their abilities. Direct contact with employers provides job seekers with an opportunity to present their individual strengths in a variety of ways that are more likely to result in success than through a resume or an online application process. In addition, job-carving and identifying jobs based on an analysis of employer needs can open up job opportunities for individuals who are DeafBlind which might not otherwise be identified. Direct contact with employers also allows the job seeker to address some of the fears employers and co-workers may have about hiring someone who is DeafBlind. Listening session participants identified employer's concerns about Workers' Compensation expenses and the fear that an employee who is DeafBlind might be more likely to be hurt on the job as an obstacle to employment. Participants also discussed their own responsibility in being able to clearly communicate their assets and abilities to employers and ways to accommodate their disability to alleviate employer concerns.

- **Ensure individuals who are DeafBlind have the technology skills they need for job seeking and to maximize their capacity to secure jobs requiring those types of skills.** Again, customized employment bypasses some of the need for technology skills during the job development process and provides support in situations in which the individual's technology skills are inadequate for job seeking. Also, technology skills needed for a specific job can be part of the training plan and tailored to a specific work situation lessening the need for generalization and a possible mismatch of technology skills. Needed skills identified through the discovery process as important to the type of work sought could also be acquired during the job development process.

Green emphasizes that customized employment helps individuals, family members and service providers to “think outside the box” in developing a job for a unique individual.²⁸ Since “the box” has such poor employment results, an “out of the box” approach bypassing many of the challenges encountered by DeafBlind job seekers may be a better approach for job development and job retention.

Implications for Policy

Although the recommendations above focus on Minnesotans who are DeafBlind, many of the recommendations would also apply to individuals with other disabilities. The Minnesota Employment Policy Initiative is conducting additional listening sessions in 2010 and will be collecting further information from other disability groups using the same questions.

Also during 2010, MEPI will be working closely with community action teams (CATs) receiving intensive training and technical assistance from the Minnesota Employment Training and Technical Assistance Center (MNTAT). The CATs will be an important resource in identifying specific policy issues which support or impede these groups as they develop employment for individuals experiencing a range of disabilities throughout the state.²⁹ The policy issues identified through the CATs will be summarized in a separate policy brief.

²⁸ Greenfield, R. (2009).

²⁹ For more information on the CATs, visit www.mntat.org.

The information gathered through the listening sessions and through the employment development efforts of the CATs will be analyzed to identify commonalities. Representatives from the various groups will then be reconvened to strategize on addressing the policy implications in improving employment outcomes and developing a more specific set of recommendations for action to move toward doubling the employment rate of Minnesotans with disabilities by 2015.

About the Minnesota Employment Policy Initiative

The purpose of the Minnesota Employment Policy Initiative (MEPI) is to facilitate dialogue and develop leadership on disability and employment policy that will result in increased competitive employment of Minnesotans with disabilities and promote the proposition, “We need everyone in the workforce for businesses to thrive and communities to prosper.” Central to this initiative is the belief that employment is fundamental to adulthood, quality of life and economic freedom and choice. MEPI is an initiative of Pathways to Employment (PTE), Minnesota’s Medicaid Infrastructure Grant.³⁰

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

Leadership for MEPI comes from National APSE - The Network on Employment - in concert with its state chapter, Minnesota APSE.³¹ The initiative works with numerous stakeholders to align policies, services and practices to ensure that integrated competitive employment is widely recognized and routinely promoted as the preferred option of all Minnesotans with disabilities. MEPI also works in close collaboration with the Minnesota Employment Training and Technical Assistance Center (www.mntat.org) to maximize the impact of employment policy and practice across Minnesota.

Additional policy briefs and reports will be available as they are developed at the MEPI website, www.mn-epi.org.

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³⁰ To learn more about PTE visit www.positivelyminnesota.com/pte.

³¹ For the APSE website, visit www.apse.org. For the Minnesota APSE website, visit www.mnapse.org.

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