

## Leading the Way: The First Year of the State Leaders Innovation Institute

Prepared by the Corporation for a Skilled Workforce

### Executive Summary

State and local policymakers are beginning to realize that for a region to thrive economically, an inclusive workforce that values the contributions of all citizens, including people with disabilities, is a necessity. This realization has resulted in an increased commitment to expand employment opportunities for individuals with disabilities. In turn, this has contributed to efforts in some states to pursue “systems change” across workforce development and disability employment programs. These systems change efforts are characterized by the bringing together of actors from across a disparate range of generic, mainstream employment, and disability-specific agencies, programs, and services to look for areas where collaboration and partnership seem likely to produce better outcomes than each entity working in its own silo. Advocates of systems change believe the efforts will reduce some of the hurdles that have prevented adults with disabilities from successfully participating in the workforce.

In April 2007, the National Technical Assistance and Research Leadership Center to Promote Employment and Economic Independence for Adults with Disabilities (the NTAR Leadership Center) selected cross-agency state teams from Connecticut, Maryland, and Minnesota to participate in a pilot project called the State Leaders Innovation Institute (SLII). The goal of the SLII is to promote systems change that will improve employment outcomes for adults with disabilities by encouraging closer connections between disability employment agencies and actors and the workforce and economic development systems in each state.

The SLII is based on the premise that although there have been examples of innovative and successful models to help achieve employment for adults with disabilities, the techniques and lessons from these models may lead to greater results if they are integrated and made relevant to both the generic workforce development system and the state’s economic development priorities. Many states, including the three SLII pilot states, have made progress in reorienting their workforce development systems to be more “demand-driven,” or focused on meeting the needs of employers and regional economies as well as individual job seekers. The NTAR Leadership Center asked the SLII states to encourage similar connections between their disability employment efforts and their demand-focused workforce efforts to ensure that people with disabilities are included in sector strategies and treated as part of the regional talent pipeline. In order to facilitate the path toward systems change, the NTAR Leadership Center asked the governors of each state to designate appropriate leadership and membership for state teams, including representatives from their own office and from state workforce development, economic development, disability employment agencies, and others.

Disability and workforce development systems change initiatives include efforts to improve the functioning and coordination of a myriad of institutions, policies, laws, behaviors, and programs to better serve both job seekers and employers. One challenge to these efforts is that many of these programs and policies are not connected in any formal sense as a “system” and do not come together naturally in the absence of concerted efforts. While progress toward systems change can be incentivized by policy or funding changes or encouraged by a particular pilot project and other opportunities, it always begins with and relies on dedicated leaders and champions. As a recent Annie E. Casey Foundation report on the subject explained, “Bureaucratic systems tend to resist change.

It requires the leadership of champions and other change agents to foster innovation in systems, to take new innovations to scale, and to sustain the changes over time.”<sup>1</sup>

Systems change is difficult and time-consuming work that requires leaders, managers, frontline staff, employers, and individual consumers of services to change how they operate. Because the results of systems change can be difficult to quantify, this report seeks to capture aspects of the process each state team underwent in the first phase of their work. The SLII project began in mid-2008, following a kick-off meeting held at Rutgers University in July and will officially conclude in late 2010. This report was researched by an outside team from the Corporation for a Skilled Workforce in early 2009. It chronicles some of what the three state teams were doing in their first year of the project. It also includes reflections by team leaders and members on the process.

Based on their experiences during the first year, Connecticut, Maryland, and Minnesota team leaders have said they believe participating in the SLII has permanently changed the dialogue in their states, ensuring that issues relating to the employment of people with disabilities will increasingly be part of all future workforce development conversations. This is a considerable accomplishment, especially given the depressed economy and high unemployment rates since the recession that began in December 2007, as well as the low labor force participation rates of the past several years, particularly for people with disabilities.

*As a direct result of participation in the SLII, the Connecticut team has:*

- Worked more closely with Connect-Ability, the state’s Medicaid Infrastructure Grant (MIG), and a broad team composed of workforce development, community colleges, corrections, vocational rehabilitation, economic development, the employer community, and other partners to jointly address more thoroughly issues surrounding employer engagement;
- Conducted a widespread inventory of all One-Stop Career Centers and community colleges to determine the availability of Assistive Technology and developed a plan to address the gaps and improve the capacity of One-Stop Career Centers to use this technology; and
- Made a commitment to exploring and developing State as Model Employer policy changes.

*As a direct result of their participation in the SLII, the Maryland team has:*

- Contributed to the adoption of a resolution at the Governor’s Workforce Investment Board on the implementation of Universal Design principles in the state’s One-Stop Career Centers;
- Developed a plan identifying specific workforce development, housing, and transportation action steps to encourage the inclusion of people with disabilities as part of Maryland’s talent pipeline for jobs connected to the Base Realignment and Closure Commission (BRAC) expansions in Maryland;
- Conducted a focus group with employers considered likely to relocate to Maryland as part of the BRAC expansions to identify recruitment strategies and skill needs, resulting in the development of several job seeker fact sheets around security clearances, asset development, and financial literacy;
- Executed interagency memoranda of understanding between the Maryland Department of Business and Economic Development, the Maryland Department of Labor, Licensing, and Regulation, and the Maryland Department of Disabilities to promote the inclusion of people with disabilities as part of the state’s BRAC plans;
- In partnership with Harford Community College, developed a webinar series on essential workplace skills for job seekers; and
- Begun work on the development of WorkStats, a cross-agency data system.

*As a direct result of their participation in the SLII, the Minnesota team has:*

- Crafted a vision of a fully integrated and collaborative workforce development system that encompasses the state’s network of one-stop WorkForce Centers, Vocational Rehabilitation Services, K-12 education, Department of Human Services, Department of Education, and the business community;
- Begun testing this vision with a regional pilot project, with preliminary results indicating that active collaboration by all participants in the career development continuum produces time and process efficiencies, and that including employers as partners can increase their understanding of the skills of people with disabilities and improve the probability of employment for program participants; and
- Made a significant commitment through the Minnesota Department of Employment and Economic Development’s Workforce Development Division to: embed Universal Design principles in both the physical space and program planning for the one-stop WorkForce Centers; educate and train other WorkForce Center partners in Universal Design principles; and review the Division’s operational policies to ensure they are supportive of Universal Design.

In addition to the specific achievements in each state, several cross-cutting themes have emerged. They are:

- *The presence or development of a unifying philosophy and strategic goal enables systems change teams to be focused and stay “on message.”* For example, Maryland’s governor has proclaimed a commitment to there being “No Spare Marylander,” a mantra team members refer to often.
- *Deep involvement of leadership enables teams to make decisions and deliver.* In all three states, the governor’s signature on the initial letter of application to the NTAR Leadership Center served as the stamp of approval that galvanized action by state agencies. In spite of competing priorities, the sustained leadership and dedication of the team leaders has helped the teams succeed in their efforts for systems change.
- *Relationship and trust building are keys to interagency collaboration.* In all three states, some of the team members knew each other and had worked together on previous projects. However, in each case, the SLII provided an important cross-agency venue for new conversations and new partnerships toward a common goal expressed by the respective governors’ offices.
- *Progress toward disability employment efforts is cumulative and experiential.* All three state teams had the opportunity to learn about and consider adopting service delivery approaches that blend the best knowledge states have gleaned from disability employment (including but not limited to supported employment and Customized Employment) and from the workforce fields (e.g., sector strategies, career pathways, credentialing, internships, and apprenticeships) and are applying those lessons to their efforts concerning systems change.
- *Building on existing success leads to systems change more rapidly than creating an entirely new initiative.* In Connecticut, for example, the team chose to coordinate closely with Connect-Ability rather than start a totally new effort. Likewise, Minnesota is building on existing pilot initiatives, striving to make the models more universally available to people with disabilities and other job seekers. Minnesota is also taking advantage of the resources of its Medicaid Infrastructure Grant (MIG), Pathways to Employment. MIGs have provided substantial funding to many states to support the competitive employment of people with disabilities. The three SLII states have each forged ties to their MIGs, encouraging the participation of MIG leaders as key SLII team members and promoting MIG-funded activities. They have also successfully leveraged MIG resources.

The three SLII states have also reported some common challenges to their work, including:

- *State and federal funding silos are a common challenge* across the states, and blending and braiding funds at the federal level can sometimes face resistance from advocacy groups who fear their programs will be subsumed or lost if they do not remain separate from other funding streams. Demonstrations in blending and braiding of funds are essential in the short term; educating policymakers and key state leaders to change the silos is essential in the long term.
- *Attitudes toward people with disabilities and work continue to be a challenge*, including the attitudes of the disability community, employers, service delivery staff, and people with disabilities themselves. Many stakeholders are only slowly starting to believe that work, especially work in competitive employment, is a viable and reasonable option for people with disabilities, including those with significant disabilities. The SLII states are encouraging opportunities for internships, on-the-job training, and other types of work experience, which benefits both the job seeker with a disability and the attitudes of employers and service providers.
- *Engaging employers is an ongoing challenge* for the workforce development system at large and is magnified for the disability community. The SLII states are experimenting with a variety of approaches to overcome this obstacle. Nationally, and in states such as Minnesota, Maryland, and Connecticut, sector-based approaches are proving to be an effective strategy.
- *The complexity of benefits, services, and funding streams that are available to support people with disabilities to employment is confusing* to workforce professionals, as well as to people with disabilities. In particular, there is a widespread lack of understanding of how Medicaid funding fits into the employment equation and about the potential impact of various asset development strategies to make work pay and to increase economic advancement for people with disabilities.
- *The Workforce Investment Act-funded One-Stop Career Centers are still not uniformly viewed as an effective avenue for people with disabilities* to access employment and training. Considerably more work needs to be done in the area of Universal Design and staff professional development before One-Stops can truly be a “one-stop” for all job seekers.

## End Note

1. Herbert, S. *Changing Systems is Like Moving a Mountain: And Other Insights from Successful Workforce Leaders* (Baltimore: The Annie E. Casey Foundation, 2010)

## 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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