

OPPORTUNITIES FOR PEOPLE WITH DISABILITIES UNDER WIA REAUTHORIZATION

**Testimony Before the U.S. Department of Labor on the Reauthorization of the Workforce
Investment Act (WIA)**

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INTRODUCTION

Good afternoon, Deputy Secretary Harris, Assistant Secretary Oates, and Assistant Secretary Martinez. My name is Maria Heidkamp, and I am a Senior Research Project Manager at the John J. Heldrich Center for Workforce Development at Rutgers, The State University of New Jersey. I am also the Director of the State Leaders Innovation Institute, an initiative under the National Technical Assistance and Research Center to Promote Leadership for Increasing Employment and Economic Independence of Adults with Disabilities — a technical assistance center supported by a grant from the U.S. Department of Labor's Office of Disability Employment Policy (ODEP) and housed at the Heldrich Center.

Today, I am pleased to offer testimony about the opportunities that WIA reauthorization could provide that could build a more inclusive, integrated, and stronger workforce system to better serve individuals with disabilities who want to work.

As one of the nation's leading university-based research and policy centers dedicated to the American workforce, the Heldrich Center believes that promoting employment for people with disabilities — and other individuals facing various barriers to the labor market — is an important policy objective. Coming from a research organization that has been studying the evolution and effectiveness of the American employment and education system, my remarks today are grounded in what the Heldrich Center has learned from over ten years of experience studying the Workforce Investment Act (WIA) as well as other federal and state education, workforce, and

disability employment programs. It is also based on what we have learned to date from our recent activities in over twenty states engaged in our federally supported NTAR Leadership Center.

All in all, our past and present experience includes evaluating a wide variety of state and local workforce and education programs and researching promising state practices in such areas as the role of postsecondary education in state workforce and economic development, green jobs and renewable energy, older workers, rapid response and transition services, incumbent worker training, and innovative One-Stop Center practices. It also includes an extensive body of research related to moving people with disabilities to employment. These experiences provide us with a belief that disability employment should be at the core of national employment policy, including but not limited to the Workforce Investment Act. We applaud Secretary Solis' goal of good jobs for everyone, including people with disabilities.

Unfortunately, although the past decade has seen the introduction of a number of new federal programs, policies, and initiatives designed to promote employment for people with disabilities, there has been limited progress in raising the employment rate for this population. While there are several theories to explain this lack of progress, one important factor is the fragmented state of our national workforce system. Job seekers with disabilities currently face a patchwork of programs — some with contradictory messages about employment expectations for people with disabilities — that are overseen by multiple federal agencies, and different layers of government.

The research conducted by the Heldrich Center leads to a clear conclusion: the employment of people with disabilities can be enhanced by using the reauthorization of WIA to reorganize and redirect these fragmented workforce development, education, and human service agency programs that are intended to help people with disabilities enter the workforce. Quite simply, integrated employment outcomes are difficult to achieve within fragmented and inconsistent delivery systems. Today's status quo challenges many job seekers trying to obtain vital employment services and supports, but it presents especially complex obstacles for people with disabilities.

Fundamental changes are clearly needed to improve the employment rate of people with disabilities, but will not happen unless there is:

- **Unified federal policy** affirming that people with disabilities are an integral and valued part of the nation's talent pipeline and should be recognized across the board in federal policy as essential participants in the economic growth and prosperity of states, regions, and the country;
- **Federal program alignment** at all levels, across the traditional labor, education, and health and human services agencies at a minimum, to promote the employment of individuals with disabilities, along with clear direction and incentives within federal programs to eliminate barriers experienced by people with disabilities;

- **Recognition that individuals with disabilities should have equal access to high-quality workforce and educational services and supports** so that they can best prepare for, secure, and remain in competitive employment. Universal and inclusive access to mainstream education and training (including postsecondary education) is vital to achieving long-term career and employment goals for everyone; and
- **An investment in rigorous research and evaluation** that informs federal, state, and local practice and provides policymakers with evidence-based data about what works and what does not work to move people with disabilities into employment and economic self-sufficiency.

As the United States works to recover from the worst recession in sixty years, state and local policymakers continue to work to develop and implement initiatives intended to increase employment for people with disabilities. To assist them, the Heldrich Center — through its NTAR Leadership Center — has been working closely with a coalition of twenty-three states to develop more inclusive and forward-thinking policies and practices to promote the employment of people with disabilities.

Our staff has devoted significant resources to assisting the first three states — Connecticut, Maryland, and Minnesota — in an intensive State Leaders Innovation Institute (SLII), as well as working with and educating the twenty other states in a nationwide State Peer Leaders Network (SPLN) to become leading examples for pioneering models to promote employment for people with disabilities by:

1. better aligning state workforce development, economic development, and disability employment efforts, and
2. enhancing partnerships between business, government, and community groups.

Through our NTAR Leadership Center, our states are seeking ways to include people with disabilities in their various high-skills, high-growth, sector and regional development strategies.

Although our state activities under the NTAR Leadership Center are fairly new, we can already see that even states such as Maryland, Minnesota, and Connecticut, selected because of their substantial track records in fostering innovation within their workforce, economic development, and disability systems, as well as other states in our network such as Virginia and the District of Columbia, face difficult hurdles to disability employment during this period of enormous economic turmoil. Nevertheless, their experiences since 2007 provide us with some insights relevant to WIA reauthorization.

Challenge #1: Building Cross-agency Collaboration and Partnerships

To participate in our State Leaders Innovation Institute, we requested that governors designate high-level, cross-agency teams that included representatives from workforce, economic development, disability employment, and others. In addition, the three states have all included postsecondary education, with other partners including corrections, transportation, and housing. Enormous time and energy has been spent in our three states collaborating and building trusted relationships across a multi-agency system of workforce development, health and human services, disability employment, and economic development. However, we are encouraged by the early results of the states' relationship-building efforts and are learning that *sustained leadership and interagency collaboration, especially with new partners such as economic development, is critical to serving an individual with a disability in an integrated fashion in preparation for competitive employment.*

- **Opportunity for Change through WIA Reauthorization: Stronger language, incentives, and rewards for integrated efforts and interagency collaboration so that it is not an exception but a requirement that is real in practice not just on paper. Establishing clear expectations for collaboration among multiple partners, instituting an accountability structure for states that reinforces collaboration, not fragmentation, and establishing a less complex accountability system that rewards collaboration, is imperative.**

Challenge #2: Employer Engagement

Engaging employers is an ongoing challenge for the workforce development system at large, and is magnified in disability employment efforts. All of our states are experimenting with, and struggling with, a variety of approaches to overcome this obstacle.

Nationally, sector-based approaches are proving to be an effective strategy for the workforce development system to both engage employers and serve job seekers. For example, Minnesota, with its relatively long history of regional sector partnership projects, is now starting to make efforts to ensure people with disabilities are included in these initiatives, in particular in health care and advanced manufacturing sectors, and that initiatives are designed to reflect a broad range of job seeker needs.

Connecticut's State Leaders Innovation Institute team, lead by the Governor's Office and The WorkPlace, Inc., is working to combine the employer outreach efforts of the Department of Labor and the One-Stop system, community colleges, corrections, and others partners, with the Bureau of Rehabilitation Services and the Medicaid Infrastructure Grant's ConnectAbility initiative. The SLII team is partnering with the employer community through Connecticut's Business Leadership Network and striving to find ways to present a unified and consistent face to employers who are interested in hiring people with disabilities. They are also working to

promote to employers the message of disability as an important element of workplace diversity, as Assistant Secretary Martinez herself did in her remarks this past Labor Day.

Maryland's SLII team, under the leadership of the Secretaries of the Department of Disabilities and the Department of Labor, is reaching out to employers who may be relocating to Maryland as part of decisions made by the Base Realignment and Closure (BRAC) Commission. They have held focus groups to study the recruitment practices and skill needs of these particular employers. In response, they are developing materials to help job seekers with disabilities and others learn how to prepare for a security clearance, and in conjunction with the Department of Business and Economic Development, will be conducting targeted job fairs. As part of its employer outreach efforts, Maryland also plans to offer technical assistance to employers around best practices for employment of people with disabilities.

Finally, the NTAR Leadership Center is in the process of completing national research on how state and community service providers work with employers to address their labor market needs. Our findings point to the importance of close local, regional, and national collaborations with and between service organizations. This includes the central role of workforce intermediaries, whether played by traditional vocational rehabilitation agencies, community-based organizations such as Jewish Vocational Services, or employer associations such as business leadership networks or chambers of commerce, such as the disabilityworks initiative of the Chicagoland Chamber of Commerce. The research shows that these collaborations enable and incentivize employers to recruit, hire, train, and support employees with disabilities in the competitive labor market, often serving as a one-stop operation for employers.

For example, dynamic collaborations in Connecticut between state agencies from vocational rehabilitation, economic development, workforce development, and others played, and continue to play, a vital role in facilitating the employment of many individuals with disabilities at a new Walgreens distribution center. We look forward to sharing with you the lessons learned from more than fifteen case studies, each highlighting different partnerships, each blending funds from different sources including but not limited to WIA, and all resulting in competitive employment in the community for people with disabilities.

- **Opportunity for Change through WIA Reauthorization: Reauthorization of WIA is an opportunity to research and experiment with better employer engagement strategies, and support new efforts that build on the most promising strategies.**

Challenge #3: Seamless Career Advancement for People with Disabilities

All three states have come to the recognition that *people with disabilities need to be as prepared and as credentialed as other job seekers if they are to be seen as essential workers to employers.* States such as Minnesota are experimenting with new programs and service delivery approaches that blend promising strategies that states know from disability employment (for example, using supported employment, customized assessment strategies, and dedicated navigation) and the

workforce fields (for example, using sector strategies, career pathways, credentialing, on-the-job training, internships, and registered apprenticeships) for all job seekers with barriers to employment, including people with disabilities.

With support from the NTAR Leadership Center, Minnesota is launching a pilot project in Duluth that will combine:

- a hands-on career exploration model that has recently been tested in health care and manufacturing settings, called Camps 2 Careers;
- a FastTRAC career development model that is based on “stackable credentials;” and
- the integration of Adult Basic Education, non-credit occupational training, and for-credit postsecondary degree and certificate programs.

The goal of the Duluth pilot is to encourage services to be universally designed to ensure that people with disabilities are able to take advantage of mainstream training and career counseling opportunities, and to share the lessons learned there across the workforce development system.

In a related initiative, Minnesota is using federal stimulus dollars to develop what it is calling an Extended Training Opportunity (ETO) pilot project in manufacturing. It will enable people with disabilities as well as dislocated workers to participate in on-the-job training at employer worksites, gaining marketable skills and potential credit from an area technical college, with supports provided for those with more significant barriers to accessing the labor market. Both of these Minnesota examples seem to be in keeping with what Assistant Secretary Oates called for in recent Senate testimony, saying that “reauthorization should create a modernized system that provides seamless career advancement services” for a wide range of job seekers.

- **Opportunity for Change through WIA Reauthorization: Reauthorization of WIA is an opportunity to ensure that language pertaining to allowable services for funding be used for the broadest and most flexible type of services to suit the employment needs of the diverse array of job seekers.**

Challenge #4: Need for Rigorous Research and Evaluation and Data Analysis

While all of our states go to great lengths to learn from each other and adopt the best and most promising practices that they discover, there remains *a paucity of information about evidence-based practices that result in significant, scalable, and sustainable employment outcomes* and that are cost effective for states that are strapped for resources. More often than not, states are reluctant to adopt or scale up marketed or publicized promising practices without data on their return on investment.

In addition to the need for evidence-based research, our states also recognize that data can be a powerful tool for policy development and accountability. Today, however, *too many states are data rich and often ‘intelligence’ poor*. That is, they lack a clear understanding of how to translate the raw numbers they gather into practical disability employment policy options. Our states understand the necessity of being ‘intelligence-rich’ and know they must analyze their data to help them reach their goals. Yet, finding the resources and time to support these endeavors is difficult. Maryland is striving to develop a new cross-agency system to track employment outcomes of people with disabilities. Tentatively called “WorkStats,” it will provide regularly updated information on the employment outcomes and experiences of people with disabilities who receive services from different agencies — information that can be used to inform policy decisions and evaluate programs.

- **Opportunity for Change through WIA Reauthorization: Reauthorization of WIA is an opportunity to support rigorous research and evaluation that informs state and local practice and provides policymakers with evidence-based data, as well as the adoption of new dissemination techniques and state-to-state peer learning opportunities that get evidence into the hands of influential state policymakers.**
- **Opportunity for Change through WIA Reauthorization: Reauthorization of WIA is an opportunity to support not only stronger data collection, but provide stronger resources dedicated to the *analysis* of the data from WIA and across other federal programs to inform program operations, improve performance, and make it more transparent to the public.**

Challenge #5: Making WIA and One-Stop Services Inclusive for All

The One-Stop Career Centers are still not viewed as the most effective venue for people with disabilities to access employment and training. While all three states in our Leadership Institute are committed to working with and within the One-Stop/Workforce Investment Board framework, they recognize that considerably more work needs to be done to make them more inclusive and truly a ‘one stop’ for all job seekers. Our states provided countless examples showing that for many people with disabilities, access to core and eventually other WIA services at a One Stop remain a challenge.

In September, the Secretary of Maryland’s Department of Disabilities took a significant step and introduced a resolution that was approved by the Governor’s Workforce Investment Board calling for the adoption of universal design principles and strategies to be implemented throughout Maryland’s One-Stop Centers. The resolution recognizes that Maryland’s workforce development system, including the local Workforce Investment Boards and One-Stop Career Centers, must serve a diverse range of customers, including individuals with disabilities, and that it is critical to design services to benefit job seekers who possess a wide range of learning styles, languages, educational levels, intelligences, and abilities.

Minnesota, under its Medicaid Infrastructure Grant project entitled *Pathways to Employment*, has started an internship program for people with disabilities to work in the state's One-Stop facilities (called Workforce Centers). According to state observers, the project has not only provided valuable work experience for people with disabilities, in many cases resulting in their attaining competitive positions, but it has also affected the attitudes of the staff in terms of the capabilities of people with disabilities.

- **Opportunity for Change through WIA Reauthorization: Reauthorization of WIA is an opportunity to support and reinforce the necessity to provide inclusive access and services that benefit job seekers with a wide range of learning styles, languages, educational levels, intelligences, and abilities. WIA language should require One-Stops, workforce development partners, and other stakeholders to institute policies and practices that reflect the best principles of universal design in the delivery of workforce development services.**

CONCLUSION

The nation cannot improve the employment rate of people with disabilities just by restructuring WIA. The reauthorization of WIA, however, does have enormous potential to provide a platform by which we, as a country, can reexamine what is working and what is not, and put in place a new system that creates greater opportunities for millions of Americans with disabilities to be better prepared, acknowledged as valuable talent, and have greater access into high-growth industries in the labor market.

Greater recognition of the critical need for skill development and education, rising societal expectations surrounding the employment of people with disabilities, federal policy that comprehensively expects and provides opportunities for full inclusion in the labor market, addressing the constraints of separate federal funding streams and fragmented programs, and the steady recovery of the American economy are several factors that will determine measurable improvements in employment for individuals with disabilities.

States and communities with innovative policies, and coordinated workforce development systems aligned with employers are emerging as leaders. Yet, much more can be done. Building on what we have learned to date from innovative states and our national research on collaborations, investing in stronger research and evaluation, and taking steps through dialogue around the reauthorization of WIA, will help us to build a more responsive, sustainable, flexible, and coordinated workforce education infrastructure that better serves people with and without disabilities.

Our vision, shared by our network of states, is the development of a workforce investment system that will give people with disabilities, like anyone else, a chance to work up the skill ladder, moving from career exploration to training to jobs to careers, and helping make Secretary

Solis' quest of a good job for everyone a reality. In keeping with this belief that people with disabilities need to be seen as part of the nation's talent pipeline and included in all sector and other initiatives, we are hosting a Green Jobs for People with Disabilities roundtable in December. We hope that we will uncover examples of states including people with disabilities in all aspects of their green jobs proposals to ETA, including the Pathways Out Of Poverty.

If some of the lessons learned from research and pilot experiences of our states and others can be incorporated into a reauthorized WIA, we believe this country will have a greater chance of vastly improving the employment of people with disabilities in the American labor market.

Thank you for this opportunity to testify.