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## **New Jersey's Challenge: Moving People with Disabilities to Work**

A Report Based on  
New Jersey's Challenge:  
A Summit on Moving People with Disabilities to Work

Sponsored by:  
The New Jersey Council on Developmental Disabilities

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## 1. Executive Summary

Disability remains a barrier to obtaining competitive employment for thousands of New Jersey residents. According to a recent Harris poll, only 35% of people with disabilities are employed full- or part-time — a rate that has remained largely unchanged since 1986.<sup>1</sup> People with disabilities are underrepresented in the labor market, despite the desire and ability to work and the existence of myriad government programs to increase labor market participation (the efficacy of which lack authoritative government statistics).<sup>2</sup> Although many employers express a willingness to employ people with disabilities, misconceptions regarding hiring and accommodation abound. In addition, many disabled adults lost the incentive to work during the 1990s when it became easier for them to qualify for Social Security or Social Security Disability Insurance benefits.<sup>3</sup>

This summit examined the barriers to work that continue to exist for people with disabilities, as well as what supports and services are most critical to helping people with developmental and other disabilities enter and succeed in the workplace. Participants identified the four key stakeholders critical to people with disabilities (particularly severe disabilities) finding and keeping a job: jobseekers themselves, their family/caregivers, employers, and service providers/disability agencies. Each stakeholder plays a unique role in facilitating — or hindering — the employment of people with disabilities.

In both the morning work groups and afternoon discussion, a number of major themes emerged:

- **Better Career Education for Jobseekers with Disabilities.** People with disabilities need both hard and soft skills to enter and succeed in the workplace. However, many job seekers with disabilities lack the prior job experience or training that hone these skills, nor do they have the same access to higher education.
- **Better and More Coordinated Access to Employers.** Access to the New Jersey business community is crucial but lacking, and more forums for communication around the issue of people with disabilities and employment are necessary. The challenge is to increase access to the business community in order to educate employers about the availability of people with disabilities as an untapped labor

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<sup>1</sup> National Organization on Disability, *2004 Survey of Americans with Disabilities*, June 2004. Accessed at <http://www.nod.org/stats/>.

<sup>2</sup> Brian Tumulty, "Law hasn't boosted disabled hiring." *Florida Today*. 9/5/04. Accessed at <http://www.floridatoday.com/!NEWSROOM/moneystoryB0906DISABLED.htm>

<sup>3</sup> Ibid. The income ceilings placed on disabled job seekers collecting Social Security or Social Security Disability Insurance are such that many are at risk of losing their benefits and health coverage should they become employed.

pool, as well as regarding the services agencies can provide in support of workers with disabilities.

- **Important Role of Service Providers and Disability Agencies.** Service providers and disability agencies provide crucial support and services that help people with disabilities enter the workplace. Service providers, in particular, work directly with both clients and employers. However, service providers argue that the current funding structure of disability programs often hinders service provision and note that employment as an outcome is not given sufficient priority among policymakers, providers, families, and government funding programs.
- **Important Role of Family and Other Caregivers.** The family members and caregivers of people with disabilities (particularly people with severe disabilities and youth with disabilities) are key stakeholders in many strategies and practices regarding employment of disabled workers. However, many caregivers focus on issues such as housing and personal care, not employment.
- **Lack of Focus on Employment.** Like many caregivers, service providers, funding organizations, and people with disabilities themselves do not always consider employment a priority. However, as more young adults with disabilities, expecting employment, enter the system, the focus must change from a social services model to an employment model.
- **Fear.** Fear — of change, mistakes, or failure — is a key barrier to employment among employers, workers with disabilities, funding agencies, and the families and caregivers of people with disabilities. This fear can impede success of any strategy or initiative, and must be continually addressed.
- **Need for Partnerships and Collaboration.** There are many agencies (service providers, state agencies, and academic institutions) working on employment-related programs and research, with little coordination or communication. Because the current economic and funding incentives encourage fragmentation, it is critical that the state create a forum or partnership for cooperation.

## 2. Summit Background

The John J. Heldrich Center for Workforce Development at Rutgers, The State University of New Jersey, and the New Jersey Council on Developmental Disabilities (NJCDD) conducted a summit on November 8, 2004, on the subject of people with disabilities and work in the state of New Jersey. The symposium, entitled "New Jersey's Challenge: A Summit on Moving People with Disabilities to Work," brought together consumers, service providers, and funders to identify strategies that could lead to the long-term sustainable employment of New Jerseyans with disabilities. The goal of the summit was the development of a set of recommendations for NJCDD regarding practices and policies leading to successful employment outcomes that it can explore and implement during the 2004-2005 fiscal year.

The Heldrich Center and the NJCDD convened the symposium to:

- Examine what supports and services are most critical to helping people with developmental disabilities enter and maintain supported and competitive employment.
- Determine what cultural and societal factors influence the ability of people with developmental and other disabilities to enter and succeed in the workplace.
- Discuss the role of governmental support systems, such as Social Security or Social Security Disability Insurance, as well as the rehabilitation provider community, in facilitating or hindering the success of people with developmental disabilities in the labor market.

To promote informed discussion at the summit, both consumers and service providers were invited, as was staff from key state disability service agencies. After an overview of the summit and the presentation of key issues and themes for discussion, attendees participated in facilitated work group sessions to discuss the barriers and challenges facing people with disabilities, the effectiveness of the service delivery system, and resources that provide assistance. In the afternoon, each work group – consumers, providers, and funders/agencies – presented key points of their discussion to the group. Robert B. Nicholas, policy analyst at the University of Tennessee's Center on Disability and Employment, facilitated a discussion and delineation of follow-up activities to conclude the summit.

Appendix A includes the symposium agenda. Appendix B includes the discussion questions for each facilitated work group.

### **3. Summary of Proceedings**

#### **The Issue**

Many working age Americans have a disability that influences the kind or amount of work they can do. In New Jersey, nearly one-fifth (18%) of the population has some form of disability, including developmental disabilities. While not always visible, these disabilities can result in serious limitations in every day activities of life, including self-care, communication, learning, mobility, or being able to work or live independently.

Increasingly, agencies and organizations that serve people with developmental disabilities are emphasizing community- and home-based services and supports that meet the needs of individuals. Among these services are employment and training initiatives designed by employers, workers, and rehabilitation providers aimed at facilitating the entry of people with developmental disabilities into both supported and competitive work. Advances in assistive technology, job coaching, supports, new training techniques, and progressive legislation are available to help ease the entry of people with disabilities into the workplace. At the same time, we know that these strategies have not resulted in significantly higher employment rates for people with disabilities.<sup>4</sup> What we do not know is how supports and strategies can be best used to help people with developmental disabilities find and keep jobs.

#### **Facilitated Work Groups**

The summit featured three facilitated work groups by consumers with disabilities, service providers, and funders. Each work group engaged in in-depth discussions regarding the barriers to employment, current strategies to overcome these barriers, and recommendations for change.

#### **Consumers**

The consumer work group identified how each stakeholder influences the employment of people with disabilities, drawing upon their own experiences with finding and keeping a job. While consumers readily acknowledge that they are responsible for preparing themselves for work, for performing a job effectively, and for acting as their own advocates, they emphasize how important it is for families, service providers, and employers to support an employment goal, and the role families, service providers, and employers can play to support employment. Key points raised during the discussion included:

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<sup>4</sup> D. H. Dean, R. C. Dolan, R. M. Schmidt, P. Wehman, J. Kregel, & G. Revell, "A Paradigm for Evaluation of the Federal-State Vocational Rehabilitation Program." In J. Kregel, D. H. Dean, & P. Wehman (Eds.), *Achievements and Challenges in Employment Services for People with Disabilities: The Longitudinal Impact of Workplace Supports*, 2002, pp. 1-39.

1. Parents and families are influential in preparing *all* children, with or without disabilities, for the workplace by:
  - Shaping the expectations of job seekers regarding their right to work and the value of self-support.
  - Creating a sense of responsibility and initiative from a young age.
  - Maintaining a positive attitude about entering the workplace.
2. Service providers/disability agencies provide the hands-on support and services many job seekers with disabilities need to enter and succeed in the workplace and are critical liaisons between employers and job seekers. While strategies such as job coaches adept at matching clients to jobs have proven successful, participants with disabilities suggest several areas for improvement, including:
  - Increased access to higher education for people with disabilities, to help them compete for higher skilled jobs.
  - Better job matching that connects the right person to the right job, including job sampling.
  - Increased flexibility and support — such as continuing education and training, long-term follow-up, and individualized evaluations — that facilitate career advancement.
  - More sustained attention to job search and placement as well as more opportunities for competitive employment.
3. Employers rely on qualified workers to ensure the success of their business. However, many are not yet considering people with disabilities as a pool of untapped labor that can help their bottom line. To do so, consumers argue that employers must:
  - Understand that what is true for workers without disabilities is also true for workers with disabilities: not all workers are successful hires and that it is all right *to fire a person with a disability if warranted*.
  - At the same time, employers must understand that they already make accommodations and provide support for *all* workers, not just workers with disabilities. Any worker, at any given point in their career, will need assistance from their employer to balance work and family, cope with an illness, or engage in professional development.
  - Employers can provide mentoring and job shadowing opportunities to people with disabilities to assist them in career development.
  - Finally, employers can contribute to a more diverse and accessible workplace by providing awareness and diversity training for all managers and employees.

Consumers recommend a number of initiatives that the NJCDD could implement in the next fiscal year, including:

- **Develop a “To Work” Guide.** This guide should be developed for the parents and caregivers of people with disabilities to serve as a tool of early intervention and preparation for the workplace.
- **Research Growth Industries in New Jersey.** Help develop more opportunities for competitive employment in a range of vocational areas for job seekers with disabilities that include individualized support and continuing evaluation.
- **Sponsor “Mentoring Days” at New Jersey Employers.** These events could be established to enable job seekers with disabilities to learn about different careers and occupations.

### **Service Providers**

The service provider work group discussed the challenges of placing people with disabilities into employment and the misconceptions that employers hold about people with disabilities in the workplace. Key comments included:

1. Gaining access to employers is critical but there are few formal forums of provider-to-business or business-to-business communication around the issue of employment and people with disabilities. The challenge, participants note, is to increase access to the business community in New Jersey, to educate employers regarding the availability of people with disabilities as an untapped labor pool, and to educate employers about the services agencies can provide businesses to support workers with disabilities. Service providers, however, want employers to understand that the providers are not *vouching* for their clients, but saying that the individuals are qualified candidates. Employers must understand that service providers only guarantee the person can do the job, not that they are going to be a flawless employee.
2. Helping people with disabilities find a job is one challenge; placing qualified people with disabilities in higher skilled jobs with opportunities for advancement is another challenge.
3. The inflexibility of the current funding structure of disability programs often hinders provision of the optimal “bundle” of services to any given individual.
4. Employment as an outcome is not given sufficient priority among policymakers, providers, families, and government funding programs. Often, the focus is elsewhere, such as on housing, personal safety, and/or health care issues. While these are valid issues, they should not be prioritized above employment for all people with disabilities.

The service providers recommend a number of initiatives the NJCDD could implement in the next fiscal year, including:

- **Initiate Coordinated Business Forum.** Support the development of coordinated business-to-service-provider communication forums or networks.
- **Establish a Project to Improve Career and Employment Information.** Focus on increasing and improving career education for people with disabilities, for both students and adults, including increased access to higher education.
- **Conduct a Study on the Current Funding Structure.** Complete a feasibility study of the most cost effective and flexible funding system that can be implemented to support an employment goal.
- **Develop a "Best Practices Guide."** This guide could outline successful strategies and initiatives in New Jersey for people to use as a resource and to encourage replicability of successful efforts. This guide would be an honest assessment of successful programs, including costs, supports, number of people served, and measurements for success.
- **Expand Technical Assistance.** Greater technical assistance is needed for provider agencies, job developers, and others.

### **Funders/Agencies**

The funders/agencies work group examined the barriers and issues that prevent people with disabilities from entering and succeeding in the workplace, and discussed the need for and availability of the resources to address them. They asked themselves why New Jersey is not where it should be in terms of serving jobseekers with disabilities. Key issues included:

1. Until recently, employment has not been a policy focus or program goal. The institutional history and perspective of service providers and agencies is only recently moving from a social service model to an employment model and, as noted previously, employment as an outcome is not always valued as it should be. The incentive system needs to be realigned to make work a viable option for people with disabilities. This must be supported by policy, funding, and performance standards.
2. Current state funding structures and rules are not structured to support employment as a goal for people with disabilities. Federal systems, however, are improving and federal barriers to helping people move to work are being lifted.

3. Data collection and measurements of success are inadequate, but critical to the allocation of resources. Current performance standards in the disabilities service system conflict; it is important to establish a data baseline, and then regularly collect accurate employment data to advocate for more resources and target those resources effectively. At the same time, employment cannot be the sole outcome since many people with disabilities need continuing support while working.
4. Job coaches are important, but there is a need for more professional development. In addition, the role of the job coach over time needs to be more clearly delineated. A job coach's intervention will likely (and should) diminish over time, but the financing structure works against positive outcomes.
5. There is a need to identify all relevant stakeholders and bring them to the table, including education (K-12, special education, and higher education) and the generic workforce system (the local One-Stop Career Center system and the Workforce Investment Boards). If employment is the goal, it is vital that the employment and education-centered organizations participate.

Funders recommend a number of initiatives the NJCDD could implement in the next fiscal year, emphasizing the need to set an employment expectation, provide information on careers and employment, and establish policies and financial systems that support the employment goal.

- **Leadership and Sustained Attention to Employment.** Identification or development of a single organizing entity to "drive" the system and effect change. In this process, partnerships are key. Unfortunately, the plethora of existing disability groups in the state has resulted in duplication of effort, wasted resources, and a lack of focus. Designating, creating, and ultimately empowering a single group or consortium to organize ongoing efforts and drive an employment agenda would maximize the efforts of all stakeholders.
- **Develop a Comprehensive Database that Tracks Outcomes.** Development of a database of disability employment statistics that can be used to establish state- and county-level employment objectives and allocate resources.
- **Develop a "Best Practices" Guide.** Compilation of a resource handbook to inform stakeholders of current successful initiatives in New Jersey.
- **Experiment with Small Pilot Programs.** Implementation of small pilot projects around "promising practices" for helping people with disabilities find and keep jobs.

## 4. Summation

Robert Nicholas of the University of Tennessee's Center on Disability and Employment facilitated the afternoon session. Working with the group, he summarized the key issues of the day and put forward ideas for further discussion and action. He emphasized that nearly all of the issues identified are *solvable*, particularly within the framework of existing state systems, including the state workforce development system (One-Stop Career Centers and Workforce Investment Boards), the disability service system (Vocational Rehabilitation, etc.), and the educational system (K-12, higher education, and special education). The current lack of coordination among these segments undermines their effectiveness in serving people with disabilities.

Participants noted how the fragmentation of New Jersey disability stakeholders hinders effective communication with each other and with the business community; as a result, many organizations in New Jersey do not know what other organizations are doing and businesses are approached by multiple agencies and organizations for the same purpose. This creates duplication of effort, frustration among employers, and misallocation of resources.

At the same time, there is an opportunity to work with the state's public workforce development system to increase employment services to people with disabilities. Participants, particularly service providers, emphasized that communication with employers is critical to successful employment of people with disabilities, and the workforce development system in New Jersey is an underutilized resource for disability advocates and service providers. The One-Stop Career Centers are available to serve as a bridge between the business community and the social service community. The key is to bring together the workforce development system and the disability system to give people with disabilities a greater range of choices and resources.

Finally, consumers, service providers, and funders all recognized the reality that employers typically are only willing to hire a person that meets their business needs. Therefore, the placement of people with disabilities in the workplace will be most effective if it is connected to a business outcome. It is critical, therefore, that job seekers understand what they need to do to get a job and that those who do not understand this, receive better information in this area. The entire system needs to continue its transition from a strictly social services model to an employment model, and the employment of people with disabilities needs to more closely emulate standard methods of employment and labor market exchange.

## Appendix A: Symposium Agenda

November 8, 2004  
Jamesburg, New Jersey

8:15 a.m. - 9:00 a.m.	<b>Continental Breakfast</b>
9:00 a.m. - 9:15 a.m.	<b>Welcome and Overview of Meeting</b> <i>Dennis Rizzo</i> New Jersey Developmental Disabilities Council  <i>Kathy Krepcio</i> Heldrich Center for Workforce Development
9:15 a.m. - 10:00 a.m.	<b>Key Issues and Themes for Discussion</b> <i>K.A. Dixon</i> Heldrich Center for Workforce Development
10:00 a.m. - 10:15 a.m.	<b>Break</b>
10:15 a.m. - 12:15 p.m.	<b>Facilitated Work Group Discussion</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>▪ Consumers</li><li>▪ Providers</li><li>▪ Funders/Agencies</li></ul>
12:15 p.m. - 1:00 p.m.	<b>Lunch</b>
1:00 p.m. - 2:30 p.m.	<b>Presentations from Each Work Group</b> <i>Kathy Krepcio, Moderator</i> Heldrich Center for Workforce Development
2:30 p.m. - 4:00 p.m.	<b>Discussion and Delineation of Follow-up Activities</b> <i>Robert B. Nicholas, Facilitator</i> Center on Disability and Employment
4:00 p.m.	<b>Adjourn</b>

## **Appendix B: Facilitated Work Group Discussion Guides**

### *Work Group 1: Consumers*

*Facilitator: Robin Gwathney, Project Manager, Heldrich Center for Workforce Development*

1. In your personal experience in finding and keeping a job, list the factors that were most important in helping you become and stay employed.
2. What services did you use to help you get employment, and from whom did you get these services?
3. What employment services or supports were the most helpful before and after you got your job or jobs? What services were the least helpful? Why? Were there any services that you would have found helpful but were not available to you?
4. Many people with disabilities have multiple concerns when they consider whether to become employed. These might include physical barriers/need for accommodations, accessible transportation, and economic disincentives. Are there any other issues or barriers to work as a program outcome that have not been widely recognized by policymakers, program providers, or consumers?
5. How can government, service providers, and the workforce development system be more responsive to the needs of job seekers and workers with disabilities?
6. Do you feel that employment as an outcome is given sufficient priority among policymakers, providers, families, counselors, and/or government funding programs? Why?
7. List three key strategies/policies/practices on which you think the Developmental Disabilities Council should focus on in the next 12 months.

*Work Group 2: Service Providers*

*Facilitator: K.A. Dixon, Senior Project Manager, Heldrich Center for Workforce Development*

1. What has worked to locate and secure career-level jobs for people with severe disabilities? List any current, past, and/or new strategies you think are/would be effective in encouraging employers to recruit a more diverse workforce that includes people with disabilities.
2. Overall, are there sufficient incentives and expectations for businesses to hire people with disabilities? List those you feel are the most effective.
3. Overall, are there enough incentives and expectations for people with disabilities to want to become employed? List those you feel are most significant.
4. What is your most effective method for communicating with the business community in which you seek to place your clients with disabilities (formal networks, informal contacts, etc.)?
5. What skills and education do local employers need and how does your system ensure that your clients have those skills (i.e., how do you match consumer skills to jobs)? How effective is the current system?
6. Many people with disabilities have multiple concerns when they consider whether to become employed. These might include physical barriers/need for accommodations, accessible transportation, and economic disincentives. Are there any other issues or barriers to work as a program outcome that have not been widely recognized by policymakers, program providers, or consumers?
7. Do you feel that employment as an outcome is given sufficient priority among policymakers, providers, families, counselors, and/or government funding programs? Why?
8. List the three most important elements for an individual with severe disabilities to live independently in the community of his or her choice.
9. In the next fiscal year, what are the three key strategies/policies/practices on which you think the Developmental Disabilities Council should focus?

*Work Group 3: Funders/Agencies*

*Facilitator: Robert B. Nicholas, Center on Disability and Employment*

1. What strategies have been effective in achieving successful, long-term employment outcomes for people with developmental disabilities?
  - a. Is it a strategy with demonstrated results or is it a strategy with promising early results?
  - b. What are the key features or components of the strategy (e.g., types of services or supports, types of incentives for individuals to work or employers to hire, changes in policies or benefits, etc.)?
  - c. Where has the strategy been effective (e.g., in one area of the state or more widely)?
  - d. Why has it led to improved employment outcomes (e.g., it boosted participants' skills in high-demand areas, it made it easier for employers to hire or retain participants, etc.)?
  - e. Is it a strategy that can be replicated and used more widely? Are any supportive policy changes needed at the federal, state, or local level to implement the strategy more successfully and more widely?
2. Do you feel that employment as an outcome is given sufficient priority among policymakers, providers, families, counselors, and/or government funding programs? Why?
3. List three or four significant factors that have kept the unemployment rate for people with developmental disabilities and other severe disabilities at 75 to 85%.
4. In the next fiscal year, what are the three key strategies/policies/practices on which you think the Developmental Disabilities Council should focus?