

## Integrating Job Opportunities for People with Disabilities into State and Regional Economic and Workforce Development Strategies

by Christopher T. King

*Across the nation, state and regional economic and workforce development officials have begun to work together more systematically and strategically in an effort to better address the economic needs of a geographical area, including creating jobs for local residents. A new perspective has emerged that recognizes the need for a skilled and ready “talent pipeline” to support local economic growth. This brief offers some background on recent trends in economic and workforce development strategies, and highlights two regions that have been piloting initiatives to include opportunities for people with disabilities in their regional activities.*

### Introduction

State and regional strategies for economic and workforce development traditionally have paid little attention to the employment needs, supports, and perspectives of people with disabilities. Such strategies tend to focus instead on area needs for building a robust economic base, bringing in “value-added” enterprises, creating new jobs, training a skilled workforce, and similar concerns. However, improving job opportunities for populations with barriers to employment, such as persons with disabilities, has not historically been a priority in formulating or implementing these strategies.

The United States expects to face a situation in which workers, especially those with good education and needed skills, will be in relatively short supply. For employers, the need for skilled workers is unlikely to erode in the future, despite the severity of the current economic downturn. In sharp contrast to recent decades in which the nation added large numbers of well-educated and skilled workers to the labor force and real wages grew, the foreseeable future promises little or no growth in the number of workers with the requisite education and skills to support and sustain economic growth.<sup>1</sup> According to the Aspen Institute, in the next few decades, the United States will face three major gaps: workers, skills, and wages. Where the number of native-born workers age 25 to 54 grew by 44% over the past 20 years, no growth is expected for the next 20 years. The share of workers with more than a high school education increased by 19% over the past two decades but is expected to increase by only about 4% going forward.<sup>2</sup>

As a result, employers will need to, and want to, do everything possible to recruit skilled workers — including traditionally underutilized groups — for their workforce. This offers opportunities for persons with disabilities, but only if old policies and traditional ways of thinking about employment creation at the state and regional level can be replaced with more supportive notions. To do this, state and local policymakers and other stakeholders require information about new ways of doing business that explicitly incorporate a new perspective about employing persons with disabilities.

The good news is that some states are pioneering efforts to incorporate employment opportunities for persons with disabilities into their economic and workforce development strategies, demonstrating that it is not only possible, but desirable and effective as well. A clear message emerging from these new state efforts is that skilled, productive workers who may have disabilities can be brought successfully into economic and workforce strategies.

## State and Regional Economic and Workforce Development Strategies: A Brief Review

State and regional economic development efforts tend to focus on marketing or “branding” of new business projects and, to the extent they address workforce issues at all, stress the attraction of existing high-level talent to fill top positions in management, engineering, and marketing.<sup>3</sup> More often than not, however, states leave details related to training and job development of the rest of their workforce to “the market” after an initial assist using publicly financed incentives (e.g., tax abatements, infrastructure subsidies). Yet, the concerns that occupy today’s workforce development professionals — including which occupations might be critical for the success of a given industry cluster or employer important to the state’s economy, how local residents should be prepared for jobs in these high-growth industries, how long workforce preparation might take for these jobs, and where financing for training might come from — are found in these details. Effective and timely preparation of area residents for any and all newly created jobs often requires considerable planning and timely investment of public *and* private resources. Unfortunately, the more laissez-faire “market approach” seen in states’ economic development efforts today may take years to realize positive results, during which time area residents looking for work are likely to miss out on jobs for which they are unprepared.

While today’s workforce developers generally try to plan ahead, developing and deploying effective training programs to meet jobs in demand, the federal/state workforce system has historically been focused on addressing *current* workforce demands and training for *existing* jobs. Employers, however, tend to focus more on immediate problems, typically not foreseeing or addressing future skill shortages until they appear. Firms in growing clusters frequently do not identify future workforce needs and commit too few resources to planning, making it an ongoing challenge for the state and local workforce system to be routinely responsive to changing and future employer skills needs.

The key to bringing together economic and workforce development that includes opportunities for workers with barriers to the labor market, including but not limited to workers with disabilities, is strong industry or employer engagement, which requires progressive employers willing to engage *before* workforce needs become critical. Also important are state, regional, and local workforce developers that are creative in their approaches and adept at translating information provided by business representatives into clear training outlines, proposals, and curricula that will lead to future-oriented training solutions for continuous industry feedback, refinement, and deployment.

Economic and workforce development programs have traditionally operated differently in terms of focus, strategy formulation, and implementation. Their strategists often come from different backgrounds and experiences and, as a result, emphasize different issues and orientations in pursuing their strategies. The sidebar on page 3 illustrates how economic and workforce development policies compare along several dimensions.

### Comparing U.S. Economic and Workforce Development Policies<sup>4</sup>

#### Economic Development

##### Goals

- Job creation
- Infrastructure development
- Economic growth

##### Key Actors

- Regional and state economic development agencies

##### Financing

- Federal Economic Development Administration grants
- State economic development funds
- State/local tax abatements

##### Tools

- Financing
- Training and technical assistance
- Policy changes

#### Workforce Development

##### Goals

- Employment
- Job retention
- Skills development
- Increased earnings

##### Key Actors

- Workforce Investment Boards
- Community and technical colleges

##### Financing

- Federal/state program funding (e.g., Employment Service, Workforce Investment Act, Adult Education, Vocational Rehabilitation, Career and Technical Education, state training funds)

##### Tools

- Job matching
- Job development
- Adult education
- Skills training

In recent years, however, these two worlds have begun to converge through more systemic policy and strategy development.<sup>5</sup> The pursuit of new *sectoral* and *cluster-based strategies* — often actively involving workforce intermediary organizations — have helped to align state and regional economic and workforce development strategies to address area economic needs.<sup>6</sup> Notable among these efforts are programs in cities (e.g., Austin and Houston, Texas), states (Idaho, Montana), and U.S. Department of Labor regional economic and workforce development initiatives that began in the past decade.<sup>7</sup> These efforts, drawing on a growing body of work,<sup>8</sup> approach economic and workforce development in a concerted fashion, and use industry clusters and sectors as basic organizing principles.

As a result, a new perspective has emerged among economic development strategists and policymakers that a state or region should have an adequate talent pipeline to support the industry sector that is the object of its economic development effort. For example, a region striving to develop a clean energy sector or a focus on “green” jobs may need access to significant numbers of entry-level and experienced and trained mid-skilled workers (such as installers and technicians), many of whom may be able to convert their skills from related industries.<sup>9</sup> On the other hand, economic development centered on biotechnology and bioscience may require a critical mass of graduate school-trained scientists and technical support workers, substantial university academic programs in these areas, and a range of mid-level technicians (e.g., lab assistants) who may get their education and training from local community and technical colleges.

## Promising State and Regional Practices that Actively Include Job Opportunities for People with Disabilities

As the need for skilled workers continues to be a focal point for current and future hiring and job creation, there are opportunities for policy to foster better job opportunities for everyone, including people with disabilities.

Some states and regions appear to be breaking new ground in terms of more closely aligning their economic and workforce development strategies while incorporating dedicated opportunities for individuals with disabilities. Two promising efforts are profiled in this brief — one in Connecticut/New York and the other in Colorado. Both efforts grew out of involvement with two time-limited federally sponsored grant programs — the *Disability Program Navigator (DPN) initiative*, which was launched as a joint effort of the U.S. Department of Labor’s Employment and Training Administration and the Social Security Administration in 2003,<sup>10</sup> and the *Workforce Innovation in Regional Economic Development (WIRED) initiative*, launched by the U.S. Department of Labor’s Employment and Training Administration in 2006.<sup>11</sup> DPN was seen at the time it was established as a response to the low numbers of participants with disabilities being served under Workforce Investment Act programs at One-Stop Career Centers. DPNs were established in One-Stops to help people with disabilities access and navigate programs that assist individuals with finding and retaining employment. While the federal DPN and WIRED discretionary grant programs are closed, many states continue to support navigators and regional economic development and workforce development efforts through other funding sources. In a number of states, navigators have continued their functions within the One-Stop system, including efforts “to improve linkages to the employer community, developing partnerships to leverage resources to promote education and career pathways of One-Stop clients with disabilities, and developing other demand-responsive strategies to meet employer recruitment and retention needs.”<sup>12</sup>

### Connecticut/New York Talent for Growth WIRED Project

The second-generation WIRED *Connecticut/New York Talent for Growth WIRED* project, which encompasses southwestern Connecticut and Putnam and Westchester Counties in New York, is built on a foundation of related efforts at The WorkPlace, Inc., the regional Workforce Investment Board for southwestern Connecticut.<sup>13</sup> The WorkPlace, Inc. has emphasized service to persons with disabilities since at least 2002 when it became an early participant in the federal DPN initiative, placing DPNs in its One-Stop Career Centers. A U.S. Department of Labor Work Incentive Grant supported a navigator in the Bridgeport One-Stop Career Center starting in 2004. When the grant ended in 2006, the board decided to absorb the DPN position via other funds because of its importance to the center’s operations. One of the board’s One-Stop Career Centers was also among the first

in the nation to become a Ticket to Work<sup>14</sup> site in 2003 and is now beginning to accrue returns from placing eligible individuals. In the early 2000s, the board also created a Regional Disability Task Force that has provided considerable guidance for its efforts.

Connecticut/New York Talent for Growth offers insights into strategies for aligning economic and workforce development to better serve those with disabilities. The project's orientation distinguishes it from many similar efforts by stressing the individual worker's skills and abilities and how they can address an employer's needs, instead of simply "marketing the disability" and hoping employers will hire individuals based on a philanthropic response. This new orientation has been reinforced through sales and marketing training for case managers across the region. The larger region and increased number of partners means more job opportunities for people (including persons with disabilities) and a larger workforce for businesses on both sides of the Connecticut-New York border.

Connecticut/New York Talent for Growth features several key components. First, it began with a comprehensive *strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, and threats analysis*, conducted in partnership with Norwalk Community College (in Connecticut), Westchester Community College (in New York), and the Business Council of Fairfield County (in Connecticut). The analysis included:

- Assessment of the demographics of individuals with disabilities;
- Regional mapping of the education, skills, experiential assets, and talents of unemployed and underemployed individuals with diverse disabilities;
- Identification of the educational makeup, employment status, and career sectors in which people with disabilities are represented;
- Detailed data analysis of the talent pipeline for people with disabilities, including the extent to which they are being trained in high-growth sectors;
- Asset mapping of the region's disability resources, including those already devoted to assessment, training, job placement, and support for people with diverse disabilities;
- Development of a gap and needs analysis to determine what resources are needed to increase the number of people with disabilities that can be included as members of the economic region's potential workforce pool; and
- A survey of employers to identify barriers to people with disabilities, tools and resources needed, and recommended systemic or structural changes.

The assessment resulted in the development of a Connecticut/New York Talent for Growth regional workforce plan released in March 2009, and the development and release, in October 2009, of a report titled, *The Hidden Workforce*, as well as the launch of a new Web site.<sup>15</sup>

Second, Connecticut/New York Talent for Growth participated in a comprehensive economic strategy and implementation plan for the region that involved engaging people with disabilities in One-Stop Career Center training and employment programs, and that looked to integrate employment opportunities for people with disabilities into the region's economic vision and its blueprint for high-growth jobs. Finally, Connecticut/New York Talent for Growth has been actively involving stakeholders and partners, such as community colleges, local employers, nonprofit community-based agencies, and others across the region in its disability and employment efforts.<sup>16</sup>

To date, according to Connecticut/New York Talent for Growth officials, the project's accomplishments have included:

- Helping a large employer (Walgreens) hire persons with disabilities to address its workforce needs,
- Supporting a multi-agency effort to place information about the benefits of hiring persons with disabilities into the Connecticut Department of Labor's quarterly tax form mailings to employers,
- Developing an employer toolkit with information from all of the agencies working with people with disabilities,<sup>17</sup>
- Conducting a review of state policies to eliminate barriers to hiring people with disabilities, and
- Increasing emphasis on the development of customized employment and work experience opportunities for people with disabilities.<sup>18</sup>

## Metro Denver WIRED Initiative

*The Metro Denver WIRED initiative* was launched as a first-generation WIRED site in early 2006. As stated in the project's September 2006 implementation plan:

*The Metro Denver Story is the tale of two regions. The first is a thriving and diversified economy propelled by the growing technology sectors and containing one of the highest average education levels in the nation. The second is a pipeline into the workforce from the school systems that is increasingly "leaking," resulting in a low percentage of Metro Denver's students finding their way to the high skill, high wage jobs that are being created in the region. These two different regions are on a collision course, as the failure of the pipeline becomes the failure of businesses in the region, and ultimately the failure of the regional economy. The phenomenon has become known as the "Colorado Paradox" and the recognition has caused increased anxiety among business, government officials, economic developers, educators, and other community leaders.<sup>19</sup>*

The Metro Denver Economic Development Corporation (EDC) and the Denver Office of Economic Development are coordinating the Metro Denver regional prosperity initiative "to integrate workforce development, economic development, and education on a regional level" to meet the needs of the aerospace, bioscience, energy, and information industries.<sup>20</sup> The project's goals are to:

- Develop and nurture a talented and skilled workforce for the region’s fastest-growing industries;
- Excel in science, technology, engineering, and math education;
- Offer an environment focused on business creation and development; and
- Establish minimum educational standards for workers.

Colorado WIN Partners, based at the University of Colorado Denver, is providing technical assistance to Metro Denver’s WIRED project and is helping with the analysis of data as part of a separate grant from the U.S. Department of Labor’s Employment and Training Administration through the Colorado Office of Workforce Development to bring opportunities for people with disabilities into the project.<sup>21</sup> Like southwestern Connecticut/New York, Colorado WIN Partners is focusing on ensuring that employers see people with disabilities as trained employees who can fill their needs; it does not “market the disability.”

Colorado WIN Partners piloted the initiative in two of Colorado’s Workforce Centers (One-Stops) through a Rehabilitation Services Administration Systems change grant in 1999 and was later an early implementation site for the national DPN initiative. Colorado WIN Partners, as part of the U.S. Department of Labor, Employment and Training Administration’s four-state national DPN study, proposed the DPN Maturity Model, which gauges the maturity of the DPN initiative from four pivotal factors: the degree and distribution of *disability expertise related to employment*, the *accessibility* of the One-Stop Career Center, the level of *problem solving* in which the DPN is primarily engaged, and the *sphere of influence* through which the navigator is engaged to effect change. Since the adoption of the model, Colorado WIN Partners has developed tools to further gauge the maturity of the DPN implementation at the state and local level. It has also developed state and local inventories that can be used by other states to analyze the level of implementation of the DPN initiative in their area with tips and tools for moving the initiative forward throughout the phases in their state.<sup>22</sup>

Metro Denver EDC is relying on Colorado WIN Partners to analyze the talent pipeline for the project, to point out where there are major leaks, and to provide substantial technical assistance with a focus on disability issues. For example, Colorado WIN Partners assisted in reviewing grant applications through the WIRED project to ensure inclusion of individuals with disabilities in proposed projects and provided technical assistance to subgrantees as appropriate. Also as part of this, Colorado WIN Partners developed two reports: a demographic snapshot of Metro Denver WIRED region titled, *Status of Individuals with Disabilities*, and the report of the Metro Denver WIRED region’s strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, and threats as it relates to people with disabilities titled, *WIRED from a Disability Perspective: SWOT Analysis*. Colorado WIN Partners also teamed with the Business and Education Talent Readiness Project and incorporated a series of positive role-model videos providing insight into the accomplishments of people sharing their own stories of eventual success after dealing with personal adversity. This included demonstrating how industry has overcome numerous challenges to hiring underrepresented groups, including persons with disabilities. Colorado WIN Partners also promoted a series of Tuesday Tours within the WIRED region in which special education and other teachers come to industry and discuss how they have modified their curricula to prepare students with disabilities for success in the workplace. According to the director of Colorado WIN Partners, the region’s workforce development system and many of its employers appear to have embraced activities and efforts to include people with disabilities in their regional economic and workforce development efforts. Additional activities affecting Colorado’s entire system include the creation of a statewide stakeholders work group (Project Train) in 2002 to enhance the capacity of the system to provide employment services to people with disabilities. Colorado WIN Partners also provides online disability awareness training for workforce center professionals and others on a variety of topics (e.g., universal

awareness, assistive technology, and serving customers with disabilities in the workforce center).<sup>23</sup> The online training effort now has 10 topics that lead to a certificate of completion. This project has been completed by more than 200 Workforce Center staff during FY 2007, 2008, and 2009. In addition, beginning in 2008 as part of Colorado's Innovation in Leadership and Service Delivery Awards, Workforce Regions may receive incentive dollars for addressing special populations. Each Colorado Workforce Region may receive incentive dollars for completing the following objective: Define and implement a policy stating that all new hires will complete the online disability awareness training as part of new employee orientation. Regions that have already drafted and implemented this policy may receive incentive dollars for each staff person who successfully completes the online disability awareness training, for up to five staff members during the program year. Each objective/option has an annual cap on the incentive dollars through Colorado's Workforce Development Council and its Continuous Improvement Management System project.<sup>24</sup>

## Recommended Directions: Including People with Disabilities in Regional Prosperity Strategies

Efforts to incorporate employment opportunities for people with disabilities into state and regional economic and workforce development policies and programs continue to be a work in progress. The initiatives in Colorado and southwestern Connecticut/New York offer some early lessons and insights for other regions and states wishing to incorporate the employment of people with disabilities as part of their economic prosperity efforts. Policymakers interested in launching such dedicated efforts should consider the following lessons and issues as they move forward:

- Incorporating job opportunities for people with disabilities entails focusing on workers' skill attainment and ability to meet employers' needs, not looking for a philanthropic response or "marketing the disability." Employers must also be routinely engaged so that workforce system partners understand industry and employer-specific workforce needs. In this way, mutual benefit can be expected in any effort to include people with disabilities in regional economic and workforce development strategies.
- Despite substantive differences between economic and workforce development policies, they share some common goals and can be linked through sectoral and cluster-based strategies via intermediary organizations. Intermediaries — which can be local Workforce Investment Boards, unions, community colleges, or other nonprofit organizations — operate through arrangements ranging from the formal to the informal. Such approaches can be accessed and used by any intermediary organization that is working to help people with disabilities move to employment.
- Understanding the skills of the individual job seeker with a disability, and helping them acquire the skills and education in demand by employers, is critical. Continuous education for employers — about the employment desire and potential of persons with disabilities, and about assistive technologies and other supports that are available — needs to play a key role in these efforts.
- Simply educating economic and workforce actors about disability concerns is insufficient to bring about a stronger, more substantive focus on the needs of persons with disabilities in these policy arenas. Employers must be routinely engaged on many levels on a continuing basis to make the case that trained, skilled workers who happen to have a disability can make a real contribution to an employer's bottom line.

## Useful Resources

*Information on Regional Economic Development and Workforce Development Efforts, including the WIRED Initiative.* See <http://www.doleta.gov/WIRED/> for additional information about the WIRED initiative and other regional economic development efforts fostered by the U.S. Department of Labor's Employment and Training Administration.

Visit <http://www.workforce3one.org/find> for information about regional economic development activities. Search "Regional Economic Development" for the latest news, research, and information about state and federal efforts to align regional economic development efforts with workforce development activities.

*Federal Efforts on Disability and Employment.* Additional information about national disability and employment activities can be found at: <http://disability.workforce3one.org/>, or on the U.S. Department of Labor's Office of Disability Employment Policy Web site: <http://www.dol.gov/odep>. Information about Disability Program Navigators can be found at <http://www.dpnavigator.net>.

*Colorado WIN Partners.* For further information, contact: Judith Emery, Director, at 303.315.1272, 303.837.8964 TTY, or [judy.emery@ucdenver.edu](mailto:judy.emery@ucdenver.edu). More information is available at: <http://www.cowinpartners.org/>.

*The Workplace, Inc.* For further information, contact: Joe Carbone, President and CEO, [jcarbone@workplace.org](mailto:jcarbone@workplace.org), or Adrienne Parkmond, Vice President for Operations, [aparkmond@workplace.org](mailto:aparkmond@workplace.org). More information can be found at <http://www.workplace.org/WIRED.asp>.

*National Governors Association, Center for Best Practices.* A wealth of information on economic and workforce development policies and programs is available at: <http://www.nga.org/>.

## End Notes

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10. Chafkin, R. “The Disability Program Navigator (DPN) and DOL-ETA Initiatives.” Presentation for the November 21, 2008 American Public Human Services Association teleconference. As of 2009, the Disability Program Navigator grants are closed.
11. In the early 2000s, the U.S. Department of Labor sought to incorporate the inclusion of people with disabilities into WIRED projects through use of the Disability Program Navigators. In 2008, the U.S. Department of Labor’s Employment and Training Administration created and disseminated a “disability perspective” template for incorporation into WIRED projects. According to the U.S. Department of Labor, Disability Program Navigators were intended to serve as the initial point of contact and resource for incorporating opportunities for individuals with disabilities into regional economic development strategies.
12. U.S. Department of Labor, Employment and Training Administration, “Announcement of Employment and Training Administration’s New Video and Information Brief on Promoting the Employment of Disabled Veterans through the One-Stop Career Centers,” *Training and Employment Notice*, No. 28-09, January 29, 2010.
13. Interview with Adrienne Parkmond, Vice President of Operations, The WorkPlace, Inc., January 22, 2009.
14. The Ticket to Work and Self-Sufficiency Program is an employment program funded by the Social Security Administration for people with disabilities who are interested in working. The Ticket Program is part of the Ticket to Work and Work Incentives Improvement Act of 1999, legislation designed to increase opportunities and choices for Social Security disability beneficiaries to obtain employment, vocational rehabilitation, and other

support services from public and private providers, employers, and other organizations, and to remove many of the barriers that previously influenced people's decisions about going to work because of the concerns over losing health care coverage. Visit [http://www.yourtickettowork.com/program\\_info](http://www.yourtickettowork.com/program_info) for additional information.

15. See <http://www.TheHiddenWorkforce.com>.

16. Visit <http://talent4growth.org/live/about-us> for a list of the Connecticut/New York Talent for Growth WIRED project partners.

17. The employer toolkit can be accessed at <http://legacy.connect-ability.com/toolkit/index.html>.

18. Communication with Adrienne Parkmond, Vice President of Operations, The WorkPlace, Inc., May 1, 2009 and with Diana Napier, The WorkPlace, Inc., October 29, 2010.

19. See <http://www.workforceatm.org/sections/pdf/2006/DenverMetroRegion.pdf>.

20. See <http://www.metrodenver.org/workforce-profiles/WIRED/goals.html>.

21. Interview with Judith Emery, Director, Colorado WIN Partners, University of Colorado Denver, January 23, 2009.

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23. Colorado Workforce Development Council and Colorado Department of Labor and Employment, *Winning in a Competitive Economy: WIA Annual Report, PY 2007* (Denver, 2007).

24. Interview with Judith Emery, October 12, 2010.

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## About ODEP

The Office of Disability Employment Policy (ODEP) provides national leadership on disability employment policy by developing and influencing the use of evidence-based disability employment policies and practices, building collaborative partnerships, and delivering authoritative and credible data on employment of people with disabilities.

## About the NTAR Leadership Center

Founded in 2007 under a grant/contract with the Office of Disability Employment Policy at the U.S. Department of Labor, the NTAR Leadership Center's mission is to build capacity and leadership at the federal, state, and local levels to enable change across workforce development and disability-specific systems that will increase employment and economic self-sufficiency for adults with disabilities.

## Consortium Partners

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Program for Disability Research, School of Management and Labor Relations, Rutgers, The State University of New Jersey

Center for Workers with Disabilities, American Public Human Services Association

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