

2010

Policy Brief on Employment of Minnesotans Who Are Blind

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 BLIND

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

A listening session on employment and individuals who are blind was hosted by the American Council of the Blind of Minnesota and the National Federation of the Blind of Minnesota on March 16, 2010. The listening session was facilitated by the Minnesota Employment Policy Initiative. Eleven participants worked to identify strategies to increase employment rates for individuals who are blind. The following recommendations were identified from the themes generated by the listening session participants:

- **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 knowledgebase 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.**

Although these recommendations were developed to address increased employment of Minnesotans who are blind, many of them would also apply to individuals with other disabilities. The Minnesota Employment Policy Initiative will be conducting nine additional listening sessions with other disability groups similar to the session on blindness. MEPI is also working with community action teams (CATs) to identify specific policy issues which support or impede these CATs as they develop customized 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 commonalities. 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 Vision Loss

Vision loss is a general term referring to sight limitations even with corrective intervention. This includes people across the vision spectrum, from those who experience low vision to those who are totally blind.¹ There are many types of vision loss and numerous causes (see Table 1).

Table 1: Common Types of Vision Loss and Etiology

Common Types of Vision Loss	Common Etiology
Macular degeneration: The deterioration of the retina causing gradual or rapid vision loss.	<ul style="list-style-type: none">· Aging· Best's Disease· Stargardt's Disease· Heredity
Diabetic Retinopathy: A condition that results in abnormal blood vessel development in the eye.	<ul style="list-style-type: none">· Diabetes
Retinitis Pigmentosa: A gradual deterioration of vision at night that can progress to total impairment.	<ul style="list-style-type: none">· Heredity
Retinal Detachment: The separation of the retina from the back of the eye.	<ul style="list-style-type: none">· Eye trauma· Infection· Tumor· Blood vessel disturbance
Glaucoma: A condition where the internal pressure in the eye damages the optic nerve, often resulting in vision loss.	<ul style="list-style-type: none">· Heredity· Eye trauma· Diabetes· Infection

Adapted from: (American Optometric Association, 2010;
American Foundation for the Blind, 2010b)

For many individuals, heredity is a major factor in vision loss. For others, vision loss can be a complication of health-related conditions such as diabetes, infections and trauma to the eye or head. Vision loss can occur at any age; however, many vision-related conditions develop and worsen with age.

¹ American Foundation for the Blind. (2010a). *Key definitions of statistical terms*. Retrieved May 5, 2010, from AFB: American Foundation for the Blind: <http://www.afb.org>.

To better understand vision loss, it is helpful to understand some of the common definitions used in the field. The American Foundation for the Blind² uses the following definitions:

- **Visual impairment:** A visual acuity of 20/70 or worse in the better eye with best correction, or a total field loss of 140 degrees. Additional factors influencing visual impairment might be contrast sensitivity, light sensitivity, glare sensitivity, and light/dark adaptation.
- **Legal blindness:** A level of vision loss that has been defined to determine eligibility for benefits. The clinical diagnosis refers to a central visual acuity of 20/200 or less in the better eye with the best possible correction, and/or a visual field of 20 degrees or less. Often, people who are diagnosed with legal blindness retain some useable vision.
- **Total blindness:** An inability to see anything with either eye.

Current national estimates utilizing the National Health Interview Survey indicate that there are approximately 18.7 million American adults between the ages of 18 and 64 with significant vision loss.³ Based on the 2008 American Community Survey, the American Foundation for the Blind reports a total of 68,028 Minnesotans who have vision loss, across all age groups with approximately 31,000 working-age adults and 4,000 Minnesotans ages 5 to 17.⁴

Workforce participation for working-age adults with vision loss is far less than that of the general population. According to the Bureau of Labor Statistics in April of 2010:

- Approximately 33% of people with vision loss are employed.
- Approximately 6% are seeking employment.
- 61% of people with vision loss did not participate in the workforce, i.e., they were not employed and were not seeking employment.⁵

To facilitate the employment of people with vision loss, funding is available to states from the Rehabilitation Services Administration (RSA) through Title I of the Rehabilitation Act of 1973,

² American Foundation for the Blind. (2010a).

³ American Foundation for the Blind. (2010b). *Facts and figures on adults with vision loss*. Retrieved May 5, 2010, from AFB: American Foundation for the Blind: <http://www.afb.org>.

Pleis, J., & Lucas, J. (2008). *Provisional Report: Summary health statistics for U.S. adults: National Health Interview Survey, 2008*. National Center for Health Statistics.

⁴ American Foundation for the Blind. (2010c, March). *Minnesota: 2008 prevalence rates of visual loss*. Retrieved May 5, 2010, from AFB: American Foundation for the Blind: <http://www.afb.org>.

⁵ American Foundation for the Blind. (2010d, April). *American Foundation for the Blind*. Retrieved May 5, 2010, from Interpreting BLS employment data: www.afb.org.

U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics. (2010, April). *Economic news release*. Retrieved May 5, 2010, from U.S. Department of Labor: www.bls.gov.

as amended. In 28 states, including Minnesota, there are State Vocational Rehabilitation Programs providing services solely to people who are legally blind. The remaining states provide services through a general vocational rehabilitation agency serving people who are blind in addition to all other disability groups.

The Institute on Community Inclusion at the University of Massachusetts in Boston, using databases from Rehabilitation Services Administration (RSA), reports that Minnesotans with vision loss participate in the workforce less and earn less than the national average of people with vision loss across the country.⁶ RSA data shows:

- The national average of hours worked per week was 31.46 for women and 33.42 for men with vision loss. In Minnesota, women worked 27.1 hours and men worked 29.38 hours per week.
- Men with vision loss in Minnesota tend to earn about \$429.31, which is \$35 less per week than the national average for men with vision loss. Women in Minnesota tend to earn about \$377.60, which is \$16 less per week than the national average for women.

A number of factors influence the employment of people with vision loss including level of education, academic skills, gender, age, race, having additional disabilities, and the severity of vision loss.⁷ Research also identifies that individuals with better self-determination skills, social skills, social support, and on-the-job socialization skills were more likely to find, obtain, and retain employment.⁸ Vocational rehabilitation services are also an important resource. Individuals who utilize vocational rehabilitation services to find and retain employment, and who maintain a working relationship with their vocational rehabilitation counselor, are more likely to experience positive employment outcomes.⁹ For transition-age youth with vision loss, post-

⁶ The Institute on Community Inclusion at the University of Massachusetts in Boston analyzes Rehabilitation Service Administration outcomes data from the RSA-911 public access database. The database provides national information, as well as state specific information regarding outcomes of people with vision impairment using the Rehabilitation Services.

Institute for Community Inclusion at the University of Mass. In Boston. (n.d.). Retrieved April 28, 2010, from StateData.info: www.statedata.info

⁷ Leonard, D'Allura, & Horowitz. (1999). Factors associated with employment among persons who have a vision impairment: a follow-up of vocational placement referrals. *Journal of Vocational Rehabilitation*, 12 (1), 33-44.

Taheri-Araghi, & Hendren. (1994). Successful vocational rehabilitation of clients with retinitis pigmentosa. *Journal of Visual Impairment and Blindness*, 88, 128-131.

Capella-McDonnall. (2005a). Predictors of competitive employment for blind and visually impaired consumers of vocational rehabilitation services. *Journal of Visual Impairment & Blindness*, 99 (5), 303-315.

⁸ Capella-McDonnall, & Crudden. (2009). Factors affecting the successful employment of transition-age youths with visual impairments. *Journal of Visual Impairment & Blindness*, 103 (6), 329-341.

McAfee, & McNaughton. (1997). Transitional outcomes-job satisfaction of workers with disabilities part two: Satisfaction with promotions, pay, co-workers, supervision, and work conditions. *Journal of Vocational Rehabilitation*, 8, 243-251.

⁹ Capella-McDonnall. (2005a).

school employment outcomes were correlated with having had a variety of employment experiences in high school.¹⁰

Experts in the field of vision loss have long believed employment outcomes were affected by whether individuals were born blind or lost their vision later in life and that these differences should be considered when developing vocational rehabilitation programs.¹¹ Some researchers have found that those who lost vision earlier in life were more likely to be employed competitively in a community business, at a home-based business, or through a community rehabilitation program than individuals who lost their vision later in life.¹² However, one study found no relationship between the age of vision loss and employment status.¹³ Other researchers have found that having a job at the onset of disability was a more significant predictor of future employment status,¹⁴ as were the number of jobs held prior to receiving vocational rehabilitation services.¹⁵

Research also identifies assistive technology and job accommodations as important to successful employment outcomes.¹⁶ Closed circuit television (CCTV), computer screen magnifiers, audio recorders, computer screen readers, and optical scanners are examples of assistive technology that support employment outcomes. However, accessing those assistive technologies can be problematic.¹⁷ Often access to experts in evaluating assistive technology options is not available to individuals and support providers. In addition, there is no coordinated funding mechanism to pay for assistive technology and vocational rehabilitation agencies, and employers often need to negotiate a resolution.¹⁸ Modification of employment tests, use of personal readers, modified

¹⁰ Capella-McDonnall, & Crudden. (2009).

¹¹ Welsh, R., & Tuttle, D. (1997). Onset of blindness. In Moore, Graves, & P. (Eds.), *Foundations of rehabilitation counseling with persons who are blind* (pp. 60-79). NY: American Foundation for the Blind.

Tuttle, D. (1984). *Self-esteem and adjusting with blindness*. MA: Charles C. Thomas.

¹² Giesen, & Ford. (1986a). *The elderly blind client: Factors associated with employment outcomes*. Mississippi State Research and Training Center on Blindness and Low Vision.

Giesen, & Ford. (1986b). *The unsuccessfully closed blind client: Characteristics of a nonemployment outcome*. Mississippi State University Research and Training Center on Blindness and Low Vision.

¹³ Crudden, & Hanye. (1999). Employment differences among persons with congenital and adventitious vision loss. *Journal of Vocational Rehabilitation*, 12 (1), 19-24.

¹⁴ Capella-McDonnall. (2005a).

Capella-McDonnall, & Crudden. (2009).

¹⁵ Capella-McDonnall, & Crudden. (2009).

¹⁶ Ibid.

¹⁷ Ibid.

¹⁸ National Council on Disability. (2000, May 31). *Federal policy barriers to assistive technology*. Retrieved May 1, 2010, from Newsroom: <http://www.ncd.gov/newsroom/publications/2000/assisttechnology.htm>

employee training, mobility and orientation training, and drivers are examples of the types of accommodation that also contribute to increased employment outcomes.¹⁹

The importance of technology is recognized by groups such as the Coalition of Organizations for Accessible Technology (COAT), made up of over 230 organizations including the American Foundation for the Blind, which was a founding member. The Coalition advocates for greater access of internet-based technologies for individuals with disabilities and was successful in lobbying for the recently passed “Equal Access to the 21st Century Communications and Video Accessibility Act.” This legislation will improve access and could impact employment for individuals with disabilities. The Justice Department is also planning rulemaking to improve internet access.²⁰ However, neither of these actions is specific to improving employment outcomes so it is hard to predict their potential impact.

People experiencing vision loss face many challenges to participating in the workforce. Some of those challenges can be addressed through training enabling individuals to learn new skills in adjusting to blindness, such as mobility and orientation training, as well as acquiring literacy in Braille and other adaptive skills. “Adjustment to blindness” services are often provided prior to active job development. Skills leading toward greater independence and self-determination in addition to on-the-job social skills have been shown to result in better employment outcomes.²¹

An additional challenge for individuals with vision loss is the limited choice among service providers. Few service providers have the knowledge and skills needed to facilitate job placement for individuals with vision loss.²² Information from the Ticket to Work Program illustrates some of the challenges. Employment networks participating in Ticket to Work cite difficulties in job placement and a lack of expertise about vision loss as major barriers impeding their ability to successfully assist people with employment.²³ Access to reliable transportation to and from work is also cited as a significant barrier. As a result, only 10% of Employment

¹⁹ Equal Employment Opportunity Commission. (2010). *Questions and answers about blindness and vision impairment in the workplace and the Americans with Disabilities Act*. Retrieved May 5, 2010, from U.S. EEOC: www.eeoc.gov.

U.S. Department of Labor. (n.d.). *Job Accommodations Network: Fact sheet series, job accommodations for people with vision impairment*. Washington, D.C.: Office of Disability Employment Policy.

²⁰ Turner, Channing. "Holder: New Rules For Disabled Access Coming." *Main Justice: Policy, Politics and the Law*. 22 July 2010. Web. 28 July 2010.

²¹ Leonard, D'Allura, & Horowitz. (1999).

²² MN State Rehabilitation Council for the Blind. (2009). *MN State Rehabilitation Council for the Blind: Annual report*. St.Paul, MN: MN State Rehabilitation Council for the Blind.

Capella-McDonnall. (2005b). The Ticket to Work program: Employment networks' views on serving beneficiaries who are blind or visually impaired. *Journal of Visual Impairment & Blindness*, 99 (6), 326-344.

²³ An employment network (EN) is an entity that contracts with the Social Security Administration to either provide or coordinate the delivery of the necessary services to Social Security disability beneficiaries who assign their tickets to the EN. The EN can be a single individual, a partnership/alliance (public and/or private) or a consortium of organizations collaborating to combine resources to serve Ticket-holders.

Networks are serving individuals who experience vision loss and about 6% of the networks refuse services to people with vision loss.²⁴

The attitudes, perceptions, and biases of employers about vision loss and its effects on employment are also a significant obstacle to employment opportunities. To address those concerns, some support professionals advocate strategies such as using internships, on-the-job training of employees, and utilizing on-site job coaches to demonstrate to employers the abilities of employees with vision loss.²⁵

Little research has focused on best practices to improve the employment outcomes of people with vision loss. In the field there is considerable acceptance of supported employment enclaves in which the work may be performed in a community business setting, but the employees are paid and supervised by the support provider.

The National Industries for the Blind (NIB) provides employment for people with vision loss by regularly accessing federal contracts through the Javits-Wagner-O'Day Act, which provides special access to contracts to qualifying support entities.²⁶ As the federal government has eliminated a number of federal positions, some of those functions have been replaced by contracting with private businesses. NIB associated agencies have become federal contractors for some of those jobs. Typically, this arrangement allows the NIB or an affiliate agency to acquire a contract and pay and support people with vision loss to perform those jobs. Some of those jobs are located in a federal setting but employees are supervised and paid by NIB associated industries. NIB uses a similar model for contracting with private businesses. Most individuals employed by NIB associated agencies earn above minimum wage but about 20% do not.²⁷

The Rehabilitation Services Administration (RSA) sets performance indicators for evaluating state vocational rehabilitation programs. In 2009, State Services for the Blind (SSB) fell below the RSA standard for clients achieving their employment outcomes with 48.17% of SSB clients achieving their employment outcomes. However, of the 78 clients who did achieve their employment outcome, 98.11% were competitively employed, far exceeding the RSA standard of 35.4%. RSA also measures the earnings ratio of individuals who are competitively employed with the average hourly wage of workers without disabilities. SSB clients also exceeded the RSA

²⁴ Capella-McDonnall. (2005b).

²⁵ Crudden, Sansing, & Butler. (2005). Overcoming barriers to employment: Strategies of rehabilitation providers. *Journal of Visual Impairment & Blindness*, 99 (6), 325-344.

²⁶ Hanye & Crudden. (1999). Innovative links to competitive employment through industries for the blind. *Journal of Vocational Rehabilitation*, 12 (1), 8-19.

²⁷ Most individuals making subminimum wages were trainees or persons with significant and multiple disabilities.

standard for earnings ratio. The RSA standard is 59 cents for every dollar earned by citizens without disabilities. SSB clients earned 67 cents for every dollar earned by other citizens.²⁸

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

The third question, “**What will it take to double employment of Minnesotans with disabilities by 2015?**” is the core question for participants. It is a question originally posed by the Alliance for Full Participation and, with their permission, adopted by MEPI. It is intended to be

²⁸ MN State Rehabilitation Council for the Blind. (2009). *MN State Rehabilitation Council for the Blind: Annual report*. St.Paul, MN: MN State Rehabilitation Council for the Blind. Rehabilitation Service Administration (2009). Evaluation of programs: Evaluation standards and performance indicators for the Vocational Rehabilitation Services programs. Retrieved on July 29, 2010 from <http://www2.ed.gov/rschstat/eval/rehab/standards.html>.

provocative by challenging participants to think out of the box and move toward strategies that can have a more dramatic effect on employment outcomes.

Listening Session on Blindness

A listening session on employment and individuals who are blind was facilitated by the Minnesota Employment Policy Initiative and hosted by the American Council of the Blind of Minnesota and the National Federation of the Blind of Minnesota on March 16, 2010. Eleven participants worked to identify strategies to increase employment rates for individuals who are blind. Their responses to the three questions follow.

Why is work important?

- Work is important for everyone, not just people with disabilities. It affects self-esteem and gives people the means to provide for their needs.
- Since there is a standard that people who are blind do not work, we need to prove to society that we *can* work.
- Working provides a sense of satisfaction. You do a good job and are recognized for it through a paycheck or other kinds of recognition.
- Society gains from our working. When people with disabilities are not expected to work, society loses our skills.
- Useful work, like useful education, is leverage you have on society since if you do not work society makes assumptions about you. We need that leverage.
- When a person with a disability works, you educate others about what you can do as a person with a disability.
- Making money is a good reason to work.
- Work makes us active consumers. It makes a difference when you earn money. We also put money back into the system that supports us through paying taxes.
- Work boosts your mental health. It gets you out of the house, completing projects, meeting deadlines, accomplishing goals and facing challenges.
- Work is important because when you meet someone for the first time, they ask, “What do you do?”

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

- State Services for the Blind (SSB) is a separate agency from the general vocational rehabilitation program.
- Strong “Adjustment to Blindness” training options. There are three training centers for blind people that are nationally acclaimed for life-long learning and job skills.
- Strong consumer groups/organizations.

- The Communication Center at SSB (Braille and audio production of textbooks and other education/job-related material).
- The Radio Talking Book – Access to leisure activities through the Communication Center makes us better rounded individuals, which enhances our opportunity to connect with others about more than blindness and our jobs.
- Blind people influenced the state legislature to make technology accessible. State websites and software are required to be non-visually accessible.
- There is an increased focus on competitive jobs rather than sheltered employment.
- Summer transition programs for youth provide work experience opportunities.
- Blind people and agencies provide outreach and visibility to promote employment.

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

The following recommendations are based on themes identified from the responses of listening session participants. The recommendations are not prioritized. The discussion that follows the ten recommendations provides further information on “next steps” in refining the recommendations and moving toward more specific policy implications.

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. Skills contributing to greater independence and self-determination are important for success in employment. The ability to travel independently and to utilize Braille and/or technology is critical to successful employment. “Adjustment to Blindness” training should encourage blind individuals to develop those skills and to emphasize employment as a goal. Training can also emphasize the importance of job skills such as networking, job seeking skills and soft skills that are valued by employers.

Provide universal access to all job-related websites and software by requiring non-visual access to Minnesotans who are blind. Access to the internet is increasingly essential to individuals seeking employment. Blind job seekers who cannot access the information on the internet to identify job openings, to apply for jobs online and to research employment opportunities are shut out of the process currently utilized by most Minnesotans to secure employment. In addition, individuals who are employed often need access to the internet to perform their jobs. The Coalition of Organizations for Accessible Technology (COAT) has advocated for such non-visual access to the internet. Congress recently passed “21st Century Communications and Video Accessibility Act,” however, the focus is not specifically on employment so it is difficult to assess whether there will be an impact on employment. The Job Accommodations Network (JAN) provides information to employers on making websites more

accessible but current requirements do not require universal access.²⁹ The Equal Employment Opportunity Commission’s outreach and training services were contacted about this issue but the office contacted does not currently inform employers about access issues for blind job seekers. They were encouraged to do so.

Ensure WorkForce Centers³⁰ are as accessible to blind Minnesotans as they are to other users. WorkForce Centers are an important public resource to all Minnesotans seeking jobs. Minnesotans who are blind have a right to access the resources available to other Minnesotans at workforce centers. Given the variability in workforce centers around the state, any access issues identified at a specific center should be promptly corrected.

Ensure Minnesotans who are blind have access to the technology they need to obtain and retain employment. Technology can make the workplace increasingly accessible to individuals who are blind, but Minnesotans who are blind do not always have access to the technology they need. Negotiations between SSB and potential employers on purchasing necessary assistive technology can place the prospective employee in the middle. Listening session participants identified the need for additional strategies in funding assistive devices. Tax incentives and certification of employers for non-visual equipment and software were identified by participants as strategies to explore. In addition, as discussed above, The Coalition of Organizations for Accessible Technologies (COAT) has advocated for additional strategies which could make funds for assistive technology available to individuals themselves.

Ensure transition-age students with disabilities develop a work history through part-time employment and internships during high school and college. Many students with disabilities have work experiences through secondary education but not necessarily typical paid jobs prior to graduation. “Work experiences” do not always focus on real world job seeking skills or soft skills that transfer to future jobs. Paid jobs in which the individual goes through a typical job seeking process and in which there are high expectations for performance on the job will better prepare individuals for successful employment when they complete their education.

Ensure SSB counselors and service providers have high expectations about the capabilities of blind people and have the knowledgebase to explore the wide array of available jobs during the job development process. Listening session participants emphasized that employment goals specific to the interests and skills of the individual should drive the job development process rather than a “cookie cutter” approach. SSB counselors and service providers need to be knowledgeable about both the individual and his or her assets in addition to the wide array of jobs available in the community. Under-employment of individuals who are

²⁹ The state of Minnesota recently enacted accessibility standards which will ensure that state-run technology can be accessed by end-users, but the standards will not apply to private businesses.

³⁰ WorkForce Centers are Minnesota’s OneStops, a Department of Labor initiative for jobseekers and businesses.

blind should not be an acceptable outcome. In order for individuals to make informed choices about employment, they need information about a range of options available to them.

Launch a public education plan targeted toward the unprecedented education of employers about the capabilities of blind people. Employers, like most citizens, underestimate the capabilities of Minnesotans who are blind. A public education plan targeted toward employers and emphasizing the highly skilled jobs of citizens who are blind would provide a better understanding of the wide range of skills blind people have and of the accommodations and technology that are available to support productive and valued employees who are blind.

Expand self-employment services for blind Minnesotans beyond food and vending services. Business Enterprise Programs (BEP) currently focus on food and vending services for business owners who are blind.³¹ Although the BEP has some limitations, given the legislation that created it, a broader range of “vending” opportunities could be explored. Also, Minnesotans who are blind should be encouraged to explore self-employment as a job outcome outside the BEP. Self-employment is an expanding area of the U.S. economy, and citizens who are blind should have access to the wide array of self-employment opportunities available to other citizens. Self-employment can provide accommodations not always available in wage employment and is increasingly being pursued by citizens who have disabilities.³²

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. The requirement of a driver’s license could “screen out” viable candidates who might be able to identify accommodations that would make them qualified for the job. The arbitrary requirement of a driver’s license can make it impossible for a qualified job candidate to have the opportunity to discuss with an employer how accommodations such as drivers or taxi-cabs could be utilized as an alternative to 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.

³¹ 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.

³² eBay and the National Federation of the Blind recently formed a partnership to open up opportunities for blind entrepreneurs to use eBay for their businesses using screen access software.

Increase funding for public transportation to expand the areas served and the times transportation is available. Many Minnesotans who are blind depend on public transportation to go to and from work. As a result, they are limited by the locations and times during which public transportation is available. Expanded funding to increase the routes and times available for public transportation would increase job opportunities not only for individuals who are blind but for many other groups reliant on public transportation.

Implications for Policy

Although the recommendations above focus on Minnesotans who are blind, 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.³³ The policy issues identified through the CATs will be summarized in a separate policy brief.

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.³⁴

³³ For more information on the CATs, visit www.mntat.org

³⁴ To learn more about PTE visit www.positivelyminnesota.com/pte.

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.³⁵ 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.

This document was prepared with support from a Competitive Employment Systems-Medicaid Infrastructure Grant from the Centers for Medicare and Medicaid Services to Minnesota's Department of Human Services (Grant #1QACMS030325). The funds for this grant were authorized through the Ticket to Work-Work Incentives Improvement Act of 1999 (Public Law 106-170). Catalog of Federal Domestic Assistance 93768.

³⁵ For the APSE website, visit www.apse.org. For the Minnesota APSE website, visit www.mnapse.org.

References

- American Foundation for the Blind. (2010a). *Key definitions of statistical terms*. Retrieved May 5, 2010, from AFB: American Foundation for the Blind: <http://www.afb.org>.
- American Foundation for the Blind. (2010b). *Facts and figures on adults with vision loss*. Retrieved May 5, 2010, from AFB: American Foundation for the Blind: <http://www.afb.org>.
- American Foundation for the Blind. (2010c, March). *Minnesota: 2008 prevalence rates of visual loss*. Retrieved May 5, 2010, from AFB: American Foundation for the Blind: <http://www.afb.org>.
- American Foundation for the Blind. (2010d, April). *American Foundation for the Blind*. Retrieved May 5, 2010, from Interpreting BLS employment data: www.afb.org.
- American Optometric Association. (2010). *What causes low vision*. Retrieved May 5, 2010, from American Optometric Association: <http://www.aoa.org>
- Brooke, McDonough, & Hardy. (2006). Benefits specialists: Key resources for supporting the use of Social Security work incentives to fund assistive technology. *Journal of Vocational Rehabilitation* , 121-126.
- Capella-McDonnall. (2005a). Predictors of competitive employment for blind and visually impaired consumers of vocational rehabilitation services. *Journal of Visual Impairment & Blindness* , 99 (5), 303-315.
- Capella-McDonnall. (2005b). The Ticket to Work program: Employment networks' views on serving beneficiaries who are blind or visually impaired. *Journal of Visual Impairment & Blindness* , 99 (6), 326-344.
- Capella-McDonnall, & Crudden. (2009). Factors affecting the successful employment of transition-age youths with visual impairments. *Journal of Visual Impairment & Blindness*, 103 (6), 329-341.
- Crudden, & Hanye. (1999). Employment differences among persons with congenital and adventitious vision loss. *Journal of Vocational Rehabilitation* , 12 (1), 19-24.
- Crudden, Sansing, & Butler. (2005). Overcoming barriers to employment: Strategies of rehabilitation providers. *Journal of Visual Impairment & Blindness* , 99 (6), 325-344.
- Equal Employment Opportunity Commission. (2010). *Questions and answers about blindness and vision impairment in the workplace and the Americans with Disabilities Act*. Retrieved May 5, 2010, from U.S. EEOC: www.eeoc.gov.

- Giesen, & Ford. (1986a). *The elderly blind client: Factors associated with employment outcomes*. Mississippi State Research and Training Center on Blindness and Low Vision.
- Giesen, & Ford. (1986b). *The unsuccessfully closed blind client: Characteristics of a nonemployment outcome*. Mississippi State University Research and Training Center on Blindness and Low Vision.
- Hanye & Crudden. (1999). Innovative links to competitive employment through industries for the blind. *Journal of Vocational Rehabilitation* , 12 (1), 8-19.
- Institute for Community Inclusion at the University of Mass. In Boston. (n.d.). Retrieved April 28, 2010, from StateData.info: www.statedata.info
- Leonard, D'Allura, & Horowitz. (1999). Factors associated with employment among persons who have a vision impairment: a follow-up of vocational placement referrals. *Journal Of Vocational Rehabilitation* , 12 (1), 33-44.
- McAfee, & McNaughton. (1997). Transitional outcomes-job satisfaction of workers with disabilities part two: Satisfaction with promotions, pay, co-workers, supervision, and work conditions. *Journal of Vocational Rehabilitation* , 8, 243-251.
- MN State Rehabilitation Council for the Blind. (2009). *MN State Rehabilitation Council for the Blind: Annual report*. St.Paul, MN: MN State Rehabilitation Council for the Blind.
- National Council on Disability. (2000, May 31). *Federal policy barriers to assistive technology*. Retrieved May 1, 2010, from Newsroom: <http://www.ncd.gov/newsroom/publications/2000/assisttechnology.htm>
- Pleis, J., & Lucas, J. (2008). *Provisional Report: Summary health statistics for U.S. adults: National Health Interview Survey, 2008*. National Center for Health Statistics.
- Taheri-Araghi, & Hendren. (1994). Successful vocational rehabilitation of clients with retinitis pigmentosa. *Journal of Visual Impairment and Blindness* , 88, 128-131.
- Turner, Channing. "Holder: New Rules For Disabled Access Coming." *Main Justice: Policy, Politics and the Law*. 22 July 2010. Web. 28 July 2010.
- Tuttle, D. (1984). *Self-esteem and adjusting with blindness*. MA: Charles C. Thomas.
- U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics. (2010, April). *Economic news release*. Retrieved May 5, 2010, from U.S. Department of Labor: www.bls.gov.

U.S. Department of Labor. (n.d.). *Job Accommodations Network: Fact sheet series, job accommodations for people with vision impairment*. Washington, D.C.: Office of Disability Employment Policy.

Welsh, R., & Tuttle, D. (1997). Onset of blindness. In Moore, Graves, & P. (Eds.), *Foundations of rehabilitation counseling with persons who are blind* (pp. 60-79). NY: American Foundation for the Blind.